

THE MEANING OF TRUE UNITY

John 17:22-23

Even though we are only going to focus on two verses today, let us read the remainder of Christ's High Priestly prayer in John 17.

John 17:22-26 NAS:

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.*

²⁴ *"Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see **My glory** which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.*

²⁵ *"O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me;*

²⁶ *and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."*

As Christ closes His High Priestly prayer, we find Him emphasizing two themes: **Unity** and **Glory**. Over the years, people have made attempts to bring unity among the many factions of the Christian Church. For instance, after **Vatican I and Vatican II**, tremendous changes were seen in the Roman Catholic Church towards "*religious union*" with Protestants especially. Excessive reverence or awe for the Virgin Mary was soft-pedaled, the title "*heretics*" which had been used for Protestants was changed to "*separated brethren*," the Mass was liberalized and the Bible was even taught from the pulpit in some Catholic churches.

Pope John XXIII said: "*There burns in my heart the intention of working and suffering to hasten the hour when for all men the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper will have reached its fulfillment, 'That they may all be **one**!'*"

Pope Paul VI at the **Second Vatican Counsel in 1963** said:

"If we are in any way to blame for that separation, we humbly beg God's forgiveness and ask pardon too of our brethren who

feel themselves to have been injured by us. For our part, we willingly forgive the injuries which the Catholic Church has suffered, and forget the grief endured during the long series of dissensions and separations.”¹

The reality is that after all these attempts at bringing Christians together, there is as much if not more separation than at any other time in history. We could probably spend hours describing to you the reason that so-called Christians have created hundreds of different religious denominations over the centuries, but that would not accomplish what we should be understanding when we read these last verses in John chapter seventeen. What we as Christians living in the twenty-first century need to learn here is what Christ desired for His followers and why He prayed to the Father for them to have it.

It might be very difficult for many Christians to understand just what it was that Jesus was asking His Father to do in John 17:22-26, and it is oh so important that we do understand it!

Let us read Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 NAS:

¹⁴ *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,*
¹⁵ *from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,*
¹⁶ *that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,*
¹⁷ *so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love,*
¹⁸ *may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,*
¹⁹ *and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.*
²⁰ *Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us,*
²¹ *to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.*

Just how do we get filled up with all the fullness of God that is spoken of in verse 19? Through the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 19 resonates with Ephesians 5:18, which reads in part “*be filled (keep on being filled) with the Holy Spirit.*” Then verse 20 refers to the “*power that works within us.*” What power is that? The power of the Holy Spirit.

Now look at Colossians 2:9-10 NAS:

¹ Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers.* Garland TX: Bible Communications, 1996, c1979.

⁹ For **in Him** (Jesus)² **all the fullness of Deity dwells** in bodily form,
¹⁰ and **in Him you have been made complete**, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

The fullness of God is found in Jesus Christ, and in Christ believers are made complete. How does this happen? Well, if all the fullness of God is in Jesus Christ and we are joined with Christ by faith in His death, which paid the price for our sins (Ephesians 3:17), then the fullness of God indwells the believer in the form of the Holy Spirit who comes to live within us the moment we accept Christ as our Savior.

Now if that is not enough information to make your self-esteem soar like a rocket, read 2 Peter 1:3-4 NLT:

³ By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence.
⁴ And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. **These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature** and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, if you believe He paid the price for your sins, and if you consider Him Lord of your life by striving to obey all His commands, then **you share with Him in His divine nature**. What exactly does that mean? We think this definition of "nature" best describes what it means to be **one** with Christ and God: "In contrast to mankind's weak and corruptible nature God is everything that transcends mankind's limitations, allowing Him to function with supernatural perfection."³ So according to the promise of God, "**These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature** and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires" (2 Peter 1:4).

God has promised you that you will share in these supernatural characteristics. If that does not give you a shot of adrenalin to carry you through the tough times, then you are simply not leaning on God's promises. The future of all believers, no matter how bad your current circumstances, is simply glorious and will continue that way throughout eternity!

As we saw earlier, Jesus is not only praying for His eleven apostles but for all believers from that time forward, which of course would include you and me today.

Jesus' reason for making these requests of the Father is so that all of His followers, whether they be the eleven apostles He has been mentoring or all those believers who

² Parentheses mine.

³ Kittel, Gerhard (Hrsg.); Bromiley, Geoffrey William (Hrsg.); Friedrich, Gerhard (Hrsg.): *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Electronic ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976, S. 9:255.

will come after them, may be **one**. “*I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one*” (John 17:21 NLT). The purpose for their being one is so that the world will believe and know that God sent His Son in human flesh to prove His love for all those who would believe and obey (John 17:23). So, the unity of believers was to be a witness to the world that the Savior had come. That gives even sadder meaning to all the dissension among Christians. Satan uses that dissension to hinder the proclamation of the Gospel. Verse 23 of John 17 suggests that the unity of believers would show the world that God loved them and sent His Son, Jesus Christ, so that they would be saved, united, and glorified.

