



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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John 17:20-26

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English Standard Version

“Christ’s Prayer for Believers”

This is the 61st sermon in the series on the New Testament book of John entitled,
“The Gospel of Christ.”

John 17:20-26

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, 21 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. 22 The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me. 24 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. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me. 26 I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them.”

INTRODUCTION: *The Right Fist of Fellowship*¹

This is the story of a real church in a real town with real people ... though it’s hard to believe. The church is, or was, the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Newton, Massachusetts. This church had been in town for years. It was known around town for two things in particular. First, it had a tremendous softball team, winning enough championships in the church softball league to make the Patriots jealous. And second, every member of the church had a bumper sticker on their car that read, “God is with US at Emmanuel Baptist Church.”

However, the church had fallen on hard times lately. There was constant disagreement and infighting amongst the Pastor and Deacons accompanied by continual complaining and criticism from the congregation. Even the softball team lost the championship this year to the

¹ The introduction is adapted from *“The Body”* by Chuck Colson, pages 91-96. This book has been republished as *“Being the Body”* and this story is not included in the updated editions.

upstarts from Temple Beth Shalom and their star pitcher, David Goldstein.

The situation continued to decline until the Deacons decided to call a congregational meeting to decide what should be done. However, for the last three Sundays, the Pastor wouldn't let them make the announcement. So one Sunday, right after the announcements, Deacon Fowler walked up to the front of the church, pulled out a piece of paper, and began to read "This is to announce a special congregational assembly ..." when suddenly he couldn't be heard anymore. The organist cranked the volume all the way up and began pounding out [the old hymn] "*Have Thine Own Way.*" But before she could get to the second stanza, Deacon Fowler yanked the power cord from the wall. There was an awkward silence. People coughed nervously and crossed their legs. The choir leaned forward and one of the tenors was taking notes.

Then Deacon Bryson [no relation] got up and walked toward the pulpit of the church. As he passed the Pastor he got his feet tangled up in the loose power cord from the organ and fell down. The Pastor delayed a moment before reaching to help him up. But the delay was just long enough to convince those in the front of the church that their Pastor must have pushed Deacon Bryson to the ground. Which was exactly what Deacon Bryson thought too, because he bounced to his feet and hit the Pastor square in the nose with a solid right hook.

The lapel mike registered the impact.

Well, then, everybody screamed, the majority of the congregation converged on the Communion table, punching and shoving. Many people came down the aisle and joined in the fight. Mrs. Dahl, President of the Dorcas Society, the ladies missionary group, launched a hymnal at the men fighting, but not being a member of the church softball team, her throw was high and to the right, and the hymnal missile sailed right through the center of the choir.

Well, after that, two tenors and a baritone leaped over the wooden railing in front of the choir and began exchanging blows with members of the Christian Ed. Committee. Meanwhile, the organist had moved over to the piano and tried to restore order by playing "*Blest Be the Tie the Binds.*" In the midst of the brawl, someone grabbed the new flower arrangement which was in a vase full of water and threw it at the Deacons. Alas, this person didn't play for the church softball team either, for the flowers and the vase full of water flew out over the pews and shattered against the wall right over a visiting Presbyterian who finally experienced complete immersion. The fight finally ended when the police arrived and cleared the church.

Two days later everyone involved in the fight received a notice to appear at the city courthouse for a hearing. Everyone sat on respective sides in the courtroom waiting for the judge to enter. When he walked in, everyone **immediately** knew who he was, for His Honor was none other than David Goldstein, the star pitcher for Temple Beth Shalom.

"I know you," Judge Goldstein said, "We may have our difference on the softball field, but the cause of religion in our city is at stake here. There must be some way you can settle your dispute among yourselves. I'm dismissing the case. No charges will be pressed at this point, but I urge you to work this out within your own church. Your Jesus Christ may allow this sort of thing in His followers, but this state will not permit fistfights as a regular order of a worship service." So everyone left the courtroom, got in their cars, and drove off in different directions. And on the back of each car was a bumper sticker declaring, "God is with US at Emmanuel Baptist Church."

Three months later, the Pastor resigned. Three years later the church closed its' doors. In this case disunity spelled death. True story. And I'm afraid you could probably find a similar story across any and all Christian denominations.

Certainly this case is an extreme, but what difference does unity make?

And when Jesus prays for our unity, **what does He really want?**

Well, let's take a look at what He says ... We start by seeing ...

v. 20-23: THE MODEL OF ONENESS²

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, 21 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. 22 The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me."

Here in John 17 we have one of those unique occasions when Christ spoke directly about Christians living today. He foresaw a continuing community of believers — the church. And so He prayed specifically, verse 20, *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word."*

Christ was praying for you and me. And not only was He praying for us, but look at what He was praying for, verse 21, *"that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, 22 ...that they may be one even as We are one, 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one."* The model of oneness is the relationship Christ has with God the Father. And Christ wants us to have the same kind of relationship with each other. He wants us to be part of each other's lives, sharing the Word together, and sharing the Work together.

