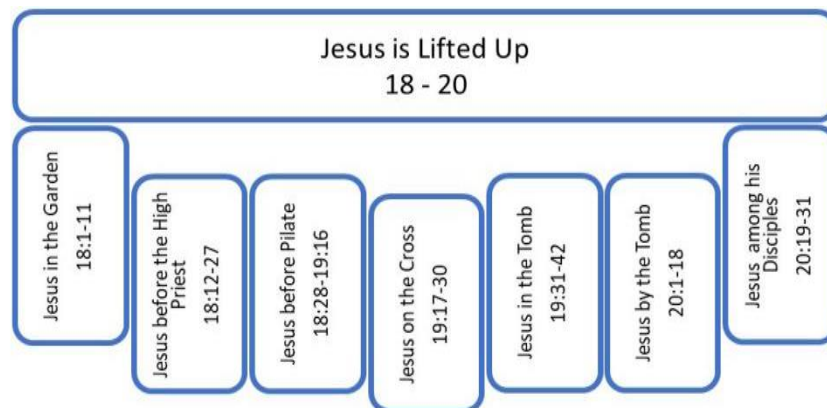


## Lesson 31: John 17:20-26 Jesus Prays for Us

### Introduction



I have experienced John 13-17 differently this past week. My father, Scott Brent, was called home to his Father last Tuesday. He ran his race with his eyes fixed on Jesus.

Right now, for me Jesus' words, "Where I go you cannot come" are poignant. Also his words, "I will come again, and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also." As I read these words and I think about Jesus going away for a long time, and now he's preparing his disciples for that absence of his presence, and I am experiencing the absence of my father's presence - I know he's not gone for good, I know he's gone to be with the Heavenly Father, but that experience is drawing me relationally, emotionally into the text as Jesus speaks to his disciples. The joy and sorrow that my dad has travelled home to Jesus prepares me for thinking about the joy and the sorrow that the disciples feel at Jesus going home. "Where I go you cannot come." Not yet. I have good works for you to do. You stay here, and then you will come and be with me. My longing to be with Jesus is now merged together with my longing to be with my Dad. He has gone home. I will follow. Not yet. I still have good works to do before I go home.

Jesus prays in John 17 a prayer of sanctification for his disciples. As he prepares to go, he is setting them apart to serve in this world: to serve him.

Jesus began the prayer by asking the Father to glorify him in his final hour and then restore the glory that he had set aside when he came in the flesh. After praying for his own glorification, Jesus made three requests for the disciples gathered around him. He concludes the prayer with a request for those who were going to later believe. It is a prayer for us who have come to believe because of the witness of that first generation.

Jesus does not actually make a new request for we who follow. He applies to us the requests he just made for his disciples. This is how he starts the section. This is John 17:20, the first part, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone," meaning his disciples, "but for those also who believe in Me through their word..." Jesus does not add new requests. The requests for the disciples were not for them alone but for us, also. And instead of adding new requests for us, Jesus expands in this section on why he made those requests in the first place. He tells us what he wants to become true because of those requests. Jesus has a vision for oneness in Christian community and for witness based on the truth of his name. This is what he wants to come about out of the prayer requests he has already made for his disciples and for us. This is his vision for future communities of Christ-followers.

Let's remind ourselves of the three requests he made for the disciples which also apply to us. First, Jesus asked the Father to guard the disciples in his name. This is the name Jesus made known by coming to the earth. It is the name of God, which is his true nature, his character. Jesus is asking the Father to keep the disciples in true knowledge of who you are. Second, Jesus asked the Father to guard the disciples from the Evil One. He acknowledges that his disciples were going to be in the world but not of it, and they're going to need protection from Satan, who is at work to pervert and

corrupt. He is the thief who comes to kill, steal, and destroy. They will try to take the disciples away from the name of God. Third, Jesus asked the Father to sanctify the disciples in truth. It's very similar to those other two prayers. It adds the idea that they are to serve God in the world, so they must be set apart as holy, sanctified. And they are set apart according to truth: the truth of Jesus. And this truth makes them clean and pure and free to do the good works the Father has prepared for them to do, has prepared for us to do.

### **Jesus' Prayer for Us (John 17:20-26)**

These are the three requests Jesus made for his disciples and for us; guard them in your name, guard them from the Evil One; sanctify them in truth. Why? What is Jesus' vision for the communities of those who would respond to the message of the disciples? Let's read the end of the prayer. This is John 17:20-26.

<sup>20</sup> "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; <sup>26</sup> 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."

