

Passionate about Unity

John 17:6-13, 20-23

Almost everybody has a church horror story, right? If you don't you're the rare exception. Many of these horror stories involve strife and disunity. Some of you have heard me talk about my church experience as a kid. My dad was a pastor in south Mississippi. Our church was part of a denomination that supported missionaries all over the world. It turns out that a young Nigerian man named Sammy who had come to Christ through our missionaries came to study at the local Christian college in our town which was also supported by our denomination.

Sammy began worshiping at our church. This probably sounds like no big deal; but this was south Mississippi in the early '70s and blacks and whites didn't worship together. There came the fateful day when Sammy walked down the aisle to join the church. In our church there was always an invitation to come forward during the final hymn if you wanted to trust Christ or join the church. Afterwards, there was always a perfunctory vote to accept the person into membership; nobody had ever voted "no" when somebody wanted to be a member. When my dad said, "All those in favor of accepting Sammy into membership say 'Aye,'" most said, "Aye." But when he said, "Those opposed. . ." there was an equally loud response of "No!" They voted no because they didn't want to worship with a black man.

That simple vote set in motion a long, protracted fight that culminated in a church split. Things happened that you probably wouldn't believe. People threw around the "n-word" in church business meetings. The group that didn't want Sammy in our church waited until we went on vacation that summer, hastily called a meeting and tried to fire my dad. The plot was discovered, and eventually the racist element left the church. It sounds like a bad Sunday-night movie, doesn't it. But I remember how traumatic it was for me as a twelve-year-old kid.

What I have described is the opposite of what Jesus wants for the Church (and for individual churches). Instead of strife and division, Jesus wants unity. As you know, I don't have to go back 40 years to another part of the country to give an illustration of disunity and strife in the church. We've had our own challenges with unity here at Faith over the years. By the grace of God, we're enjoying a season of unity right now. But it's not the type of thing to take for granted. Paul actually told the Ephesians to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:1-3). Our unity is the will of God.

Scripture suggests that we should be very intention when it comes to the "will of God" - things such as unity that we know God wants. We are supposed to know the will of God, do the will of God, and pray according to the will of God. Today we are going to consider Jesus' prayer for our unity in John 17 as a stimulus for our unity. Next week Brian will wrap up the entire sermon series; we'll see how Jesus prayed for our protection.

Jesus' prayer for His disciples' unity (John 17:6-13, 20-23)

Let's look briefly at verses 6 through 10. In these verses Jesus describes how His disciples had received the truth about the Father. This description of the disciples will be the foundation of the prayer He prays for them.

6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. 7 "Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; 8 for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received *them* and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. 9 "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; 10 and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them.

Jesus is saying that the truth had found a home within these men whom God had given to Him. The disciples understood and believed that Jesus had come forth from the Father. As we've seen in chapters 13 through 16, they were woefully immature in many ways; but spiritually speaking they were right where Jesus wanted them to be. Therefore Jesus will now pray for His disciples and not for the world (He'll pray for the world later).

In verse 11 Jesus' prayer reflects the familiar theme that He is going back to the Father and leaving the disciples in the world.

11 "I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as *We are*.

The core request is, "Holy Father, keep them in Your name. . ." Jesus' request can be understood in two ways. He may be asking God to keep/protect the disciples **through** His name - "by the power of" His name as the NIV translates it. That understanding is possible, but I lean toward the other option, namely that Jesus is praying, "Father, keep them in full adherence to your name/character" (Carson, p. 562). In this understanding Jesus is asking that the disciples would live their lives in a way that is compatible with God's name or character.

This understanding fits well with Jesus' earlier description of the disciples. In verse 6 Jesus mentioned that He had "manifested [the Father's] name" to the disciples. Jesus had perfectly represented God's character to the disciples. Jesus had told them, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father." Since Jesus wanted the disciples to continue living in a way that's compatible with God's character, He prays, "keep them in Your name."

Jesus prays this so "that they may be one" - even as He and the Father are one. Their loyalty to God's name and their unity rise or fall together. If they don't live in a way that reflects God's character as revealed by Jesus, they won't be "one." For example, Jesus

revealed and demonstrated that God was “full of grace or truth” (John 1:14). If the disciples failed to be full of grace and truth, their unity would be compromised. This is actually a critical point when it comes to unity. We’re not supposed to be 50% truth and 50% grace - as if they somehow balance each other out. Like Jesus and His Father, we are supposed to be full of grace and truth - 100% of each. In this way we remain faithful to God’s name/character and have the capacity to “be one” - unified.

So far Jesus has been praying for His immediate disciples. Beginning in verse 20 Jesus prays for those who would believe through their witness. This, of course, would include us.

20 “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even 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 sent Me.