Notice that the key to oneness is Christ ... Christ in us ... the indwelling of the Lord Jesus Christ living in our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Paul wrote in **Galatians 2:20**, *"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

Only as that is true in each of our lives will we be able to live as one. You see, the Father and the Son, by means of the promised Holy Spirit, live in the disciples (that's us) so that the disciples become the sphere of Christ's activity. As disciples (you and me) remain in the vine (Christ), we bear fruit. This **only** comes about as we stand in dependence upon Him and are obedient to Him. Only as Christ **is in us** can we be one. Our differences are too great, our flesh too strong to allow us to be **bound** together **except** by the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Unity is not only to be the experience of every disciple but it's also to be the commitment of every disciple. Our unity as a church is directly related to our obedience as disciples. Our unity will only be as great as our spiritual maturity.

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the model of oneness. But we have to ask why? What's the purpose behind the model? Is it because if oneness is modeled for others, then perhaps they will listen to ...

v. 23-25: THE MESSAGE OF ONENESS

"I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me. 24 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. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me."

And here Jesus goes on to say, verse 23, *"I in them and You in Me, that they may become*

² The Exposition of the text is adapted from my sermon "Does Your Life Need Unity?" 2/21/93; Colson, pages 102-103; *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Vol. 4 by Leon Morris, pages 591-600; *The Gospel According to John* by D.A. Carson, pages 569-571; *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus* by D.A. Carson, pages 195-207; *Exploring the Gospels: John* by John Phillips, pages 329-335; *Loving One Another* by Gene Getz, pages 47-56; *The Father Heart of God* by Floyd McClung.

perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me...” And this message is nothing less than the Good News that Jesus Christ **was sent** into the world by God the Father ... **to save sinners**. And the end of verse 25 tells us that the disciples had already accepted this message, *“these know that You have sent Me.”* And it’s important for us to realize as well that there can be no unity in our church if we don’t — individually and collectively — accept the message of Christ. If we don’t understand who Jesus Christ is (the Son of God and Savior of Sinners) and what Jesus Christ did (died on the cross, taking our sins upon Himself and paying the penalty for those sins, and then rose again from the dead, conquering both sin and death) ... if we don’t understand those two things — who Jesus is and what Jesus did — then there is no way we can be unified as the body of Christ. We’re unified by what we believe, by our doctrine, by what the Bible says, and by how well we live it, and by how well we share it as part of our everyday lives.

This is the foundation of our unity. The church in unity is attractive. But the flip side of this, naturally, is that the church in **disunity** is **unattractive**. And to be honest with you, I don’t think the world can see it very well today. You know what they say, “Where you have one believe, you have a Christian. Where you have two believers, you have a church. And where you have three believers, you have two churches.” The world today looks at the church and sees Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox, Baptists and Brethren, Congregationalists and Church of Christ, Methodists and Mennonites, Pentecostals and Presbyterians.

Needless to say ... they are both skeptical and confused.

You see, the world isn’t looking at our marketing and media, our telecasts, websites, or study materials. They’re looking at us and how we act. And when the world fails to see the unity of Christ’s followers — the church — it fails to see that Christ is the Son of the living God. If believers aren’t living close to Christ, if the face they present to the world is that of a group of people bickering among themselves and criticizing everyone else, then who in the world would want to join them? The world can be just as unhappy where it is.

And that’s, I think, why the Lord is praying for unity in the church. So as ungodly people are introduced to the church, they’ll be convinced that this is of God and they’ll believe in Christ for themselves because they’ve seen and sensed Christ in the midst of His people. Our display of unity should be so compelling, so different from what the world is used to seeing that it can only be explained by our need of Christ and our commitment to Christ.

The message of oneness has two parts. Not only must it be **proclaimed** with words of **truth**, but it also must be **demonstrated** with actions of **love**. And when the world sees the church united in truth and in love, then it cannot be anything but impressed because the world cannot produce a unity like that. Only the truth of Christ is adequate to explain it.

And that brings us to the next piece of this puzzle, which is ...

v. 23, 26: THE METHOD OF ONENESS

Jesus says in verses 23 and 26, *“... that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me. ... 26 I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them.”*

As we read that it becomes apparent that the method of oneness — the means by which Christians are unified in living for, through, and in Christ — is love. This can only happen because God loves you in the same way He loves Jesus and God gives you the same love that He gave Jesus. Here Jesus prays that God’s love may be within us (and displayed as we become loving people) and He prays that God’s love may be among us (and displayed in our love for each other).

