

Together We...Are United
Saved People are a United People

John 17:20-23

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on November 19th, 2023.

Elusive Unity

This week we continue a series unpacking the vision and core value statements declaring what our church will become together. These values are the unified goals we are to share together. Each statement begins with the words, “together we.” So far, we have considered together how together we go and tell because saved people share the gospel. Together we pray because a healthy church is a praying church. Together we invest in future generations because children should thrive in a healthy church. Last week we considered how together we need people because saved people need other saved people.

This week our thoughts turn toward the community of faith that is brought together in Christ in the Church. Together we are united because saved people are a united people.

Of all of the code words that we use in church, unity may be the one with the broadest range of definitions. There are lingering perplexities over how unified we are to be in our convictions, preferences and opinions. There are a few passages that deal with the unified convictions believers should share, such as views of Christ, the Godhead, and salvation. But there are more passages that deal with a unified mindset. Peter and Paul write about this understanding of unity. Our unity is based on Christ, in the Spirit, on the Scripture and around the gospel. It isn't based on opinions or preferences. And it isn't based on everyone agreeing about everything all the time.

Unity does not mean uniformity in everything. In the Trinity, there exists a unity in diversity – three distinct Persons, yet they are one.

Suppose we could bring together some of the great Christians of the centuries under one roof. From the fourth century would come the great intellect Augustine of Hippo. From the tenth century, Bernard of Clairvaux. From the twelfth century, Anselm of Canterbury. From the sixteenth century, reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther. From the seventeenth century would come John Wesley and George Whitfield, the evangelist. From the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon and D.L. Moody. From the twentieth century, Billy Graham.

If we gathered all of these men under the same steeple, we would have a lot of strong disagreement. We would never have a unanimous vote on several things. But underneath all of their diverse and differing opinions would be unity. Because they share a mindset of humility, brotherly love, and sacrificial service for the sake of the gospel. And the more those men lifted up Christ, the more they focused on him, the greater their unity would be. There would be unity amid a wide diversity of style, methods, and opinions.

In John 17, the Lord Jesus prayed for unity in the church. This will help us better understand unity. Christ's prayer does not mean we all should be the same, though many Christians mistakenly assume that. Too many think that other believers must think, act, and be exactly like them – carry the same Bible, read the same books, listen to the same podcasts, promote the same styles, educate their children in the same way, have the same likes and dislikes. That is not unity. It is uniformity. We are not called to be clones. In fact, the insistence that others be and think just like us is one of the most disunifying forces in the Church. Uniformity allows for a judgmental inflexibility to fester that practically hurls people away from the church with deadly force.

One of the gospel's glories is that it allows our individuality even while bringing us into unity. Unity without uniformity is implicit in Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12:4-6. Paul says that there is a variety of gifts and service and activities, but the same Lord, the same God who empowers everyone.

Getting a handle on what the Scripture tells us is complete unity is paramount to understanding what our unity is based on. I invite you to the high priestly prayer of Jesus now as we consider what complete unity is, why it matters so much, and finally how unity comes to us. (read text)

What Is Unity?

Jesus prays "that all of them may be one, Father." This is our Lord declaring that he desires that his followers would be one in love and unity. Some people might limit that desire down to some earthly concept. We do well to also note that this is a significant prayer. He is headed to the cross. Soon, his prayers would be interrupted by his own arrest. So, these are important words to consider. Not many of the Lord's prayers are written down, transcribed, as it were, by the Gospel writers.

And yet, John does exactly that. He records these important, emotional, powerful words of Jesus as he pours his heart out to the Father about believers who would be coming along behind the disciples. Christ prayed this prayer passionately. Christ is burdened for his future children. His desire is for a complete unity based on the unity Christ the son shares with the Father.

In the first half of the 20th century, there were some leaders across various denominations who believed this passage was Jesus declaring he didn't want different denominations. Uniformity in religious experiences. They recommended a strange merger more so than a unifying experience.