Jesus then asks that all believers would be with Him in Heaven (John 17:24). Jesus had identified His followers back in verse 20 as those who will believe in Him through the teaching of these apostles. In fact Jesus had told Peter in Matthew 16:18 that He would build the His Church on the teaching of these eleven apostles. Paul confirms this in Ephesians 2:19-20 when he is speaking to Gentiles:

¹⁹ *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,*
²⁰ **having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,**
Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone. (NAS)

This is probably the reason that the apostle John writes in Revelation 21:14: “*And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*” (NAS). Remember that **Matthias** joined the group to replace Judas Iscariot. The Church was built on the teaching of the apostles, therefore the apostles were the foundation for the Church of Christ according to the plan of God. Most importantly, the apostles are the chief witnesses for proclaiming the truth about God and Jesus to the rest of the world, as we see in John 15:27: “*And you must also testify about me because you have been with me from the beginning of my ministry*” (NLT).

Jesus' prayer then applies to all believers from that time forward. He prays that God would provide for all their needs and love them just as He had loved Jesus, guiding them and growing them in faith, trust, and righteousness as they teach others what they received from Jesus. Jesus says that this group of apostles there in the room with Him would be the foundation of one **unified** humanity. Now I hope you get the full impact of this next verse.

John 17:22-23 NAS:

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.*

The word *glory* is used of men to describe their wealth, splendor, or reputation (though in the last sense the Greek word, *doxa*, is often translated ‘honor’). The most important

concept is that of the glory of Yahweh. The Hebrew language had several words for God. “Yahweh,” or “*Jehovah*,” was the most holy, the most special, of the names of God. Jews felt this name was so special that they would not speak it, and when scribes were copying the name in the Scripture, they would get up and wash their hands before writing this name for God. Yahweh represents the revelation of God’s being, nature, and presence to mankind in all his beauty of being and character.⁴ Jesus shares in this glory as the eternal Son and the second person of the Godhead or the Trinity (John 17:5, 24). He has now given this glory first to His apostles, and then to the disciples that follow them. In part, this refers to His revelation of the Father, which He has made known to His apostles. This promise makes them aware that they will be sharing with God in God’s own eternal life. “*This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*” (John 17:3).

While He was here on earth Jesus lived in **oneness** with the Father by being always responsive to the Father’s will.⁵ By being responsive to Christ’s will, we live in oneness with Him. It is this uniquely personal relationship that Christ prays we will experience with Him.⁶

Jesus was asking the Father for all of this for all believers so that they might share in the divine **oneness**. In other words, be filled with the Spirit of God. Oh the wonder of it all. Are you a believer? Do you know how lucky you are? Do you know how much you are loved by the Creator of the world, the King of the universe? Do you know you are His adopted son or daughter and will be given all the privileges of being in the royal family?

Jesus spoke of a **oneness** among all believers (“*that all of them may be one*,” John 17:21) and then He connected that oneness with a combined indwelling of the Father and the Son. Verse 22 has this indwelling as the model for the relationship among believers: “*that they may be one, just as We are one*.” The word translated *just as* (*kathos*) can refer to what created the relationship as well as to the relationship itself. Both of these meanings are applicable here, for the combined indwelling of the Father and the Son is both the reason that all may be one as well as the example for this kind of **oneness**. This becomes clearer when Jesus adds, “*just as you and I are one*” (John 17:22). The **oneness** for all believers is to be found in the relationship between the Father and Son. The oneness of the Father and the Son is both the cause of and the model for the believers’ **unity**.⁷

Oneness is made possible because of faith: believers’ faith in the Son places them “*in Christ*” and also brings “*Christ in them*” (“*Christ in you, the hope of glory*,” Colossians 1:27). The believers are in the Son because of their faith and the Son is in them because of that same faith (John 14:20; John 15:4-5). Also, the believers are in the Son, who is in the Father (John 14:20; Colossians 3:3). We see too that the Father is in the Son, who is in the believers (John 17:23). The believers’ direct contact in both cases is the Son. Jesus

⁴ Wood, D. R. W.: *New Bible Dictionary*. InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962, S. 414.

⁵ John 5:19–20; 6:38; 8:28–29; 14:9–11.

⁶ Richards, Larry: *The Bible Reader's Companion*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991, S. 694.

⁷ Rodney A. Whitacre, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series – John*, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 416-421.

is the visible manifestation of the godhead. No one can see the Father or the Holy Spirit. But when Christ was on earth, people did see Him. So therefore Jesus is the visible connection between us and God the Father. Believers, therefore, do have a connectedness to God, but it comes through the Son, for no one comes to the Father except through the Son (John 14:6). So the **oneness** of the Son with the Father is a very special relationship (John 1:14, John 1:18), because Jesus shares in the deity of the Father. But through the Son believers have a bond to the Father and **share** in His eternal life.⁸