There can be no unity apart from keeping Christ’s command of **John 13:34-35**, *“A new*

commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Unity without love is merely a temporary unity forced by outside circumstances. When those circumstances change, the unity disappears. Look at any major crisis in the last twenty years, the Persian Gulf War, 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq and so on. We initially rally as a country and it was a great feeling. But as soon as the war, event, crisis is over and things start to drag out a little bit, our nation reverts to constantly criticizing each other. It’s almost as if those events haven’t happened. But when unity is based on love and is maintained by love, then the circumstance (either good or bad) have no effect upon the unity. Unity driven by love thrives in all situations and is a characteristic mark of the believing community. Jesus prays that we might be a convincing testimony. The world is waiting to see divine love in action in the Christian community.

One of the most distinctive things about Jesus was His love for His Father, family, friends, followers ... and foes. He loved Judas as He loved John. He loved Pilate as He loved Peter. He loved the two dying thieves. He loved the Roman soldier whose spear pierced His side. He loved the man who punched Him in the face, the man who crowned Him with thorns, the man who scourged Him to the bone, the man who spat in His face, the man who mocked Him on the cross.

He loved them all.

Love, the essence of God’s being — the one-word definition of God — was embodied in Jesus. Jesus walked this earth as a living, breathing, moving, three-dimensional, stereophonic, visual, full-color presentation of love. Love shone in all that He was, in all that He said, in all that He did. In closing this prayer, Jesus was saying something to the effect of “Now Father, these people of ours must love like that. My love is to be their love. But I know these people. They mean well, but they don’t have what it takes. So, I’ll be in them, and then My love will be their love.” The prayer was over.

The model of oneness demonstrates love. The message of oneness present love to the world. The method of oneness is obedience to the command of love. Because everybody who belongs to Jesus belongs to everybody who belongs to Jesus.

Still, when all is said and done, unity is an elusive concept for most Christians. I think that’s partly because we just haven’t seen it very much and partly because we don’t know how to get there from here.

Well, there are three things that I think are needed to move us as believers, and us as a church, in the direction of unity. There’s probably more than three things, but there’s at least these three things. First ...

- **UNITY LIVES IN COMMUNITY**

Unity comes through community — through worshipping together, through studying God’s Word together, and through serving together. Are you part of the togetherness? Are you truly worshipping with us ... or are you just going through the motions and taking up space? Are you really studying God’s Word with us in Sunday School, Sunday worship, a Bible Study ... or are you just meeting a social obligation? Are you serving the community with us? Are you serving others outside of our church community? Or are you just watching? Unity lives in community and you need to be a part of it. Second ...

- **UNITY LIVES IN CONTINUITY**

Unity comes through your regular presence and through your regular presents. What’d He say? Unity comes through your regular presents (p-r-e-s-e-n-t-s), your regular giving. And

unity comes through your regular presence ((p-r-e-s-e-n-c-e), your regular attendance. You know the two most important things in most people's lives are time and money. And I think that's why Jesus lays claim to those very things. He wants your money. Because as you give your money to Christ and His church, you're making a statement that Christ comes first in your life. Christ wants your public commitment that He's more important to you than your money. He also wants your time. Time spent with Him and time spent with His people. I've said before that the church is the relationship place. Unity is built on relationships and relationships take time. As you give your time to Christ and His church, again you're making a statement that Christ comes first in your life. And that's what He wants. Christ wants your public commitment that He's more important to you than your time. And third ...

- **UNITY LIVES IN CONFESSION**

Unity comes through your willingness to repent ... and unity comes through your willingness to forgive. Are we eager to forgive those who hurt us, accept those who are different from us, prefer those who disagree with us, love those who attack us, submit to those over us, trust those who lead us, go to those who hurt us, and be patient with those who disagree with us. If not ... we need to repent. We need to ask God for a change of heart — for a change in our hearts — for a cleansing from the sin that keeps us from wanting that degree of love and unity.

I'm not talking about a feeling here, but a basic attitude. Unity begins with an attitude of heart that is the fruit of brokenness in our lives. God doesn't want us to be the judge of other people's hearts and lives. He wants us to judge our own. And it's when we lose that brokenness and become hard and judgmental that we lose our eagerness for unity.

Forgiveness is not a feeling. It's not trying to forget the bad things done to us. It's an act of the will. It's giving the person something they haven't earned the right to have — a pardon. Forgiveness acknowledges that we've been wronged but goes beyond that and extends mercy. And sometimes we have to forgive people again and again, until that resent and critical spirit has left our hearts. Forgiveness gives us the freedom to give out love, give up self, and give in to God's grace.

You see, we are God's "I Love You" to a lost and dying world. And if that's going to be true of us, then unity is absolutely essential. If we believe that what Jesus prays for us is actually possible, and that He will accept nothing less than our total, heartfelt obedience, then we're cornered. No more excuses. No more rationalizations. If we chose to follow Jesus, we must do so on His terms, not ours. And love and unity are part of His terms.

Think about that.

You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

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Romans 15:5-7

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.