

## “One Church = Won World” (John 17:20–26)

In the sports world a common chant is: “We’re number one! We’re number one!” Various teams, cheerleaders, and fans will extend their index finger skyward and proclaim their own greatness. Such players and fans want everyone to know their team is the best team. The chant, “We’re number one,” fires up players and fans. Supposedly, it even intimidates the opposing team, who is usually chanting the very same claim. Of course, there can be only one *true* number one. This is especially evident during football season (i.e., college football bowl games and the Super Bowl). When the dust settles, there can only be one number one.

In the church of Jesus Christ, there can only be *one*. The goal of truly being “one” is incredibly important. But instead of chanting, “We’re number one! We’re number one!” we should be chanting, “*We are one! We are one!*” In John 17:20–26,<sup>1</sup> Jesus shares His greatest burden for His followers . . . oneness . . . unity. When Christians are “one,” we provide a visible, tangible witness to the world. As we read these final seven verses in John 17, we can almost hear the chant: *We are one! We are one!*

In 17:20–21 Jesus prays, “**I do not ask on behalf of these alone [my eleven disciples], but for those also who believe<sup>2</sup> in Me through their word;<sup>3</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,<sup>4</sup> so that the world may believe that You sent Me.**”<sup>5</sup> Jesus has prayed for Himself (17:1–5) and His original disciples (17:6–19). Now He prays for those who will believe His message through His disciples.<sup>6</sup> This illustrates perfectly our vision of “transferring truth to the next generation.” One great way to build unity is to model Jesus’ heart. On the last evening of Jesus’ earthly life, He prayed for future generations of believers like you and me.

What about you? Are you praying for your children? Are you praying for your grandchildren or even your great grandchildren? Are you praying for the children and youth in our church? Are you praying for our daughter church and other churches that we may plant? Are you praying about the continuation of our church long after you leave this world? How future-oriented are your prayers? If the only prayers you pray deal with urgent and immediate needs, your prayer life is not all that it could be. As an individual Christian, your vision must transcend the present, reaching those who will come after you. As a church, our vision must transcend the present, reaching those who will come after us. We must be deeply concerned about future generations of believers. We must long for oneness and fruitfulness so that the world will believe in Christ.

It’s worth noting that Jesus makes three requests in 17:21 that begin with the conjunction “that” (*hina*). All these requests are sub sequential. The second request depends on the first and the third depends on both the first and second.<sup>7</sup> The first request: “that they may all be one” is repeated in 17:11 and 22. This is the dominant emphasis of this entire chapter. In 1776, the Latin phrase *e pluribus unum* (“out of many—one”) was suggested by Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as aptly describing the creation of one nation out of thirteen colonies. Since 1873, federal law has required that the phrase appears on every coin minted by the U.S. Treasury. We often see it with the emblem of the eagle, our national bird. The phrase *e pluribus unum* is a perfect description of the unity shared by the members of the body of Christ. While there are many members, we are joined into a spiritual entity—the church. We are not many but are *one*.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this unity is at least twofold: (1) that believers may be in the Father and the Son and (2) that the world may believe that the Father sent Jesus. Jesus prays that we may have the same oneness that He and the Father have. As we experience this God-like intimacy with one another, the world will believe that the Father sent the Son. In other words, Christian unity enables the world to see and understand that Jesus is divine in His origin and is God Himself. After all, one of the greatest miracles known to humankind is when Christians get along. Generally, this is so unusual that the world might die of shock! Instead, we need to ensure that they see this greatest possible witness —unified Christians.

