

“Christian Unity”

John 17:20-26

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Text Comment

- v.20 Remember the Lord’s statement in 10:16? “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” Now he prays for *us*, those who were not his disciples at the time he uttered this prayer, but those who would become his disciples through the witness of the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is a unity founded upon the truth, their “message”, which is how the NIV translates “their word.” This is a oneness, a unity created by a common loyalty to the apostolic gospel. Jesus was the Word, the message about him is also called “the word.”
- v.21 The unity of Christian believers is analogous to the unity that exists between the Father and the Son: a unity of love, of purpose, of life itself, sustained by their own connection to the Father and the Son. All being united to God, they are united to one another. What is more, this unity is so other-worldly, so supernatural in character, that it powerfully testifies to its supernatural origin and to the reality of the Christian faith. Men and women drawn together this completely, a unity that surmounts all the obstacles that keep people apart in the world, is proof that Jesus Christ really was the Son of God sent from the Father.
- v.22 This is not an easy statement to interpret and many interpretations have been proposed. *Glory* ordinarily means the manifestation of God and God’s presence, and this is what Christ has given to his followers. And he did this with a view that, transformed by the experience of the glory of God, they may be one with all others of like experience.
- v.23 The Lord wants “complete unity,” not some lesser measure.
- v.24 The Lord picks up the thought of v. 5. The disciples saw the glory of God in Christ in a scene such as the transfiguration, and, of course, later in the resurrection and ascension. And Christians in the ages since have tasted that glory, but the Lord longs for us to see the fullness of it, Christ in unveiled splendor, the sight that will transform us completely, when we shall be made like him because we see him as he is.
- v.26 The last two verses seem to serve as a summary, a restatement of the entire prayer. You notice that there is no petition in these last two verses. He speaks instead of the character of the Father and of the completion of his own work and of its purpose. He does not need to add a further petition. These things being true, the Father will act accordingly.

Now there is nothing particularly controversial in the text that we have read. Very clearly we have an appeal on the Savior’s part to his heavenly Father on behalf of the unity of his followers, their oneness before the world. He desires such a unity as will be founded on a like faith and a

like experience of the love of God and the glory of God. And, clearly, he is speaking of a visible unity, a unity that, as in vv. 21 and 23, the world can witness and draw conclusions from. I say, there is nothing particularly controversial here, but the matter that the Lord raises in his prayer has been a matter of the most intense controversy in Christian history and this text has been appealed to times without number in the heat of those controversies.

For, the fact of the matter is that, by and large, one does not see in the history of the Christian church the sort of unity, the kind of other-worldly, supernatural, witness-bearing unity that Jesus prays for here.

Everyone is aware that the Christian church today is deeply and historically divided into three great sections: The Orthodox or Eastern Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Protestant Church. And everyone is further aware that the Protestant world is further divided into virtually innumerable divisions, and that the major divisions, such as, for example, the Presbyterian Church, are further divided into still smaller segments. Anyone familiar with Church history at all and with the history of his or her own church, knows that the divisions that separate Christians from one another often were born in bitter controversy and continue in studied antagonism, the one church holding itself apart from the other.

What is more, however, the better one learns the history of Christianity, the more division and disunity one finds. We tend to look back on the early centuries of Christianity, the three centuries following Pentecost, as a kind of golden age of Christian unity. We remember Tertullian's famous statement, which he puts into the mouth of the pagan observer of Christianity, "My how those Christians love one another." And, surely, there was such brotherly love and impressively so. But there were, within the church at the same time, bitter divisions as well, major schisms, dirty dealing – one side against the other – and mutual hatred. Tertullian himself apparently became a member of the Montanist sect, a movement of Christians not so dissimilar to the charismatic movement of more recent times, especially a charismatic church that was also fundamentalist in its approach to Christian ethics and the Christian life. Montanists practiced what they held to be a continuing gift of prophecy, they had female clergy, and were rigorists in Christian ethics, even determining the exact length of the veil that their women had to wear to worship. The very first regional synod known to Christian history excommunicated the Montanists and it was a movement often spoken against, though, so far as we know, Montanists held to the main points of an orthodox Christian confession.