Jesus is describing here a type of unity that might seem unattainable. In verse 21 He prays “that they [His disciples] might be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You.” Jesus and the Father are distinct persons, but they experience profound unity. The Father is “in the Son” - so much so that Jesus could say that “the Father abiding in Me does His work” (John 14:10). And the Son is “in the Father” - so much so that Jesus only spoke what the Father prompted Him to speak (John 14:10). The Father and the Son had unity in purpose and action.

Jesus prays that in the same way, we [His disciples] would be “in” the Father and the Son. I think Jesus’ thought here is similar to what He said in chapter 15 when He said, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me” (John 15:4). We are to remain so dependent upon the Father and the Son that they live their life through us. It makes sense that if we are all (as a church) “in the Father and the Son,” we will also be “one” with each other. In other words, our unity with the Father and the Son will also preserve our unity with one another.

The point that Jesus makes at the end of verse 21 has tremendous implications for how we think about and pursue unity. There Jesus says that ***the purpose of our unity*** with the Father, the Son, and one another is (verse 21) “so that the world may believe that You sent Me.” ***Deep, substantive unity is the world’s best evidence that Jesus was sent by the Father.*** Superficial relationships, strife, individualism, or a dozen other maladies make it very easy for “the world” to dismiss Jesus as just another good man who had some helpful advice.

Jesus goes even further at the end of verse 23. Let’s read verses 22 and 23.

22 “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be

perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

In verse 23 Jesus prays that we “may be perfected in unity” (NIV “brought to complete unity”). Remember that Jesus prayed for the things that He wanted most passionately. Jesus wants our unity to be mature and complete (instead of weak and immature). Jesus adds to what He prayed in verse 21 when He says, “so that the world may know that You sent Me, **and loved them, even as you have loved Me.**” Our unity is not only the world’s best evidence that Jesus was sent by the Father. **Deep, substantive unity is also the world’s best evidence that the Father loves us - that He loves us just as He loved Jesus, His Son.**

Why does it matter whether or not “the world” knows that we’re loved by God? It matters because that’s exactly what we’re offering to them - the love of God. We aren’t merely offering a set of propositions about God or concepts about spirituality; we aren’t offering them a list of rules that will make their life work better. We are actually offering them a love relationship with the heavenly Father. That’s why I can say with conviction that God is like the Father in the parable of the prodigal son: He is standing on the road out in front of His house hoping that He’ll see you stumbling back home; if you simply come back to God He will run to you, hug you, kiss you, and throw a big party out of joy over you. That’s the message we have to offer people who are far from God.

Without mature, deep unity that message will be hollow at best. And remember that when we invite people to follow Jesus we’re also inviting them into community. Much of the New Testament is irrelevant if you’re not living in community with other believers in the context of a specific local church.

Earlier I told you about my church experience as a kid. There’s really no mystery why we lacked unity, is there? As a church we didn’t live in a way that’s compatible with God’s name/character. Racism is incompatible with being loyal to God’s name. If Jesus revealed anything about the Father, it’s that He seeks out people from every tribe, nation, and tongue; God doesn’t show partiality based on race or gender or status. If a church is true to God’s character, it won’t either. The result of not being faithful to God’s name is strife and disunity. As a kid, church wasn’t a safe place. I didn’t walk away from angry meetings thinking, “Wow, the love of God has descended upon those people.” I walked away thinking, “They hate each other.”

God wooed me back to Himself when I was in college; His grace makes up for all sorts of sins and deficiencies in the church. But His design is that His followers **stay true to His name** and experience **mature, substantive unity**. That is the will of God. We should understand it, pursue it, and pray for it.

Perspectives on Unity within the body of Christ In light of Jesus’ vision for unity among His disciples, I want to share some perspectives on pursuing unity within the body of Christ at large as well as here at Faith. As you know, there is no formula that

will guarantee unity (“church happens” as they say), but there is plenty in Scripture that has a direct bearing on how we pursue unity.

This first perspective involves ***Generosity toward others in the body of Christ*** (Philippians 1). Instead of being critical and judgmental toward other churches and other believers, Scripture urges generosity. I’m always impressed by Paul’s attitude in Philippians 1. Paul was in prison in Rome. We aren’t really told why, but apparently some believers in Rome viewed Paul as “the competition.” Perhaps they resented all the attention he received because of his writings and his influence. Whatever the case, this is what Paul wrote about them in Philippians 1:15-17.

15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 16 the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; 17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.

We might have expected Paul to be livid that others were trying to “cause him distress.” But notice what he writes in verse 18.

18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice.

