

**\*Intro** – **\*Why can't Christians just get along?** The cry for unity rings out from churches everywhere. **How come there are so many different types of churches?** An objection I've heard numerous times when trying to share the Gospel. **(P)** Some place such a high value on Christian unity that they believe it must be maintained at all cost. Some place such a low value on Christian unity that they avoid other churches at all cost. **\*There's Biblical warrant for placing a high value on unity, after all, that is what Jesus prayed for in John 17. (P)**

In this prayer Jesus pours out His heart to the Father, praying for Himself, His disciples, and for all believers. **In His prayer for His disciples and for all believers He prays for unity, asking that all Christians may experience the perfect unity enjoyed by the Godhead.** Just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one, so Jesus prays that believers will be perfectly one, this unity will serve as a testimony of the truthfulness of Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. **The stakes are high – truly unity deserves a high place in the church. (P)**

However, there is a huge misunderstanding in the church when it comes to the issue of unity. **Many think of unity in terms of an organizational unity.** If we organize something that we can all agree to be involved in and united around then we'll have oneness. That could be an event, an initiative or a project. **(P)** However, the Bible teaches an *organic unity*. **\*It is not about a firm but a family, not business but a body!** It's a oneness that unites people spiritually rather than organizationally. **It is a unity of the Spirit, a unity of faith, and a unity rooted in our redemption and sanctification. (P)**

If unity is based on organization, then what the church needs are the most skilled administrators to bring it all together. But if unity is the oneness of the redeemed in relationship, in belief, in living, in purpose and in love then it will need Spirit-filled people. **(Pause)**

Jesus identifies what is necessary for unity in the church in His prayer for us. \*Let's consider the foundation of unity (v20-21). If Christian unity doesn't have a solid foundation it will collapse into disunity. \*The first condition is faith in Christ (v20). Jesus prayed, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message." There are others who will be united to the Apostles and that unity will come because they "believed in me." Jesus prays for unity not based on events and projects but based on faith in Him and His message.

Here is a vital point in all this striving for unity. Those who believe in Christ do so "through their message." "Their" refers to the apostles, while "their message" refers to the apostolic preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we put these together we begin to understand that the foundation for unity is belief in the Jesus that the Apostles proclaimed in the first century. \*In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we've remodeled Jesus so that more people can hang-out with Him and so be united around Him. (P) However, when we unite around a remodeled Jesus rather than the real Jesus proclaimed by the Apostles whatever we think we have it isn't Christian unity! (Pause)

\*In striving for unity some say let's put to one side all talk of doctrine, doctrine is divisive, subscribing to a rigid set of beliefs creates barriers and we want to be united. I hope you can see from Jesus' prayer for us that there is no unity outside of belief in the **Truth** of Jesus Christ.

There are undeniable and non-negotiable truths that the apostles proclaimed and upon which countless sinners bowed the knee and embraced Jesus Christ as **Saviour** and **Lord**. This was "their message." The oneness Jesus prays for can only exist in those who truly have faith in Him as revealed through the message of the Apostles. (Pause)

\*It's this faith in Christ that leads to **union with God (v21)** and it is union with God alone that is the certain foundation for our oneness. Jesus prayed: *"that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us..."* We know that there is absolute oneness in the Godhead. We do not have three Gods, but one God who is three persons. Each member holds particular responsibilities. For instance, we speak of the Father electing, the Son redeeming, and the Holy Spirit regenerating. There is no disunity among the members of the Trinity, but a perfect union in exercising the divine will. (P)

*What does our union with the Godhead imply?* It's a union of life! Think how John expresses it in his Gospel. Jesus is the 'bread of life' that sustains us. He is the 'living waters' that refreshes us. He is 'the Good Shepherd' who provides for us. He is 'the Vine' in whom we are united as branches. His life gives us life. His joy has become our joy. His love has become our love. It is a living union that gives life in all its fullness. (Pause)

Unity is not simply to be our **position** as believers it is to be our **practice** in life and ministry. \*That is why our Lord went on and prayed for the necessary **provision for unity (v22-23)**. The provision Jesus mentions in our text for being completed in unity is the gift of God's Spirit. *"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity."* When He mentions completing us in unity, He refers to the ongoing process of developing a visible unity before a watching world. Jesus doesn't stop developing unity in the redeemed. The Holy Spirit is given to us so that we, with all of our differences, can experience the vitality of unity.