The fourth century, as you know, witnessed the long and bitter struggle over the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ, the contest between the orthodox and the Arians, which brought grief and misery to Christian people everywhere. Popular bishops were sent into exile by one side or the other, sometimes even killed, then the exiled bishop would be restored at the expense of his replacement, and round and round it went. There were, in many places, riots in the streets caused by the controversy, with one Christian party demonstrating against another.

Then there was the great Donatist schism of the 4th and 5th century, the schism that Augustine devoted his life to healing with only very partial success. As a result of that schism there were, as it were, for the first time, two Christian denominations represented in the same towns of North

Africa, and congregations that mistrusted one another and would hardly speak to one another, so sure they were that the other had betrayed the Christian faith.

And, still these major schisms are but the beginning of the story. There were disputes and divisions prompted by jealousy among the clergy, or over matters doctrinal or ethical, there were disputes over questions of right worship, and, of course, divisions produced by different responses to persecution. And all of this in early Christianity.

In the intervening ages the story of Christian disunity continues unchanged. The more one knows about the Eastern or Roman Catholic churches, the more one discovers how much disunity exists within each body and how many bitter antagonisms lie in each church's past. Think of the bitter disputes that divided the Franciscans from the Dominicans and many Catholics from the Jesuits even today. And so, of course, and on a still grander and more public scale, in the Protestant world. It was very early on in the Protestant Reformation that the new movement began splitting apart. At Marburg, in 1529, an effort to hold it together was torpedoed by Martin Luther, who insisted that his view of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper was non-negotiable. And so it continued. At a conference in Montbeliard in 1586, held as a last ditch effort to effect reconciliation between the Reformed and the Lutherans, Andrea, the Lutheran representative, refused to take Theodore Beza's hand. Beza remember was the younger colleague of John Calvin and, then, after Calvin's death, the senior leader of the Reformed church. Andrea offered to give Beza his hand as a mark of love toward him as a fellow-man, but would not greet him as a fellow Christian!

And, today, there is hardly a Protestant church that anyone can attend at this point in Christian history that is not the product of at least several Christian divisions. If one is a Methodist, for example, one belongs to a church that is Protestant, and thus is divided from Roman Catholicism; but it is also a church that is no longer Anglican as a result of a division brought to pass by the Great Awakening of the 18th century. And that original Methodist movement had its own interior divisions before one comes to the American Methodist churches, which themselves have suffered splits through their history. Seattle Pacific University, for example, is a *Free* Methodist school, and the name itself heralds the origin of the church in a nineteenth century division from her parent body.

And, of course, what is true of the Methodists and the Lutherans and the Episcopalians and the Baptists, is also true of the Presbyterians. We belong to a denomination that has its roots in two divisions, one from the Northern Presbyterian Church in 1936 and one from the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1973. In the Protestant world there have been splits over doctrine, over worship, over ethical issues, and, alas, over race.

And the beat goes on! I read last week on the *Presbyterian Church in America's* website that the Westminster Presbytery, one of the regional bodies that make up our denomination, a presbytery located in southwest Virginia and northeast Tennessee, has voted to leave the PCA. Only some of the churches will actually leave the denomination, but a majority of the minister and elder members of that presbytery voted to leave our church. If you asked them why, they would say what countless Christians have said before them through the ages, that dividing from this particular Christian body was an act of loyalty to Jesus Christ and to the faith once delivered to

the saints. They would say, I'm sure, that they regretted the necessity to separate from the PCA, but that it was a choice forced upon them by the PCA's departure from historic Christianity.

We, of course, would reply, "Stuff and nonsense! No one is departing from historic Christianity; no one is even departing from historic Reformed Christianity. We are still a church that holds sincerely to the Westminster Confession of Faith, to the inerrancy of the Bible, to the gospel of Jesus Christ." But, they would reply, "No. That isn't true." And they would point to such things as the fact that the PCA permits ministers and elders to hold other views than that the creation days of Genesis 1 were ordinary 24-hour days. We would reply that to divide over such matters, concerning which good men with a deep loyalty to our Reformed Faith and to the supreme authority of the Bible have long held different views, is schismatic. Such divisions we say are precisely what the Lord Jesus prayed against in his great prayer. Unity that is based on such a complete agreement regarding every detail of biblical interpretation is not supernatural unity at all. It is simply the unity that any group of human beings can enjoy with people who agree with them about everything! But they would say, on the contrary, that to remain in a church that permitted such interpretations of the Bible would be tantamount to betraying the Lord with a kiss. Did not Paul himself once write, "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." And does not the Bible over and again warn against giving any foothold to false teaching?