For Paul, the gospel wasn’t about ***him***; it was about ***Christ***. The thing that mattered to Paul was that “Christ is proclaimed.” Remember that he’s the “apostle to the gentiles”; he’s the author of half of the New Testament. His doctrine was perfect; his motives were right; he had risked life and limb in proclaiming Christ. He didn’t hesitate to confront false prophets, but he had no anger or competitiveness when it came to other believers.

That’s the type of generosity toward other churches and ministries that should characterize us; that type of generosity preserves unity in the body of Christ. Like Paul we need to resist the temptation to judge and criticize. What matters here in our town is that Christ is proclaimed.

There are some tensions here. I realize that some organizations have the word “church” in their title but don’t believe that Jesus died for sin and rose on the third day. We really can’t have unity with that type of church. But I’ve known people who are basically self-appointed defenders of God’s glory; consequently they are the most judgmental, critical people I know. That is not good for the body of Christ or its unity.

The second perspective is important for unity within each church (or ministry):
Clarity on our identity (doctrine, mission, values, etc.) as a church (John 17:20-23)

This is a perspective based on observation and experience. Every church (in effect) draws a circle that defines its boundaries. Some churches have a very small, tight circle that describes the things you need to believe and how you need to behave if you’re

going to fit in that church. Generally speaking, I actually think that's okay as long as it's not legalistic and exclusive (as long as you allow that there are other legitimate ways to "do church.") Other churches come close to not having a circle; they have an anything-goes attitude when it comes to doctrines and lifestyle.

Here at Faith we draw our circle as large as our understanding of Scripture will allow. Let me explain. The E-Free doctrinal statement defines our boundaries theologically; it defines what we understand the Bible to teach concerning core doctrines about the authority of Scripture, the person and work of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, salvation, etc. But there are many areas of doctrine and practice that aren't addressed in that statement. Godly, Bible-believing Christians have disagreed on the specifics of many of those issues down through the centuries. I'm thinking about issues such as modes of baptism, use of alcohol, issues related to science and faith, political affiliation, etc. We've decided that we are going to draw our circle large enough to include people with different convictions on these issues. This is who we are; this is one of our values.

We don't say, "Believe whatever you want on those issues. . ." No, we encourage you to study the Scriptures and have biblical convictions. But we also encourage you to hold those convictions humbly and allow others the freedom to hold differing convictions. Larry Osborne says that if you want unity, you have to decide ahead of time what things you won't fight about.

So if we're not going for uniformity on every issue, where do we find our unity? Jesus' prayer is helpful here. Remember that the purpose of our unity is so that the world might know that God sent Jesus and that God loves us. In other words, our unity serves our mission of "helping people come to Faith in Christ and then experience God in all of life."

One of the best ways to pursue unity is to stay "on mission" (reaching out to people who need Christ, serving our community, etc.). Petty differences get crowded out when we're trusting God together to do great things in the lives of the people we love and in our community. I can remember conversations with those whom we've sent to serve God in other cultures; they've mentioned that in the places they serve they simply don't have the luxury of fighting over many of the things that tend to divide churches in the States. There's too much at stake "over there." But they've helped me see that there's too much at stake back here as well. We've got to be clear about our mission.

The last point I want to make involves our ***Character (being the type of people who promote unity)***. (Galatians 5:19-23) We can be crystal clear on our mission and our values and all the rest, but if we're contentious, disagreeable people, we still won't have unity. In Galatians 5 Paul contrasted the deeds of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. As we read through this list, it will be obvious that if we don't walk by the Spirit and exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, there's little or no hope for unity. First listen to Paul's description of those who follow their flesh:

19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Strife, outbursts of anger, dissensions - those things are the opposite of unity. And yet many church people justify being angry and divisive in the name of truth. By contrast, consider how the fruit of the Spirit makes us the type of people who can live together in unity:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

That's the profile of a person (and a church) that can experience true unity. Think about it. . . A person who **lacks** joy and peace will always be agitated and discontented. That person will cause dissensions and factions in the church. That person can't do otherwise. A person who is **full of** joy and peace is internally satisfied and "full." That person approaches issues and decisions and relationships with nothing to prove. If you're full of joy and peace, you don't have to win; you don't have to get your way; you can even endure being wronged. Your satisfaction in this life comes from God, not "being right" or being respected or whatever. You are the type of person who can promote and experience unity.

It's worth pointing out that there will always be disagreements in the church. Churches are very complex entities (and often just plain weird). There will be disagreements over doctrine, over decisions, over money, over music, over programing, etc. Building expansions are notoriously divisive. We've tried to stay "on mission" with our Making Room building expansion. But unless our lives are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit, disagreements and misunderstandings will lead to division.

There are dozens of reasons why it's important to keep in step with the Spirit. This is one of the best: the Spirit will make us the type of people who can actually experience unity and show the world that God sent Jesus and that God loves us. We'll enjoy the fruit of our unity for all eternity.