Jesus prayed that we would be guarded in God's name, guarded from Satan, sanctified in truth in order that we might share together in a oneness based in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Abiding in Christ is an individual experience. It is also a shared community experience.

#### *Oneness (20-21)*

Let's think about the oneness. The first two verses.

<sup>20</sup> "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; <sup>21</sup> 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.

The first goal Jesus states as vision for this new community is oneness among believers. "That they may all be one." And this oneness is a reflection of the Trinity; the relationship that is already truly harmonious, that is one in the Godhead. He says, "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You." It is not a Hindu type of oneness by which we lose our individuality as we enter into God. We are not a drop that falls into the lake and dissolves into the great oneness. The Christian vision, the Old Testament, the New Testament vision maintains our individuality as we come into relationship with the Father. It is similar to the distinctive persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit, who share relationship while maintaining distinction. It is similar; it's not the same. The oneness of Father and Son goes farther. It's more of a mystery to us. But it provides a model of oneness for us as human beings who are in community. Jesus' prayer that we be kept in God's name was "that they may all be one" and then "that they also may be in Us." Being kept in the truth of who God is, we abide in him. Abiding in him is a spiritual and relational reality. So, the Trinity is not just a model for us to follow. We are invited into him and so we are called to live out the reality of oneness that we already share in a spiritual way by being together in Christ. Even though we are already one in Christ, oneness is something that we have to struggle towards because of our independence, our fallen nature that still pulls at us, our individuality.

Consider Christian marriage as a fundamental example of Christian community. Two people. Our personal desires and motivations and goals and values can easily drive us in different directions on all

kinds of issues. Not towards oneness but away from it. Disagreements about money, disagreements about in-laws, disagreements about free time, working around the house, careers, parenting, service at church, the way we personally feel about these things, the values we bring into marriage, our own selfishness - all of this can propel two married people onto very different paths, moving away from each other's mind, away from each other's heart, away relationally, away from oneness.

If we make our marriage relationship the number one objective, we will fail. It's in our nature. We are like two magnets connected on a straight line attempting to move toward one another. And sometimes there is very strong attraction. But at other times we spin around, and we are repelling. We're like magnets that keep spinning, sometimes attracted, sometimes repelling, unable to overcome our own nature.

Instead of making an approach to one another our primary goal, when we turn to Jesus and believe him and make him our number one goal, the competition we have with each other is reduced to some degree, because our eyes are not focused on what we want from the other. Our eyes begin to be focused on Jesus. We fix our eyes on Jesus. And then we try to model ourselves after him. We want the heart of abiding in Christ. We want a heart like his, a heart of humility, of faith, of glory, of love. And that heart motivates us to the acts of abiding, which result in the fruit of abiding. If we're acting in our relationship in Christ then we're coming closer to him, we're becoming more like him. And as we both move toward Jesus, we are like objects, instead of being on a line that are repelling or attracting, we're like the two base corners of a triangle, and Jesus is the apex. And we're moving towards him, and as we move towards, we necessarily are moving towards one another. So abiding in Christ is both our model for oneness in relationship, but it's also what enables oneness with each other.

It's not automatic. We have to seek Christ. But it's not easier than that. We can't do it apart from abiding in Christ. Abiding in Jesus Christ, seeking to be one with him, one with the Father, this is the basic blueprint for oneness in Christian community, whether we're speaking of two people, or three people, or fifty people. We find our oneness by abiding together in Christ.

#### *Witness*

Jesus' vision for our oneness comes back to his vision for the glory of God to be made known in the world. He says to the Father that he desires this oneness for us. This is what he says, "So that the world may believe that You sent Me." Oneness is a community fruit that gives witness to Jesus Christ. Do you remember from chapter 13 after Jesus set apart his disciples by washing their feet; here he's setting them apart, sanctifying them by praying for them; there he sanctified them with action, by washing their feet. What fruit in that chapter did Jesus say would give witness to the fact that the disciples are truly his? How does the world know that we belong to Jesus? "Love one another as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are my disciples."

So, there is a parallel here, these are parallel passages. There's a connection between loving one another and being at one in relationship with one another. And both of those things, love for one another and oneness with one another, gives witness to the fact that we belong to Jesus and that Jesus is real. The aim of Jesus Christ is a transformation in us and in our communities. He doesn't just want to change you without having an impact on your Christian community. And he wants it to be noticeable in the world. This is not a top down oneness where everybody is told to believe the same thing and to practice the same kind of ritual, that somehow there's going to be a world-wide institution that creates a formal oneness. This is a oneness that arises out of transformed hearts that indicates some power at work. Look at who they love each other. Look at their relationships, their common purposes, their oneness. They're not perfect but there is something really different here that I don't experience in my family room, my school and my job. Could it be that the Jesus they proclaim is real?

