

“That They May Be One”

John 17:20-23 says this: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

In John 17 we have the longest recorded prayer of Jesus. Jesus first prays for Himself...then for the 12 disciples...then for *all* who will believe in Him from then on. (If you are a believer, Jesus was praying back there for *you*!)

What was He praying for? That His people would be *one*! That the followers of Jesus would live in *unity*!

A long time ago I heard a Roman Catholic priest who was part of the clergy group in our town say that not all of Jesus’ prayers were answered. This is one of them.

You know that old hymn, Onward Christian Soldiers? One of the verses goes this way:

“Like a mighty army moves the church of God,
Brothers we are treading where the saints have trod;
We are not divided, all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.”

Isn't that a laugh! “We are not divided, all one body we” *Really?* How many Christian denominations are there? Do you want to take a guess? A figure often given is 33,000! 33,000 denominations! The Christianity Statistics organization says there are 41,000 denominations worldwide. The Center for the Study of Christianity maintains there are 34,200 denominations. And the World Christian Database claims there are 9,000 denominations. One observer, however, says no, those figures are very much inflated – there are less than 2,000 Christian denominations. The answer depends a lot on what we mean by “denomination”. But even if we take the *lowest figure*, 2,000 Christians denominations, how does that stack against Jesus’ prayer that we may all be one?

That verse in “Onward Christian Soldiers” says, “We are not divided, all one body, we; One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.” *One in doctrine?* Right! How many church splits have there been because of differences in doctrines and how the Bible is interpreted! *One in charity (love).* Church history is smattered with instances of Christians fighting and arguing and splitting off from each other. Our Methodist and EUB history tells of splits within these church bodies. And now we are heading towards a possible split once again over the issue of homosexuality. *And yet our Lord prayed that all who believe in Him would be one.*

What was Jesus really praying for when He prayed that His people would be one? Was He praying that there would be no denominations? That there would be one humongous worldwide

church organization? Was He praying that there would be no differences of belief, that all agree on everything? Or did He mean that we should be one in spirit – that we just get along with each other? Let's think more about this.

What about an organizational unity? That instead of all these denominations, we'd be one organization, one church body? Anyone remember COCU? It was the Consultation on Church Union. Formed in 1962, this movement involved the Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ. It was a high profile part of the "Ecumenical Movement" – church bodies in conversation with each other, exploring possible mergers. (Some skeptics instead of COCU called it COOKOO or COCOA). Well, the whole ecumenical movement sort of died off. There is little push these days for denominations to unite. Is that a good thing, or not?

To be honest, I just don't think it's realistic to believe that we can ever have one large, worldwide church organization, or that we will all interpret the Bible in the same way, or adhere to the same doctrines. In this imperfect world, even as Christian believers, we will have differences. Differing views on Biblical passages. Different ideas on how the church should be organized. Different slants on social issues. Different theological convictions. None of us has a corner on all of God's Truth. We all, as human beings, have a limited perspective. So to think that we can get rid of all denominational labels, agree on everything, and form one worldwide church structure, is a pipe dream! I'm not sure Jesus had this in mind.

But having said this, some of the dividedness, the selfish isolationist stance within the Church, makes little sense. For instance, there are many small congregations, close by one another, that dot the landscape in the U.S. Most of these were established in the horse and buggy days, when to travel 5 or 10 miles represented quite a distance. So now, we have thousands of little congregations, often struggling to keep up with their buildings, often competing with churches nearby to get new members.

I served a 3 point charge in the Poconos. Three small churches, three services Sunday morning. Two of the three churches were about 2 miles apart. I often wondered why we couldn't close one of the buildings and merge. (I know why: because the people in those churches didn't want to. They didn't want those "outsiders" in their church. They didn't want to give up their buildings). I also served in a small town where there were two United Methodist churches in town, about a block away from each other. The town was once thriving because of the coal industry, but now it was somewhat rundown, economically depressed. Each congregation had dwindled to about 30 to 50 people in worship. Both church buildings were very large and were a financial drain on the members. This arrangement just made no sense to me.

Nancy and I lived in South Carolina for a year prior to coming here. I had contacted a District Superintendent to see if there were any churches open, to which I could be appointed. At one point I learned I was in line for an appointment that included two churches. They were about an hour's drive away from our house, perhaps 20 minutes away from each other. The one church's average attendance was 11. (the D.S. told me this wasn't smallest church on the district. One

other church averaged 6 people in worship). Yet these churches stayed open. Talk about stupidity.