When believers are walking in the power of the Holy Spirit they cannot help but walk in unity. He will direct the church to lay aside the sins that divide and then walk together in obedience to the Word of God. He will produce unity in the life of the saints because He presses us all closer into the life of the Trinity. We are encouraged to pursue unity in the strength of the Holy Spirit. (John 4 – S&T)

**\*Our Lord's prayer also reveals the purpose of this unity (v21-23).**

In these few verses a twofold purpose is revealed to us. \*Firstly, is the purpose of our **enjoying what God enjoys**. *"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one."*

Jesus wants His church to know (the deep knowing of enjoying) the glory of divine oneness. He wants us to experience, as much as is possible in our current condition, the oneness that He enjoys with the Father. **There is never division in the Godhead.** The Father never has cause to complain about the Son, nor does the Son have a critical word about the Holy Spirit. **The members of the Godhead never have different agendas – pulling in different directions.** They're one in nature, will, character, purpose and love. **The church is to know by its own experience this sense of divine oneness. (P)**

**Dear friends, unity is something to be enjoyed.** In the same way that our Lord immensely enjoys His unity with the Father, we are to enjoy the unity that is ours as a church. **The whole prayer of John 17 overflows with the pulsating love that exists between the Father and the Son.** **What does unity expressing itself in love look like for us?** Let me give three Cs to aim for. 1) **Contact** - the willingness to talk, no aloofness, no withdrawal from each other. **Time spent together!** 2) **Concern** – the contact mustn't be superficial. It's to be marked by a readiness to help, to share, to listen, to pray, a willingness to bear one another's burdens. 3) **Contribution** – a recognition that we need each other. You have what another one needs and they have what you need, and we minister to one another alike.

The second reason for unity given in our text has more of an external purpose: *“Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”* \*This is the **displaying** nature of unity. Here we find unity affecting those outside the church. Our unity is a testimony to the world of the reality of Jesus Christ and the experience of the Father's love.

How will the world know that Jesus Christ was truly sent by the Father? Typically, it is the lives of believers that catch the attention of an unbeliever so that they begin to think about the message of the gospel. Twice, Jesus states that the work of unity must take place so that the world may believe that the Father sent Him. How will the world know that Jesus Christ is indeed God who became a man for the purpose of redeeming sinners?

The arena that best **displays** this reality is found in local bodies of believers. As a variety of people can come together, not merely as an organization, but as a living body, it shouts of unity in diversity! It sings of being of one purpose and will. It arouses their attention to see us loving one another and standing together in the faith of the gospel. Unity delivers a message that there is a God who is both united (1 God) and diverse (3 persons) overflowing in selfless love towards sinners! (Pause)

\*There is a final part of Jesus' prayer and that is **the culmination of unity (v24-26)**. Throughout Jesus' ministry glimpses of His glory had shone forth (John 2). Glimpses of who He is as the Son of God and glimpses of His eternal relationship with the Father had been brought into the open. His hour of glory at the cross would in the eyes of some diminish His glory as the eternal Son obscuring His divine glory.

What Jesus prays for believers, in this final section, is that one day they would be with Him, in the place where the veil is finally and completely lifted. In that place His full glory will be evident to all and the perfect unity that has eternally existed between the Father and the Son will light the whole place as the sun lights the earth.

It is to that end point that our unity with God and with fellow believers is heading. Jesus wants us to be in that place where the glory of divine unity shines forth. Where the beautiful relationship between the Father, Son and Spirit is wonderfully displayed for all to see and enjoy and revel in. As we head to that place our unity here on earth must shine ever brighter as it reflects the unity of the Godhead and as it seeks to mirror our final destination. (Pause)

**\*Conclusion** – I began by saying that there is a lot of talk about unity. Jesus has granted us positional unity and we must strive in the strength of the Spirit to have practical unity. However, growing in unity doesn't come about through chatting about it. \*Imagine I put a chair in the middle of the room and ask you to be untied around the chair. You could form committees and have projects to express your unity but it wouldn't achieve much. However, if you all decided to move closer to the chair then you would move closer together.

It's as believers together move closer to the throne of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ seeking to worship Him in Spirit and in Truth that we start to practice and experience that unity which Jesus has purchased and prayed for. Then we have a powerful platform for our witness to the world.