One of the messages my mom received this past week after my dad died was a note of Christian encouragement from a fellow named John. John was on dad's track team in high school. He became

homeless in high school, so dad offered for him to come and live at our home. We the three boys had all graduated and left. It was just mom, dad and John. And John did not believe in Jesus in those days. He once told my parents that they were fake because they never yelled at each other. You know, it is not normal. He knew it didn't make sense. They became - even maybe without him putting it all together - they became his model for oneness in Christ. And they were not a perfect model. He got to see the challenges in their relationship and in their communication. Their lack of oneness. But there was something real and something different, something apparent. Something unusual. Years after leaving my parents' home, John came to know Jesus and he was able to understand what he saw different in my parents. It was the witness of Christ in them.

#### *Glory (22-23)*

Jesus has given us something to enable our oneness. He says in verse 22, he's still speaking to the Father, "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one..." What does that mean? "The glory which you have given me I have given to them." What does it mean for Jesus to give glory to us? What is the glory of Jesus? Let's go all the way back to the prologue. There are three concepts there and when I mention them, you'll be able to see how they play throughout the whole Gospel. John 1:4, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Two things there. His glory is life and his glory is light. Two major themes of John. There is a principle of life in Jesus, and it's holistic. It's our physical life. Through him all things were made. Nothing was made without him. So, we owe our biological life to him, but the focus of the Gospel of John is our spiritual life and our relational life, which are enabled by Jesus. In chapter 7, he stood up in the temple and proclaimed, "He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" Then in chapter 10, he promised, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly." In chapter 14, "I am the way, the truth, the life." Chapter 15, he gave us the image of the vine and the branches. We do not have the vitality of spiritual life within ourselves. Apart from Christ we are spiritually dead. But when we are connected to him, yielded, obedient, dependent, his life flows through us to produce fruit by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is truly alive. We are truly alive in him. This is a glory that he has given us. The glory of his vitality. Like Lazarus out of the tomb, we embody a new kind of human life. We are able to take off the grave clothes.

Along with the glory of life there is the glory of light. Jesus makes the truth of God known. And Jesus has shared this glory with us. We are able to see, to know. And then we are in turn able to participate in making God known.

With light and life there is also the goodness of his name. John 1:14, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." This is his glory, his character. His name is grace and truth, love and justice, courage and humility, patience and conviction. The life and light of Jesus at work in us begins to make us like him. This glory he has given us, it's a change of our nature. We become good.

The glory the Father gave Jesus: life, light, goodness, he has given us. And this glory enables both our oneness and our witness. So, we've already mentioned these two in the prayer and we come right back to them in verse 23. I'll read 22-23. See the connection with glory.

*"<sup>22</sup> The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; <sup>23</sup> 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."*

This sums up what we have said so far, the two goals of Jesus. The prayer request he's made for us have these two major goals for the Christian community. Jesus has given us his glory by dwelling in us through the Spirit. Glory of life and knowledge and goodness enables us to the vision of oneness; to a way that models the relational unity of the Trinity. That's the first vision of Jesus, that we would be increasingly one in Christian community. But that gives rise to the second goal. That oneness of community gives witness. It gives witness here. It's two truths it gives witness to: that Jesus was sent

from God; that if the people of Jesus are truly different then that gives witness to the reality of Jesus. But here he mentions another thing. He says, "They will know that you sent me and loved them. It gives witness. The story of Jesus, and if this is real, gives witness to the fact that God truly loves his own. We are loved by God. And how does oneness show that we're loved by God? Because he's transforming us, he's making us alive, but also because he's invited us into relationship with him. And this experience of God shows his love for us, and that's a witness. It's a witness to us. It's a witness to the world.

*With Jesus*

In verse 24 Jesus states his desire that we would see his glory. And that can sound a little odd as you get into it, but not if you love Jesus. When you love somebody, you enjoy seeing their glory. You want to see their goodness and their beauty. And you want to see it displayed. Jesus truly is glorious. And he desires for his disciples to have the joy of experiencing him in all of his beauty and goodness and truth; to experience him much more fully than they ever did on earth. They beheld his glory. But it was still a glimpse. Jesus expresses this desire this way, "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." Jesus is our focus. Our eyes are fixed on him and on his glory. As we draw towards him, we draw together with each other. We have the shared aim: this desire for the glory of God, the glory of Jesus. He is our joy and we rejoice together. And that brings us closer.