In 17:21, Jesus asked us to be in the Father and Son. Now in 17:22–23, He asks that the Father and the Son may be in us. Jesus puts it like this: **“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me,<sup>9</sup> and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”** The “glory” (*doxa*) that Jesus received and gives to us refers to the servanthood of His incarnation—leaving the glory of heaven and coming to earth as a man. Jesus’ servanthood includes the cross and He invites us to share in His sufferings. This is the glory that He gives us.<sup>10</sup> Jesus indicates that the purpose of our servanthood is that we may be “perfected” (*teleioo*)<sup>11</sup> in unity. The Greek concept of “perfect” does not mean “flawless perfection”; rather, it carries the sense of maturity and completeness. This past week as I was talking to my wife about this passage she said, “I’ve always thought that I had to work hard to make Christian unity possible, but it really dawned on me that unity has been given by God.” Lori is exactly right! Ephesians 4:3 says that we must be diligent to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The key word is “preserve.” We must maintain what God has already instilled in the body of Christ. We don’t have to create unity, it is His Work. We are simply responsible to preserve what He has put into place. So while we possess unity; it isn’t “perfected,” unless grow in it.<sup>12</sup>

Along the coast of northern California are great forests of redwoods—the giant sequoias. Redwoods are noted for age, beauty, and fine wood. But one unusual characteristic of redwoods is their tendency toward *unity*. Two redwoods may grow up together several feet apart, and then after fifty or one hundred years the trees begin to touch. Quite often the bark begins to overlap and fill out so that the two trees ultimately become one. There are cases where a dozen trees have sprung up from the outer roots of a tree that has fallen and have formed a perfect circle. After several centuries these trees have grown together so that outwardly they appear as a single giant tree! In keeping with Christ’s prayer, the goal of the body of Christ should be to grow into such unity that the world will recognize us as one. The display of such unity in our individualistic society will be a testimony to the world of the divine Person and work of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Unity is paramount! Unity will win the day! Thomas Manton (1620–1677), the great Puritan preacher said, “Divisions in the church breed atheism in the world.” The converse is also true: Unity in the church builds belief from the world.<sup>14</sup> Is the unity that you are experiencing impacting your community? Can you tell your neighbors, coworkers, classmates, family, and friends that you are one with your church? You need to be able to say, *We are one! We are one!*

In 17:24, Jesus prays that we would receive another type of “glory” (cf. 17:22). He says, **“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>15</sup>** Jesus’ use of “glory” refers to the future glorification of believers when we shall see Jesus as He is (1 John 3:2–3). Jesus wants us to see Him in all His glory. In Matthew 17:1–8, Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus’ glory when He was transfigured before them, but this was merely a dress rehearsal, a preview of eternity.<sup>16</sup> The glory that Jesus desires to give us will not be momentary, it will be permanent. The word “given” is in the Greek perfect tense, meaning a past action with abiding results. In other words, Jesus has always possessed “glory,” but the unveiled expression of His glory is present now and will last for all eternity. Here, Jesus is deliberately contrasting His glory with the world’s glory which comes and goes.<sup>17</sup> For the final time, He also emphasizes that we are those whom God the Father has “given” to Him. This is Jesus’ version of the unbreakable golden chain in Romans 8:30 where Paul states that God has foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified us. Since we have been given to Jesus from the Father, He will ensure that we are kept for glory. In that day, we will be given a new body and will be made just like Jesus. We will see the full expression of Jesus’ glory and we will fall down before Him, much like the apostle John in Revelation 1:17. What a day that will be! When we see Jesus in all His glory, we will worship Him like never before and truly be able to say: *We are one! We are one!* In that day, our unity will finally be truly “perfected.”

Verses 25–26 mark the final verses of this chapter and the entire Upper Room discourse.<sup>18</sup> In these two verses, Jesus summarizes all that He has prayed in John 17: **“O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; 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 uses the word “known” five times in these two verses. He closes His prayer with a vow to the Father, but it is also a promise to us. He will continue to make His name (i.e., all that He is) known to us and also will be increasing the Father’s love in us. That is His sovereign vow, and it will be our continuing experience. Jesus concludes with the phrase, “I in them.” At the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus promises His disciples that He will be with them all their days (28:20b), but here is an even greater promise: “I in them.”<sup>19</sup> *We are one* because Jesus is in us!