And, surely, it is not difficult to see the logic of their position when we ourselves are subject to that same logic in other ways. For example, it is all very well to say that we should have remained in the mother church, that we should not have left what is today the *Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, but, fact is, PCA pastors couldn't serve in the PCUSA if they wanted to. Should we apply, we would be examined, and the PCUSA ministers and elders in that presbytery would ask us whether we believed scripture permitted the ordination of women and we would say no and that would be the end of that. Or, they may ask us whether we are willing to serve peaceably with ministers and elders who have very different convictions than our own. "What sort of convictions?" we might ask. And they might say, "Well, that Christians aren't the only people in the world who are saved, that other religions also can lead to God and heaven; or that open, practicing homosexuals ought to be permitted to be members in good standing in the church, even ministers." And, we would say, "Well, no; I couldn't live peaceably with those views. I would be conscience bound to declare them unchristian." And that would be the end of that. The PCUSA conservatives were, this past year, unable to pass an amendment to their Book of Church Order that would have forbidden PCUSA ministers from blessing homosexual unions. And, we think, surely it cannot be right continually to be discussing whether a Christian Church will observe the teaching of the Bible! And, in any case, we couldn't belong to such a church without having to deny our own fundamental convictions as Christians. That would be a betrayal of the Lord and his Word plain and simple. Well, say the folk in Westminster Presbytery, we are in precisely the same situation.

And the challenge never seems to end. Friday night hordes of people crowded into the Tacoma Dome to hear Benny Hinn and in hopes of being miraculously healed by him. We recoil in disgust from what transpired there, we are offended that, for many in our society, this is the public face of our holy faith, it frustrates and angers us that a so-called Christian minister should produce such a circus-like sideshow, a business that trades on people's desperation to make

millions of dollars for itself. But who can doubt that there were Christian people there last night? And what are we to do about *that* in the light of our Savior's prayer?

Much as we might differ from our brethren in other churches and, now, even those leaving our own church, we would certainly have no difficulty explaining why we cannot belong to our historic mother churches. But, then, where does that leave us in regard to our Savior's prayer? It is humiliating for a serious Christian to read this prayer and then to consider the fractured history and the present landscape of Christianity. But, humiliating or not, it is not easy to know what to do about this.

Surely, if the Lord asked his heavenly Father for complete unity among his followers, we know that this is both *his* will and *our* duty. Earlier in this same prayer, he asked for our sanctification, our holiness of life. "Sanctify them in truth," he prayed to his Father. That too is his will; as Paul will later say – "this is the will of God, even your sanctification" – and, clearly, it is *our* duty. We are all to put on holiness, to live a godly life. What Jesus prayed for, we must work for. It is as simple and inescapable as that!

Well, then, surely, in the same way, we are to practice unity, such a unity as so wonderfully surmounts the barriers that otherwise separate men that the unbelieving world cannot help but sit up and take notice. It is our duty to be one with our brethren and to live together with them, as Paul says, "making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

But, we have the witness of the New Testament itself that this duty will be as difficult to fulfill as that of our sanctification. Just as every Christian struggles to be holy and finds continual failure, even as he or she also advances in godly living, so it is with the practice of Christian unity. It simply is. It has always been so.

The book of Acts shows us, at the outset, the Christians being cast out of what was then the church of God. The religious leadership was unwilling to accommodate the new teaching and threatened the Christian preachers with arrest and eventually with death in an effort to stamp out *in the church* the product of the ministry and the saving work of the Messiah.

Paul's very first letter was to the Galatian churches he had founded shortly before and was an impassioned plea to cast out of the church those – they certainly called themselves Christians and thought of themselves as true Christians – who had brought a false and deadly misunderstanding of the gospel into the church. Much division in the church since has been of these first two kinds – the orthodox being separated from the heretics. I take some significant comfort from the fact that many of the divisions that lie behind us in our history were not of our own making. They were cases of being cast out of a corrupt church because of its unwillingness to have orthodox, Bible-believing Christians speak and act on behalf of their views. Such was the case with the Protestant Reformation – Martin Luther and John Calvin didn't *leave* the church, they were cast out of it by churchmen who were hard of heart toward the gospel of Jesus Christ, just like the Jews 15 centuries before. J. Gresham Machen did not *leave* the Northern Presbyterian Church in 1936, he was cast out of that church for continuing to complain that the Presbyterian Church was sending as missionaries to the four corners of the world people who had nothing but contempt for

the faith once delivered to the saints. Not all our divisions were of that sort, of course, but the most decisive of them were.