Because Jesus loves us and knows that we love him, he desires for us to know the joy of his seeing him in his glory.

*Known in the world (25-26)*

But not yet. Jesus wants us to see his glory. But before that, he wants us who believe to be his hands, his feet, his mouth, his word in the world. He's left us here for a purpose. This is how the prayer concludes in verses 25-26.

*"<sup>25</sup> O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; <sup>26</sup> 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."*

Jesus ends the prayer as he began the prayer. He began with a request to be glorified and with the statement that eternal life is knowing God Jesus Christ whom God sent. Similarly, Jesus has ended his prayer with a desire for us to see his glory and a statement about knowing the Father and the Son. So he started with glory and knowing God, and now it ended with glory and knowing God. The word "know" appears five times in these two verses.

The world had not known the Father.

Jesus has known the Father.

These who believe have known that the Father sent Jesus.

Jesus has made the Father's name known to these who believe.

And Jesus will continue to make the name of the Father known.

To know God as he is in a truthful, experiential, relational way, this is eternal life. Jesus makes God known, according to his true nature. We who believe have come to know the Father, according to his true nature. And Jesus will continue to make the name of God known. We can truly come to know God. And at the same time, we will never come to the end of knowing God.

And in these last words of this prayer it's not a mere philosophical knowing of God. It's not sitting in some classroom debating all the characteristics of who God is and facts about God. That's part of it. To know someone, you need to know truths about who that person is. But this knowing that's being spoken of here, the knowing that is eternal life, this is relational knowing. And that's how the prayer ends. Jesus has made God known and here he's speaking to God, and he says, "I've made you known

so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.” God wants to indwell us and transform us with the love of his presence.

This is the prayer of Jesus, that we might experience God in a way that transforms us as individuals, but then also transforms our relationships together with believers. He wants us to experience oneness with each other, such that our love and unity becomes a reflection of the love and unity of the Trinity: of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that even more people will see and believe and enter into his love and enter into the community of his family, of his Kingdom.

### **Further Reflection On Jesus’ Prayer for Christian Oneness**

So, “What has gone wrong? Where is oneness among Christians?” We can’t read over this prayer without... This is the huge elephant in the room. As I reflect on that question, so many different ideas and problems pile up in my mind. There’s conflict in missionary teams, animosity in churches, the split-up of churches, there are thousands of Protestant denominations, there’s racial and ethnic division, there are black churches and there are white churches, there’s Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, there’s religious wars scattered throughout history. Where is the oneness? What’s wrong with the vision of Jesus?

And this oneness of believers, as I think about it, is not a topic I can handle fairly right now as I’m speaking to you. This is a topic for a book. But I do not want to avoid the topic, either. I want to give some thoughts, recognizing that I cannot develop my thoughts thoroughly and I’m certainly going to miss some important truths that you’ll think of that need to be considered in talking about Christian oneness.

I’m going to give you five observations, kind of to get the discussion going. Here are five things I observe about Christian oneness as I reflect on this prayer of Jesus.

#### *First observation*

Christian oneness cannot be separated from the truth of who Jesus is and truth of who we are.

Oneness is grounded in reality. Jesus defines God. Jesus defines us. To reject that is to reject God. If we do not yield to the authority of God’s Word, there is no valid basis for Christian unity. We might find other ways to be unified as human beings, but Christian unity must accept Jesus at his word.

Various denominations and movements, they hold on to this name, “Christian,” but they completely redefine the Word of God, some by elevating tradition up to, even above the level of Biblical authority, and others by making God’s Word out to be relativistic. It changes over time. It doesn’t really mean what it says.

But for Christian oneness to exist according to the terms that Jesus has laid within his words - and I don’t know why we would elevate this prayer and want to accomplish it as Jesus’ word and then reject everything Jesus said that leads us up to this point. The oneness Jesus is talking about is dependent on what he has been teaching. It’s a full package. It’s dependent on these two things, (1) the reality of Jesus Christ who is God, became flesh and died on our behalf: you cannot have Christian oneness without accepting that reality; and (2) the authority of God’s Word contained in the Bible. This is the Word of Christ that he has left with us. This defines for us the oneness that we’re seeking. This is the message of John. True disciples abide in the Word of Christ. True Christians receive his revelation of himself. They accept that he defines us, not the other way around.