This past week, I’ve had a black eye. On Monday I was lifting weights alone in my neighbor’s garage. I did my bench presses and decline presses. I then moved to incline presses. For this exercise, the bar is set at a forty–five degree angle. As I prepared to unrack the bar, the bench collapsed like a speeding bullet. The velocity of the downward motion gave me an instantaneous headache. I was slightly dazed when I got up, but I decided to resecure the pin which had popped out of the bench. Since Mamma didn’t raise no fool, I used my hands to apply pressure to the bench to make sure that it would hold me. As I did, the bench collapsed again and I fell forward and cut my eye on the bar. This was a comedy of errors. Nevertheless, I jokingly threatened my dear friend and neighbor with a lawsuit for his faulty gym equipment. (But since his wife is a lawyer, I would probably lose the case.) Ted checked why this pin popped out and discovered something we had never realized. This particular pin requires a second step: you must twist it after it is through the hole. Although we have used this pin without twisting it for the last year, we were living on borrowed time. In order to have a safe and successful workout, both steps are required. Similarly, the ABC’s of Christian maturity and unity are B and A: (1) Believe in Christ—receive eternal life. (2) Abide in Christ—proceed in eternal life.<sup>20</sup>

Since today is Christmas Sunday, it’s important to ask, “What does Jesus want for Christmas?” I think after studying Jesus’ words it would be safe to say that Jesus wants unity—oneness among His followers. I would like to challenge us to give Jesus three gifts this Christmas. These gifts can be simple prayers or commitments that you make to Jesus.

***Gift #1: I will focus on what unites rather than on what divides.*** When Lori and I were students at Multnomah University, President Joe Aldrich, would say, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” This is especially critical in the local church. We must major on the majors not minor on the minors. We must focus our hearts and our minds on Christian essentials. We must always remember that as Christians, we agree on far more than we disagree. Thus, it is helpful to identify those areas on which we do agree. A few examples will suffice: The Bible is God’s Word, Jesus Christ is God, salvation is by faith through Christ alone, and Jesus will return. These beliefs are worth dying for, but many others are not. E. Stanley Jones (1884–1973), missionary to India, once said, “Talk about what you believe and you have disunity. Talk about Who you believe in and you have unity.” May we be a church that is all about Jesus and the essentials of our faith.

***Gift #2: I will agree to disagree.*** It’s been said, “We can agree to disagree—until the Lord shows you that I’m right!” Seriously, I’m undoubtedly wrong in some of the non-essential tenants I believe. It is acceptable to disagree on issues such as baptism, eternal security, election, the structure of church government, the role of women in the church, the charismatic gifts, and timing of creation and Christ’s return. These are non-essential issues that we can discuss and disagree agreeably on until Jesus’ returns. While doctrine is important, we must recognize the distinction between membership and fellowship.<sup>21</sup> Local churches can and should have doctrinal distinctives, but these distinctives should pertain to church membership. They should not result in breaking fellowship with any regular attendee or brother and sister in Christ in the community. After all, *we are one!*

In every biological family some family members will be closer than others, but all should be one. In the same way, we must come together as a spiritual family and declare to the world, “*We are one!*” If we are functioning in conflict and disunity rather than unity, God will limit His work in our lives. If we have time to be blessed but not be a blessing; if we are selfish saints who want things from God but don’t want to mess with being a functioning member of a local church; or if we are causing disruption in the church by our attitudes and tongues, then we are wasting our time getting on our knees and asking God to do something for us. If we don’t want to hang with His children, what makes us think that our Dad in heaven will support our rebellion?<sup>22</sup>

In Africa, a two-year-old child wandered off into the forest. The entire tribe spent the day searching for this youngster but could not find him. The next day, they decided to join hands and cover the entire area. They found the boy, but unfortunately, he was dead after having spent the night outside. The distraught mother cried, “Why didn’t we hold hands sooner?”<sup>23</sup>

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to come together, join hands, and pursue a common kingdom goal. Since we are going to enjoy the same place, the same presence, and the same Person, we need to all learn to enjoy one another.<sup>24</sup> When we cooperate in Christianity unity, the world will see Jesus clearly revealed through His bride.