So maybe to help answer Jesus' prayer, some of the little churches need to quit thinking just about themselves and their little group, and give up worshipping their building, and consider what's best for the *kingdom of God*.

As we consider Jesus prayer that His people be one, I have to believe Jesus wants His people to be one in mission to the world.

So often, we in church don't even think about getting out of our little cocoon, where we do things by ourselves as a congregation. Wonderful things can happen if we just explore how we can join hands with other churches and work together to get the gospel into the world! I mentioned earlier serving a three-point charge, three churches on a circuit. We did do some things together turned out very well. We had a weekend experience called a Lay Witness Mission, where Christians from other churches came in and shared their faith. It was a time of renewal for all three churches, and it brought us closer together. Then we formed a combined choir from the three congregations and presented a musical (Gaither's "Alleluia"). The Holy Spirit really moved during that event, and again it drew the congregations closer together. It was so inspirational that the choir began to present this musical to other churches in our area.

A few years back I read a book called *City Impact*. It is a plea for God's people to get out of their isolationism and fulfill Jesus' command that we be one. It convicted me of how I had pretty much ignored the prayer of Jesus that we be one. It also tells thrilling stories of how some cities, including Tampa Bay, Florida, had been impacted with the gospel when churches banded together, and partnered with businesses, to address needs of the city.

So, yes, it may be unrealistic to think that we will ever be one grand organized church and agree on everything, but we certainly can be more united, and work more together, than we are currently doing. So, it may mean closing some church buildings, merging with some nearby congregations, or at least partnering with them, to use explore how we can accomplish more by working together rather than by doing our own thing alone. (I have often wondered if there's a way we can partner with the people of Calvary Chapel and link together with them to impact our neighborhood, or share the gospel with the lost.

Jesus prayed, "I ask not only on behalf of these (current disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one..." (John 17:20-21a). ***I'm sure in this prayer Jesus is praying that we will be one in spirit – that we love one another.*** Jesus made this clear. Our Lord said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

All of us within Body of Christ are to love one another! This means are to love the people who go to LCBC...and our fellow Christians here at Calvary Chapel...and love our Roman Catholic

sisters and brothers...and those in the church down the block or the church up the road from us. I really think we have seen progress in this area. Years back, there was much more ill will between Baptists and Methodists, Catholics and Protestants. Now, denominational differences don't mean as much to people – especially younger people. If anything, the tension and conflict today between Christian believers has morphed into hostility between liberal and conservative Christians. We're certainly seeing that in our own denomination.

Jesus is praying for a unity in the Spirit, love among His people for one another. The Apostle Paul echoed this when wrote in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Or, in more up to date terms it could read: “There is neither American nor Chinese, there is neither employer or employee, there is neither Pentecostal nor United Methodist, there is neither black nor white, there is neither liberal nor conservative, for you are all *one* in Christ Jesus.” The Apostle Paul also urged this when he said we are to “Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

Jesus prayed that we would all be one *just as He and the Father are one.* Verse 20, in John 17, reads: “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” Then Jesus continues: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (verses 22-23). These are not the easiest words to understand, are they? (At least not for me!). Jesus is in us. Jesus is in the Father. We are to be in Father! Can you fully comprehend what Jesus is saying? I think, at least, Jesus is praying that through faith, Jesus abides in us, and we're drawn close to the Father, and we feel a bond and an intimacy with sisters and brothers in the faith!

One more thing. ***Why should God's people be one, and live in unity?*** “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, *so that the world may believe that you have sent me*” (verse 21). Have you ever thought how much of a stumbling block it is for non-Christians when they see us in the church divided, being hateful to one another, putting each other down? The world laughs. “If those Christians in the church can't even get along with each other, why would I want to join that crew? Why would I want to be like them?” “They don't have anything to offer the world, which is in such a mess!” Jesus prayed that we would be one, so that the world might believe in Him.

Today is World Communion Sunday. We join Christian believers throughout the world at the Lord's Table. I hope we can sense today that we are not in this alone. We are part of a worldwide community of believers. People of every nation and color, of every status in life, are part of the family of God through faith in Christ. They're our sisters and brothers. And we need them.

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