Now let’s just think about the three requests Jesus made for his disciples. They’re all about truth. Guard them in your name. Your true name, God. Hold them in the truth of who you are. Guard them from the Evil One who would pervert that name, and unfortunately often does it in Christian circles. Sanctify them in truth. We’re set apart for service according to the truth: the reality of things that Jesus has made known. When we go back through the Gospel and consider how Jesus did this, how he guarded the truth, we are reminded in chapter 6 how the crowds tried to define Jesus as prophet and as king. They had their own vision of Messiah. Jesus pushed them back with the words “eat my flesh, drink my blood.” He rejected the definition of the crowd that they wanted to put on him, but

he gave affirmation to Peter who testified, “You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy one of God.” Truth. We are also reminded how in chapter 8, just after Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free,” just after that the crowd pushed back against Jesus’ assertion that they were slaves to sin, and they defined themselves as children of Abraham. They would define themselves. But Jesus said, “No. You are the children of the Evil One.” Jesus would define them very differently than how they thought they ought to be defined. And he refused to accept their self-identification. You do not give yourself identity. Jesus defines himself. Jesus defines us. We yield to the truth of his word. That’s the basis for Christian unity.

I have a personal example that stuck with me for much of my life. I have one famous relative. You can check out his Wikipedia page, my great, great uncle Bishop Charles Henry Brent. He was a Bishop in Episcopal Church in Buffalo, New York. He was also head chaplain of the allied forces in World War I. Christian historian Bruce Shelley considers him one of the pillars of the ecumenical movement of the mid-twentieth century. At that time three initiatives for Christian unity converged.

According to Shelley’s book, *Church History in Plain Language*, John R. Mott, founder of the World’s Student Christian Federation exhibited “a passionate zeal for unity based on the love of Christ (443).” I admire Mott, and I find value in the idea that our unity comes from true relationship with Jesus. I think that is true. At the same time, a great variety of Christians can claim subjective experiences with Jesus. In fact, that’s a basis for Mormon witness, you know, what you feel in your heart to be true. And I’ve learned there are Muslims who pray to Jesus and claim heart-warming experiences from that prayer. So a testimony of love for Jesus is too subjective to be the basis, or the ground of our Christian unity. We need something more objective.

And two of the initiatives competed at that time with one another as a basis for ecumenism, that is, bringing together different Christian groups. The World Conference on Life and Work argued for unity based on action. Our oneness is in our joint causes. And Bishop Brent was all for joint action. He is credited for leading the fight to end the opium trade to China. But he rejected the idea that common action is a basis for Christian oneness.

He led the World Conference on Faith and Order, as distinguished from the Conference on Life and Work, and he argued for unity based on doctrinal truth. Shelley says, he “believed that cooperation among churches was possible only on the basis of agreement on essentials of the faith (444).” And I agree. Without agreement on essential Christian truths we cannot have Christian unity. And it begins with these two things I’ve already mentioned. It begins with an acknowledgment that Jesus Christ is God and he came and died for us. And second, with the acceptance of the Bible as our authority. The Bible is true.

Unfortunately, the Conference of Faith and Order lost the argument and the Worldwide Council of Churches accepted the position of the Conference on Life and Work that unity is based on what we do, not on what we believe, which essentially allowed them to invite everybody in. So, then you have Christian leaders, or so-called Christian leaders who deny the divinity, deny the incarnation, deny the atonement, deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And how in the world someone can actually call themselves Christian with a straight face while denying all the essential truths Jesus Christ taught about himself, is beyond me. I struggle to comprehend that. I wish co-called Christian leaders would be honest and drop the name, “Christian.”

Are the words of Jesus true or are the words of Jesus not true? It’s really not that hard, as twisted as we might make it. When we claim the words of Jesus are true, we’re still going to have disagreements with each other, but at least we have a basis for our disagreement. And the point is not simply to have agreement on propositions. What we’re saying is that belief in these truths brings about change. It brings about the oneness. To reject the truth is to reject the way that leads into spiritual life.

If Jesus truly is the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father but through him, then to reject that truth is to not come to the Father. You cannot have oneness if you refuse to come to the Father, according to the way of Jesus. If, as Jesus says, we must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God but we reject the idea of being born-again then, according to Jesus, we don't enter into the Kingdom of God and we cannot have Christian unity. Because we're not there, we're not in. We're not part of his family. If Christian unity is based on being alive in Jesus and indwelt by his Spirit as Jesus clearly describes in this prayer, then those who reject these ideas cannot, according to what Jesus is describing, have unity.

See, the argument is not that we must all have unanimity of thought to have unity. It's not that we all get our truth lined up and doctrine in agreement. The argument is that new birth and inclusion into the family of God depends on faith in Jesus as he has revealed himself. To use the words of Jesus, we must believe in him, we must receive him, we must know him. And when we do, we enter into him. And that's the basis of our unity: belief in the core truths that bring us into the family of God.