So, they pushed to unify all denominations. More than likely, this cannot be what Jesus meant here in his high priestly prayer for us. It also does not appear to be structural unity either within the church. It is a unity marked by love, not by some merger of various friend groups. Do you remember the first time you saw a Dunkin Donuts and a Baskin Robbins in the same store? Was your response, "Behold, how they love one another!" No! Jesus isn't referring to a sort of structural unity in which all the administrative and communicative ducks were in a row inside the church. His thoughts are more significant than infrastructure and polity.

He seems to be seeing how this type of unity will make the world around the church open to the claims of the gospel. His desire is that love and humility would be the markers of the early church and that all of them would be one in spirit, one in mindset. This would be a significant mark of the church in Acts. This was, for the first time in history, a multi-ethnic religious experience. Jesus prayed that all of them would be one, despite the vast differences separating them.

Ephesians 2 says we were dead in trespasses and sin and made alive in Christ. When you come into contact with a real Christian, not some nominal half-hearted, part-time, Christmas-and-Easter-only Christian, but a believer who has been deeply convicted of their sin and lostness, it makes an impact. I am speaking of coming into community with a humble, loving servant of God who has been infinitely affirmed by the unconditional love and grace of God through Jesus Christ and his death on the cross.

When you yourself experience community with a person who has experienced and extended that kind of grace, then it doesn't matter about their race or their class or their politics because the gospel cuts through all of that.

The gospel cuts through all of our differing opinions, experiences, preferences, and it forms and shapes our unity because the gospel changes your identity. The gospel changes the very layout, blueprint, floorplan, design and even the furniture of your heart. In this gospel community, things that once seemed extremely important to you are no longer important.

What Jesus is talking about here is so astounding and so unique that it really is not reproducible outside of Christ. There is a unity to be found at the heart of the gospel that brings people together who otherwise could never ever be brought together.

What Does It Mean to All be One?

Jesus desires that “all of them are one.” What does that mean to be one? Here are a few things on what this loving community should really look like. In Acts 4, we see that in the early church no one treated their possessions as if they were their own. That is not to say that there wasn't private property in the early church. There certainly was. What it does mean is that there was a radical open-handedness with possessions.

The gospel changed hearts in the early church toward their own possessions, so they shared their stuff, their money, their homes, everything. A Christian church should be one in sharing possessions. I served at a church that developed a ministry just to help people within the church to take care of financial issues. It was a significant and powerful ministry. God blesses that church because it continues to share their possessions.

We should be one in sharing truth. Ephesians 4:12-15 says speaking the truth in love is the essence of sharing truth. That's the operating principle of real Christian community.

The things in your life that are distorting your life the most, like the flaws and the sins in your life, those things that are hurting you the most are also very often things you simply cannot see as well by yourself.

When you are not able to clearly see these things in your life, the only way you're ever going to grow is because someone told you about the sins, the flaws, the problems. It's very hard and it takes a tremendous amount of courage to talk to somebody about these things. It takes courage because well, if someone comes to you, chances are you are going to be upset. Or maybe it is going to really crush you. Unified believers are surrounded by people who are empowered to do two things: 1) Be courageous enough to tell you what's wrong with you; and 2) Love you as they're doing it.

When somebody tells you about your flaws, even when they are right, if they tell you about your problems when they're angry, or when they're grumpy at you and they're just trying to let you have it, it's easy to dismiss it, to write it off. But when somebody who clearly loves you and it is obvious that it is hurting them to tell you, that's transformative. That's what a Christian community could be and should be.

The church should be one in sharing failure. When somebody fails in our competitive culture, they're out. They don't have what it takes. Take a look at the early Christian Church. The two significant leading figures were Paul and Peter. Paul killed Christians until he was converted. Understand that there were those within the church who looked to Paul as a leader, who probably lost friends to his persecution. And yet they brought Paul in. Peter was blatant in his denial of Christ and his cowardice, and yet Jesus re-establishes Peter and the brash and loud Peter becomes a humble leader, plunged into the grace of Christ. Peter would become a leader whose wisdom would be shared with the church. Peter is proof that while age may bring experience, when you plunge failure into grace of Christ, wisdom is the result. One of the unique markers of genuine Christian community is that it can actually incorporate failure and turn it into wisdom.