***Gift #3: I will validate not vilify.*** I want you to think about a believer with whom you disagree with doctrinally, philosophically, or practically. What are some positive things you can say about this person? This may require you to think hard, but this can be done. There are always positive things that we can say about other believers. It may take a conscious effort to think through a believer’s strengths, but we can all accentuate the positive and minimize the negative.

George Whitefield (1714–1770) and Charles Wesley (1707–1788) were constantly at odds over their theology. Whitefield believed that God alone was responsible for our salvation. There was nothing man could do to bring it to pass. He affirmed God’s absolute Sovereignty over every aspect of life. Wesley agreed that God made our salvation possible in a way we could never do. However, Wesley contended that the salvation of the individual rested on the choice of man. It was a sometimes strong disagreement (as it continues today).

One day Whitefield was asked by one of his followers, “Do you think that when we get to heaven we shall see John Wesley there?” “No,” said Whitefield, “I don’t think we shall.” The questioner was very delighted with that answer, but Whitefield added, “I believe that Mr. John Wesley will have a place so near the throne of God that such poor creatures as you and I will be so far off as to be hardly able to see him.”<sup>25</sup> Whitefield understood the words of Jesus. He knew that regardless of their disagreements on theology, they were brothers in Christ and he loved Charles Wesley. We are called to do likewise. We must not let denominational, theological, socio-economic, race or gender labels get in the way of our love for fellow members of God’s family.

If Christians are unloving, uncompassionate, selfish, argumentative, and divisive, they contradict the Lord they profess to serve. Nonbelievers won’t be convinced of Christianity’s claim to truth. Apologist Francis Schaeffer wrote, “In John 13, the point was that if an individual Christian does not show love toward other true Christians, the world has a right to judge that he is not a Christian. In John 17, Jesus is stating something else which is much more cutting, much more profound: We cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus’ claims are true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians. The greatest testimony that we can possibly offer is not quoting Bible verses or providing some cutting edge outreach, it is loving our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and showcasing Christian community.

*Spartacus* is a classic movie that retells the historical account of the great Roman slave rebellion in 71 B.C. Spartacus was a highly trained gladiator who escaped and led other slaves to freedom. As news of his rebellion grew, thousands of slaves joined his cause and followed him through victories and defeats. Near the end of the movie, a massive Roman army under the command of Senator Crassus (Laurance Olivier) captures the rebels. Although Crassus does not know what Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) looks like, he suspects that Spartacus is among the prisoners under guard. In full Roman uniform, Crassus gallops up to the mouth of the valley where the prisoners are being held and shouts an offer to them: they can escape death by crucifixion if they turn Spartacus over to him. Spartacus studies the ground for a moment and then nobly gets to his feet, intending to turn himself in. But before he can do so, his comrade to the left stands and calls out, "I am Spartacus!" Then his comrade to the right also stands and calls out, "I am Spartacus!" As the real Spartacus looks on, comrade after comrade in his slave army rises to their feet and calls out, "I am Spartacus!" until there is a chorus of thousands united.<sup>26</sup>

As slaves of Jesus Christ, we need to stand as one and identify with our Lord Jesus even though it could mean our own end. Oneness can change the world. Will you promote Christian unity as your greatest witness? Chant: *We are one! We are one! We are one!*

### **Scripture References**

John 17:20–26

Psalm 133

1 Corinthians 12:12–26

Ephesians 4:1–16

Philippians 2:1–4

Colossians 3:12–17

Colossians 1:28–29

### **Study Questions**

1. What are some attitudes and actions that do not make for unity among believers in the local church (17:20–21)? How can these be avoided? Have I attended a church that has faithfully modeled unity? How was this church able to model such unity?
2. How does the Trinity experience unity (17:22–23)? How does this correspond to the unity that should exist in the church? Where is my church strong in exhibiting unity? What areas could be improved? Does my church have a positive reputation in the local community? Why or why not?
3. What influence does Jesus expect unity to have on the unbelieving world (17:21, 23)? Why is Christianity unity such a compelling factor in reaching unbelievers? How can I utilize the Christian community and unity that I am experiencing to share the gospel?
4. Can I agree to disagree on certain nonessentials with my fellow believers? When have I demonstrated a gracious spirit in a theological or philosophical debate/discussion? What was the outcome? How have I failed in this regard? What can I learn from this experience?
5. What practical steps can I take to promote unity among believers in my church (17:25–26)? In my home? In my Bible study? Who is a model of biblical truth and unity? How is this person's personality and perspective different than mine? What can I learn from this person?