But Paul's letter to the Corinthian church exposed an orthodox Christian congregation that was splintered, not by heresy but by other factors, into distinct parties and oppressed by party spirit, various groups vilifying the others for various reasons: from loyalty to a favorite preacher to different opinions about what constituted Christian behavior.

And there has been much of the Corinthian type of Christian disunity in the years since as well, and certainly far too much of it in our own evangelical, Reformed Presbyterian tradition. We have had our splits dominated by jealous personalities, our divisions over theological and ethical issues far too arcane to justify the splitting of Christ's seamless robe.

But, again, where does all this leave us. A Savior and King praying on our behalf for the complete unity of his followers and his church fractured into uncountable pieces.

Well, my friends, welcome to the Christian life. Just as sanctification – for which our Savior also prayed – comes very slowly and only with great difficulty, so does unity. As to our holiness the Savior also said that the world would notice, see our good works and glorify the Father who is in heaven. And it is hard for us to believe that, so poorly do we practice good works. And it is hard to believe that our unity, such as it is, could ever impress the world. But that is our Savior's will and so it is our calling and our duty and ought to be our passion.

And, as with personal holiness and sanctification, one must begin where one is, wherever one is. You have the brotherhood right here. You don't have to go anywhere else to begin to practice the will of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ah, but right away we see the rub, do we not? As the wag has it.

To dwell above with saints we love,
Indeed! That will be glory;
To live below with saints we know,
That is another story!

But that is what the Lord is after and what he has told us cannot help but make an impression on outsiders. And it does. There are people in this sanctuary this morning who came to Christ in the very first place in part because of the impression that was made upon them by the love they saw Christians had for one another and the reason they divined for that love.

As Augustine said of himself and his Christian friend Alypius, "we were washed in the same blood!" That is true of you and every other Christian. Let your behavior demonstrate that, the words you speak, the affection, interest, respect, good will you show even to believers with whom you are in substantial disagreement, and the world will notice. It *never* sees that otherwise. Never. You make sure it does see it, and where it ought to see it, in the Christian church. It won't see it perfectly there, or anything like perfectly, but it should see it really there, and you must make it so.

And, then, you look for every opportunity, in word and in behavior, to do yourself what Christ here asks the Father to enable his followers to do: to be one in the love of the Father and the Son and in loyalty to his Word.

John Wesley and Augustus Toplady had very different theology and fought bitterly with one another through the years of the Great Awakening. They fought bitterly and publicly. Never did two Christian men so completely forget Paul's admonition: "in meekness instructing those who oppose you." John Wesley and George Whitefield also had very different theology and struggled to maintain their friendship and fellowship as a result. But, by and large, they spoke of one another with respect and affection and were never unable to acknowledge the Lord's work in the ministry of the other. There are many Christians who have practiced unity beautifully even in a divided Christian world. Why should we not be among *them*?

This side of heaven we will never manage harmoniously to unify the body of Christ in a single church with a single government. Or so it certainly seems. Those who really hold to the Council of Trent cannot make peace with those who hold to the Westminster Confession? Not without someone betraying sacred convictions. We cannot even rally finally around the simple Apostles Creed, for it has in it, by a later and very controversial addition, the line "he descended into hell," which we can only confess if we give the words a meaning that clearly they were not intended to convey. The Lutherans like it, the Reformed don't, some Christians alter the creed, others use it and tell people to think something else when they recite that one line.

No, not this side of heaven. Just as we ourselves will not be thoroughly sanctified or anything remotely like it this side of heaven. No wonder, at the end of the prayer, the Lord should say to his Father, "I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory." There is still much more of this prayer that will only be fulfilled in heaven.

But, meantime, we are to do everything we can to fulfill our Savior's will. That will he described to us in his prayer just before giving himself up to death for us and our salvation.