This **oneness** must also refer to the **oneness** that is present throughout the life of the Church as the Church makes *"every effort to keep the **unity** of the Holy Spirit through the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3). This bond, if lived with a commitment of obedience and love for the Holy Spirit of God which lives in every believer, will become quite evident to the world. So this is a spiritual **oneness** that comes from God, and which God wants the world to recognize so that they will be able to see the good relationship that exists among those who follow Christ.⁹ The first step of this journey for the Church is to know which members are saved and which are not. There are a lot of people in every church that consider themselves Christians because they go to church every Sunday, but who have never made a declaration of faith in Christ's atoning work in their lives. Without such a commitment they are not saved and do not have the Holy Spirit living within them. Therefore they are neither able to feel this kind of **oneness** nor to demonstrate it to anyone else. It is therefore one of the very first requirements for a pastor to have a sit-down with everyone in the church individually and ask them if they are truly saved. If they are not he/she must pray diligently for that individual and do whatever God shows him/her to do to bring that person into the family of God. Remember, your church cannot fulfill its mission with pretend believers. And if anyone hearing or reading these words knows they do not have this kind of saving faith, then tell your pastor. If he/she is truly a servant of God, he/she will rejoice with you in that admission and will be happy to guide you into true faith and conversion.

Jesus says the purpose of this **oneness** is *"that the world may believe that you sent me"* (John 17:21). Jesus knew that His small band of apostles had the kind of faith we have been talking about because of what He said in His prayer back in verses 7 and 8:

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** (knew)¹⁰ that You sent Me.*

To believe that the Father sent Jesus is to believe that the Father is everything that Jesus has told them about the Father. It is to believe that the only way they can have a saving relationship with the Father is through Jesus. They must first believe in Jesus' death on

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Parentheses mine.

the cross for their sins before God will by His grace grant them salvation and everlasting life in Heaven.

Because knowing this must be parallel with believing, Jesus does not refer to some mere intellectual recognition of the fact that the Father sent the Son, but rather to the knowledge that brings eternal life, John 17:3 NAS:¹¹

³ *"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*

Jesus therefore (in verse 18) launches His apostles' ministry in much the same way that He was sent to them by the Father, to bring the message of salvation to the unsaved: *"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."*

The purpose of their lives together, living the **oneness** in love that we have been discussing, was to both deliver the message of God and Christ to unbelievers, and at the same time demonstrate to others what it is like to live life according to such truth.

Now here is the part that simply knocks us off our feet. The love that God the Father has for Jesus is the same love He has for believers. In fact that love applies to the whole world according to possibly the best known Bible verse in the world, John 3:16: ***"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."*** (NAS)

God loves believers in the same way He loves Jesus. But I have no doubt that He loves the unsaved in much the same way because first He sent His one and only Son to die for them, and secondly that is the assignment that was given to the apostles whom Jesus taught personally. For *"God is love,"* according to 1 John 4.

1 John 4:7-21 NAS:

⁷ *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*

⁸ *The one who does not love does not know God, for **God is love.***

⁹ *By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him.*

¹⁰ *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

¹¹ *Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

¹² *No one has seen God at any time; **if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.***

¹³ *By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.*

¹¹ Op Cit, Whitaker.

¹⁴ *We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.*

¹⁵ *Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.*

¹⁶ *We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. **God is love**, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

¹⁷ *By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.*

¹⁸ *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*

¹⁹ *We love, because He first loved us.*

²⁰ *If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*

²¹ *And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.*

Believers are to receive this love, internalize it, and allow their own human transformation to provide living proof of God's ability to take one's sinful lifestyle and transform it to match the characteristics of Jesus Christ who is a living, God-in-the-flesh example of God's mercy, grace, truth, and **love**.

Imagine that the next time you're watching your favorite television show and they break for a commercial, that instead of seeing an advertisement telling you what the latest electronic toy is, which you do not really need, there is instead an advertisement inviting people to join in this **oneness** with God and other believers. Imagine that the commercial was so tastefully done that it was evident to people that the church is a place where there is the kind of welcome awaiting them that one might experience when returning home for Christmas. As one walks through the door, instead of a finding a lukewarm atmosphere, they are warmly welcomed by a community of disciples as if they were family that had been away for a long time. Imagine that this church was filled with true believers who are filled with God's love that comes directly from the Holy Spirit living within them.

That is the picture that outsiders should be getting from the church and other contacts they may have with individual Christians. How do you think you and your church are doing in that regard?

The actual lack of unity among Christians throughout history, both between groups of Christians and between individual Christians, can cause a believer to be depressed. It can also cause Christ to be held up to contempt by the world. Jesus' prayer here shows that there can be no **oneness** apart from Him, yet Christians disagree on who Jesus is and how one is to relate to Him. **Oneness** clearly must come from God and is not something

people of goodwill can manufacture. **Oneness** cannot be produced by individuals who want to “*be good just for goodness sake,*” as has been suggested just this week by a group of atheists. **Oneness** is a gift of God’s grace, which can only come to a person or group **sharing** in the divine glory (John 17:22) and name (John 17:26) of God. **Oneness** can only come through being born from above, hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd and accepting the witness of the Holy Spirit, thereby sharing the glory of the Father with all unbelievers that touch their lives.¹²

Let us in our church purpose today to show this oneness and unity to the community around us.

¹² Ibid.