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Comparison with John 17:20 shows that in 17:6–19 Jesus was praying specifically for the Eleven. However, we should not regard what He requested for the Eleven as restricted to them exclusively. The change that takes place in 17:20 is not from one group of believers to another as though they were in separate containers. It is rather a broadening of the field from the Eleven to those that would follow them. Thus, it is understandable that when Jesus prayed for the Eleven He would pray for some things that not only they, but their successors would need. Clearly all subsequent believers would need sanctifying by God's Word so they could achieve their mission, as the Eleven did.

<sup>2</sup> This is a present tense functioning as future. This refers to all subsequent believers and in 10:16, even to Gentiles.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout John 17, Jesus has referred to "your [God's] word" (17:6, 14, 17), but in 17:20 He transitions to "their [the disciples'] word."

<sup>4</sup> Burge writes, "Interpreters often point out that Jesus fails to refer to the Spirit in his prayer. But it is the Spirit (mentioned from chapters 14–16) who facilitates this intimacy. Later John will write in his first letter, 'We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit' (1 John 4:13)." Gary M. Burge, *The Gospel of John*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 468.

<sup>5</sup> The same concern was expressed in Jesus' prayer at Lazarus's tomb (John 11:42; cf. 13:34–35; 17:23, 25).

Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*. Baker Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 498.

<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 569; cf. 2 Tim. 2:2.

<sup>7</sup> Philip W. Comfort and Wendell C. Hawley, *Opening Gospel of John* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1994), 275.

<sup>8</sup> J. Carl Laney, *Marching Orders* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), 152.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase "to let the world know that you sent me" (cf. John 17:21) is reminiscent of OT passages such as Zech 2:9. Köstenberger, *John*, 498.

<sup>10</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14–17* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 199–200; Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 596; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. Revised edition. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 650; Köstenberger, *John*, 498.

<sup>11</sup> The verb *teleioo* ("perfected," "complete") is also used in John 4:34; 5:36; 17:4; and 19:28.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus*, 199.

<sup>13</sup> Laney, *Marching Orders*, 155–56.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Hughes, *John*.

<sup>15</sup> The Triune God was active in redemption even before creation. This phrase is used several times in the NT (cf. Matt 25:34; Luke 11:50; Eph 1:4; Heb 4:3; 9:26; 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8; 17:8).

<sup>16</sup> Erwin Lutzer, *How to Have a Whole Heart in a Broken World* (Wheaton: Victor, 1987), 149.

<sup>17</sup> Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John*, 596.

<sup>18</sup> Jesus concludes His prayer, summarizing several of the main themes: (1) knowing the righteous (holy) God; (2) Jesus' divine origin; (3) the revealing of the Father's name; and (4) the unity of mutual love between the Father, Son, and believers. See Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 1352.

<sup>19</sup> Comfort and Hawley, *Opening the Gospel of John*, 277.

<sup>20</sup> Brad McCoy, John 17:20–26 sermon notes (10/25/09), Tanglewood Bible Fellowship, Duncan, OK.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Evans, *What Matters Most* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 323.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Evans, *God's Glorious Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 195.

<sup>23</sup> Erwin Lutzer, *How to Have a Whole Heart in a Broken World* (Wheaton: Victor, 1987), 140.

<sup>24</sup> Ken Boa, *The Gospel of John - Chapter 17*: [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

<sup>25</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of the New Testament Vol. VI* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951), 508.

<sup>26</sup> Preaching Today citation: Spartacus (Universal Pictures, 1960), directed by Stanley Kubrick; submitted by Bill White, Paramount, CA.