Christians shouldn't expel failure. Instead, we reconcile, heal and then incorporate back into the body. That's what Jesus has in view when he says that they may all be one.

Why is it Important?

We do need to think about why unity is it so important. Jesus says, "that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Here is the significance of unity within the church.

Jesus is saying something extremely important. When the world looks at a church, it is supposed to see an inexplicably loving community. The world should see a community that is so loving, it is attractive.

If a Christian church is not unified in this way, the world will not actually believe the truth claims the church makes with the gospel. Let's be honest, according to conventional wisdom, Christianity is chock-a-block full of these crazy claims: "Jesus is the Son of God." "Jesus came to earth and he died on the cross for our sins and he's been raised in the dead." They're radical and wild and we are compelled and commissioned and commanded to continually make those claims. But Jesus is saying the world will not believe our claims unless they see a community of astounding love behind the claims.

The honor of Jesus Christ name is bound up in, tied to, the quality of this community. One of the commentaries on John 17 says this: "Do you know any churches like this? Do you know any churches that have gossip, insensitivity, negative criticism, jealousy, backbiting, and unforgiving spirits, failure to fully welcome people of other races and classes, coldness, greed, and selfishness? Churches like that are making Jesus Christ look ugly to the world."

When churches engage in those activities, they're not just engaging in gossip, negative criticism, jealousy, backbiting, etc. Yes, all of that is wrong in itself. But if Christian churches are not one in this way, it allows the world the right to reject the gospel. If the gospel message is not backed up with a loving community, the message can be ignored.

When we engage in all those things, which we do, we're making Jesus look ugly to the world. That's the negative. Now, here's the positive. It must be possible to have this kind of community or Jesus wouldn't have said this. It is possible in the gospel and in Christ to have the community we described earlier.

How Does Unity Come to Us?

How do we get it? It's not easy because human beings don't naturally operate like this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a great book called *Life Together*. He says that it's natural for human beings, when they meet each other, to immediately size each other up.

We compare ourselves to each other because we're trying to make sure that

this other person is not a threat to our self-worth. We like to compete with each other in any number of categories looks, money, sophistication. Our relationships are transactional. We are always negotiating our way through them. That is why so many of our relationships are troubled. We are incapable of making unity happen. It is only through God in Christ that we can experience it. The gospel transforms us, and our loving community validates the gospel and makes Jesus attractive.

Further, Jesus says that through this type of unity, we can experience the love of God in the same way that God loves Christ! It is right there in v.23. Through our unity, the world can come to know Jesus through the gospel and further, they world will come to understand that we are loved by God in the same way that God loves his own Son! The Greek word translated “even as” means “just as” or “to the same degree that.” Jesus is telling us that God loves those who are Christ’s to the same degree and in the same way as the Father loves Jesus.

The world will see our unity and our love and make the deduction that Christians are recipients of a supernatural, different kind of love and that will be attractive to them. Thomas Manton once wrote, “Divisions in the church breed atheism in the world.” The opposite is also true. Unity in the church builds belief in the world.

With that in mind, there is not hardly anything more important than Christ’s prayer for genuine unity in the church. This unity is a oneness in truth and in spirit that comes by drawing close to Christ and it reveals itself in love.

Christ prays for the church to experience unity. That is his prayer the church. Unity in truth, a sense of oneness. Sharing truth and sharing redemption and restoration. And realizing that our understanding of unity validates the gospel claims we make and reveals a supernatural love that the world will be attracted to.

We are to have a unified mindset or disposition. Our backgrounds, our opinions, our preferences, our methods, can all vary. We don’t have to agree on which Bible translation is the best or which worship mode is the best or what architecture is more aesthetically please. That stuff isn’t mentioned here in the Lord’s High Priestly prayer.

Jesus is concerned about our humility and our love and sense of oneness with each other. But when we allow those areas of diversity to become dividing lines, it makes Jesus look less attractive. Let's plunge ourselves into grace and let the gospel change the layout of our hearts so together we can be unified. Because saved people are united people.