After having yielded to the truth of Jesus, we then share this subjective experience. We begin to take on shared priorities. We desire his glory. These are the types of things that build up and make possible our unity through our joint faith in Jesus.

Let me make clear an implication of what I am saying. Just as the Gospel of John deals with many in the crowds who claim to believe without believing, we recognize the same reality among Christian denominations all over the world today, and particularly among whole nations that claim to be Christian. Nationalistic Christianity does not produce true Christian oneness. Christian institutions do not produce true Christians oneness. Old Christian denominations, by maintaining their ritual and their culture do not produce Christian oneness. Not automatically. True Christian oneness can only exist among those who have truly been born again and entered into the kingdom of God through faith in the essential truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe it is generally correct to say that there is a remnant of true believers throughout Christian denominations. There are true believers. And it is among this remnant of believers that this oneness spoken of by Jesus Christ has potential to exist.

There can be value in different Christian organizations working together, even if we have significant - even if we're wondering if they're really Christian or even if they reject doctrine that we consider essential - we can still have a kind of unity on causes for social justice, for humanitarian care. We can come together to argue against abortion, to stand up for marriage, to care for refugees, to argue an end to racism. We can stand together, and there is a kind of unity there. It is a unity of case, however, and that's good, but it's not what Jesus is talking about here. It's not Christian oneness through being in God. You have to be born-again for that.

I've got four more observations and I could develop them all like this first one but for the sake of time I'm going to be more brief on these next four.

My first observation was that Christian oneness depends on accepting the truth of Jesus: what he says about himself and what he says about us.

#### *Second observation*

My second observation is that Christian oneness already exists in a real way that guarantees the future realization of Jesus' vision. This is part of the good news.

If I were writing the book on Christians oneness, one of the first places I would turn to in addition to this prayer right here would be the letter to Ephesians. The first part of Ephesians 2 describes how all of us who believe have been made alive in Jesus Christ, and in him we have been raised up, we've been seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-6). There is something already true about our position with Jesus. We're one with him.

And then the second part of Ephesians 2 repeats that idea, but in a corporate way. Not only are we already in Jesus as individuals. We are also in Jesus as a community. Focusing on the often hostile



division between Jew and Gentile, Paul declares that Jesus tore down the dividing wall so that he might make the two into one new man, reconciling both in one body through the cross (Ephesians 2:14-16).

I have more unity in my being in who I am in Jesus with my black brothers and sisters in Christ than with my own relatives who have rejected Jesus Christ. I share spiritual life, the life and vitality of Jesus with all of my brothers and sisters who have believed in him. I can't share that, even with my biological blood who reject him. That spiritual unity has already been achieved whether I acknowledge it or not, whether you accept it or not. To believe in Christ is to be in Christ. All who believe in Christ are in Christ. That is true of Jew and Samaritan, black and white, Croat and Serb. All who are in Christ share a spiritual oneness.

Our great sin is our failure to live out that unity which Jesus has already accomplished for us. But our sin cannot thwart the ultimate realization of that vision for his people. Jesus will bring us together with him in glory.

I grew up in the Moravian Church in the Southern United States. My church experience was almost 100% white. And yet, there are 20 times more Moravians in the African country of Tanzania than in the whole of the United States. Me and my white Moravian brothers and sisters would do well to seek unity with our black brothers and sisters in Christ here on earth because they're going to way outnumber us in Heaven. I guarantee that the Moravian choir of Heaven is going to look a whole lot different than the typical Moravian choir in North Carolina. That's my second observation, that Jesus has already accomplished a spiritual oneness by bringing us into himself, and it will be realized.

#### *Third observation*

My third observation is that Christian oneness is a dynamic vision to be pursued, not a static state we fully achieve on earth.

Even though Jesus Christ has accomplished oneness for us in him and even though his disciples already shared a certain amount of oneness, they had a long way to go. We always have a long way to go. There is continual room for growth. You get a hint of that in verse 23 when Jesus communicates his desire that we be perfected in unity. This is a process.

There is a parallel between our individual experience and our corporate experience. Just as we need to learn to give ourselves grace as we press towards Christ, as we grow in Christ, and we're going to fail a lot but we're moving towards Christ, so also we need to give our communities grace, because our communities are made up of people who are going to fail a lot. But our hope is that we're pressing together towards a vision of oneness.

As individuals, we exist in an "already, but not yet," state. We are already in Jesus, already forgiven, already secure, but we are not yet complete, not yet whole, not yet free of this body of sin. We will be. One day we will be glorified with Jesus. But for now we live in a messy middle. We are in process. We have been sanctified, we will be fully sanctified, but right now we're even participating in our sanctification. We're becoming.

If this is true of individual believers, this is also true of communities of individuals. We who believe already have spiritual unity in Christ. We are all in him. And we look forward to that day when that unity will be whole and complete; perfect unity. Though for now, we live in the mess between the "already" and the "not yet." This is the messy middle with the call of Jesus to engage and to pursue that oneness that he has already accomplished for us.

Whether we are speaking of our marriages or our Bible study group or our Christian band or our missionary team or our local church, we exist in communities that are "already-not-yet." So there's something already true in Christ and we have this beginning of oneness, but we're not yet complete.

#### *Fourth observation*

My fourth observation is that Christian oneness cannot be experienced apart from loving like Jesus loved.

There are two emphases of Jesus in these chapters that are sometimes held up in conflict with one another which are really meant to work in harmony. And those two emphases are truth and love. Do we build our unity on truth or do we build it on love? Well, both. We enter into unity when we yield in faith to the truth of Jesus. The goal of that truth is to transform us into a people who love God with all our heart and who love one another as Jesus has loved us. That is the new commandment. I have emphasized truth earlier, in my first observation. Now I am coming back around to love.

There is an ugly smelliness to propositional truth divorced from loving action. As a result, there is a lot of very smelly Christian doctrine on social media. It just stinks. It's true, but it stinks. Statements of truth expressed with hate or impatience or lack of gentleness deny the reality the truths are intended to establish. If I insist that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son and I insist on that truth with condescension, sarcasm, or prideful words, then I'm denying the very reality that I'm insisting on: that God loves. God loves but his children, apparently, don't.

If it is true that Jesus is both grace and truth, he is both light and love, then what am I communicating about the power of Jesus to transform lives when I communicate in a smelly, abusive, legalistic, judgmental way? And you see this a lot in differing communities with different, polar positions.

If I, as a Christian, cannot seriously put aside my thoughts, and just shut up, and listen, and put myself into another person's shoes, and admit to the complexity of values and experiences and needs that drive people differently; if I can only dogmatically insist on my own perspective, what does that communicate about the truth of who Jesus is? It's a very immature truth that can't be quiet. Jesus knew when to be quiet and when to speak, and it's amazing how many sinners enjoyed gathering around Jesus.

We do hold on to certain spiritual and moral truths without apology. And yet, if we cannot do it in love, then we might all just keep quiet. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." The truth of Jesus without love is an irritating noise.

The solution, however, is not the avoidance of conflict. Rather, it is conflict in love. Speak truth with love. If you've tried, you know how hard that is. It's a lot harder than it sounds. It is not easy to live in Christian community. We are not really good at loving like Jesus loves. On top of that, God puts some very unlovable people in our communities. Maybe that's us? We must learn to love. It's something we learn, and we're not going to learn to love if we are surrounded by like-minded people who constantly agree with our thoughts and our desires. To learn to love, we need challenge. I thought I was pretty selfless until I got married. And then I realized, I am a bit selfish. Then we had children, and that I realized, I'm really selfish. I need challenge to wake me up to the change that needs to happen in my life.

I guarantee, if you have not gotten mad or hurt by somebody in your Christian community, then you are lacking in your Christian oneness. Until you open up to the point that you get frustrated each other, until you enter into that space, you're limited in your oneness of relationship. Love calls forth a sacrifice of self that is given opportunity when there is conflict of needs, and desires, or perspectives. It's that conflict that gives you opportunity to love.

#### *Fifth observation*

One last observation. Christian oneness is lacking even more than you imagine, and yet, present more than you might hope for. There is bad news and there is good news. The bad news.

Those who have truly believed in Jesus Christ and have been indwelt by his Spirit still struggle with all the sins common to humanity. We are self-centered and tribal. We struggle to be truly authentic in community. We do not easily yield to others in humility and love. We judge one another. And we hide behind masks that make us feel safe.

We develop identity in our communities that compels us to judge those who are part of some other community. Our tribalism forms around doctrine or practices or ritual or race or politics. It makes us

feel safe because we're same. We're all alike and we're all fighting to keep it the same. We're fighting for a certain set of perspectives and values, a certain shared history. We develop a sense of unity that is not the same thing as Christian oneness, but it's based on prejudices, or fear, or pride, or selfishness, or unwillingness to go to extra effort to understand those who are not like us. It is easier to be of Paul or to be of Apollos, to rally around a denomination or a culture or charismatic figure than to honestly face the good and the bad in our own group while also honestly acknowledging the good and bad in other groups. To see truly is exhausting.

Adam and Eve shared a oneness of experience when they hid from God. You know, they were one in their hiding. The people of Babel shared a sense of oneness when they came together to make a name for themselves, to create their own identity. The Jewish leaders were together in oneness when they kicked the formerly blind man out of their community. Oneness of thought and action is not the goal. Christian oneness is the goal, a growing intimacy based on the reality of being in Christ. It is hard, and we're not good at it. And we've sinned. Our communities have sinned. And that's bad news. Here is some good news.

Unity is not the same thing as uniformity. Christians are commonly criticized for the multitude of movements and denominations. I admit that one of the reasons for all these diverse groups is sin in the hearts of Christians. We know that history. There is bad news here. But just as we are a mixed bag of motives as individuals, so also the history of our churches, and movements, and communities are a mixed bag. It's always a mixed bag. Every community, every individual is mixed in motive. There's good and there's bad. And to be honest, there is much good in our diversity. Thousands of denominations and churches is not a complete problem.

We do not want uniformity. That is not the goal. We do not want everybody to communicate in the exact words and the exact same way. We do not want every worship service to look the same, for all Christian music to sound the same; for every church to have the exact same priorities.

We have a variety of gifts, a variety of ministries enabled by the Holy Spirit, which shines through a myriad of personalities. And that's not bad. We don't want to all be the same. Our varied communities arise out of history and culture and a gift mix that belongs to that community. And it develops priority, a leading by God for that community. The Gospel was freed from Jewish culture, not to reproduce the same culture among every people group, but to infuse every people group with the truth and life and goodness of Jesus Christ, his glory, in order to produce a variety of expressions of the local church within one people group variety and across cultures variety.

And there is good news in great variety. Since the ground of our oneness is in the personal relationship with Jesus based on faith in his Word, there is more oneness across movements in churches and people groups than might at first seem apparent. I've experienced oneness with brothers and sisters in Christ who are very, very different than I am, and yet when the Gospel is spoken, when Jesus is declared, the joy in their eyes is the same joy in my heart. And there's an immediate sense of oneness in Jesus. And I've experienced that oneness in a black church in Durham, North Carolina that was pastored by an African missionary. I've experienced it at youth camp in Czechoslovakia back when it was still called Czechoslovakia. I've experienced it going to a Mexican church in Bakersfield, California, greeted at the door by tattooed elders wearing black leather vests. I have experienced the oneness of Christ with thousands of college students in South Korea, in a poor farm house in Croatia, at my home church in North Carolina, in small groups on the Outer Banks. I have experienced oneness with believers teaching through Central and Eastern Europe in Albania, and Macedonia, and Bosnia, and Slovenia, and Ukraine, and Poland, and Czechia, and Slovakia, and Moldova, and Estonia, and Lithuania. I have experienced oneness across denominations, preaching to Presbyterians, and Pentecostals, and Methodists, and Moravians, to Baptists, to Brethren, to Bible churches. I have experience oneness in my Croatian church, oneness with my Croatian colleagues, oneness with the dear Iranian couple I mentor. It is the real joy of Jesus through being born-again in him.

Across Christian denominations, throughout the cultures of the world there is a remnant of believers about whom the last words of this prayer apply. Verse 25-26,

<sup>25</sup> “O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; <sup>26</sup> 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.”

The prayers of Jesus Christ do not go forth without fruit. He is already accomplishing his vision for oneness through all of us who are in him. He will bring about this oneness fully when he gathers us together in his kingdom. We are called to work out this oneness in the here and now, in our own communities by abiding in Jesus Christ and seeking to love one another. Abiding in Christ is not something we do one on one with Jesus. Abiding in Christ is individual, yes, but also communal. As we abide in Christ together, we grow in him together with the goal of reflecting his love to the world that they might know the glory of his name and come to know him, too.

### Reflection questions

1. Read John 17:20-26. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
2. How do the previous requests in the prayer relate to the oneness Jesus prays for among future followers? What connections do you see between oneness and his glory, his name, truth, and being sent into the world as witnesses?
3. Considering the new commandment given in 13:34 and 15:12, what should be sacrificed in order to pursue oneness among Christians?
4. What cannot be sacrificed for the sake of unity if Christian oneness is to actually remain Christian? (Remember the promise of opposition and the prayer to be guarded from Satan.)
5. Consider the five observations provided in this lesson for further reflection on oneness. Which one stands out as most helpful in your own reflections right now in your life? Which one do you find least helpful with or disagree with?
6. What practical action could you take to promote Christian oneness in your family, church or community? How can you participate in the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer?