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Bridgeway Church
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Sermon Summary #23

The Mysterious Nature and Evangelistic Power of Christian Unity John 17:20-23

Most people in this room were either not yet born or far too young to remember the momentous events of 1948. This was the year that witnessed the formation of what is known as **The World Council of Churches**. The driving force behind the establishment of this organization was a desire for Christian unity.

Today, its members include a wide variety of professing Christians: Anglicans, the Assyrian Church of the East, most jurisdictions of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Old Catholic Church (a split from Roman Catholicism in 1850 due primarily to differences over papal authority), the Oriental Orthodox Churches, several mainline Protestant churches such as Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian and some Reformed denominations, as well as a handful of evangelical Protestant churches such as those who are part of the Baptist World Alliance and some Pentecostal denominations. In case you're wondering, no, the Roman Catholic Church is not a member, although it does on occasion send observers to the gatherings of the World Council.

In order to broaden its reach as far as possible, the WCC has only one statement of theological belief:

“The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

It would appear from this that in order to be included in the WCC a church or denomination must believe in the deity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity. Nothing else is required or specified. The WCC claims to have member denominations that together represent nearly 600 million people around the world. I must confess, though, that I think that number is highly inflated.

Now, why have I mentioned the WCC today? The answer is simple. ***There are many professing Christians who believe that what we've just read in John 17:20-23 concerning unity requires some form of structural solidarity such as is found in the WCC.*** We can't be “one” as Jesus prayed unless we are organizationally aligned or united or affiliated together as a single monolithic entity, sharing a common cause.

But as glorious as some might find the WCC to be, it has been, is, and always will remain highly splintered. The Baptists in the WCC don't believe what the Lutherans do, and the Pentecostals don't believe what the Eastern Orthodox do, and the Reformed don't believe what the Methodists do. Notwithstanding the desire for some kind of so-called “unity” the WCC is still a collection of highly diverse theological traditions and styles of worship and beliefs about the nature of true Christianity.

OK, so why did I bring this up? After all, I don't really care whether you remember much, if anything, about the WCC. I bring it up only to ask the question: ***Are we at Bridgeway Church living in defiance of the prayer of Jesus by existing as an independent and autonomous congregation of Christian believers?*** Although we are a member of the Acts 29 network, it is not a denomination. There is no authoritative head office that dictates to us our mission statement or how we should worship or whom we should hire or how we should spend our money. There is a wide diversity among the 620 churches that are part of Acts 29.

So, if we are going to take seriously what Jesus prayed for in John 17, should Bridgeway affiliate with some evangelical, Protestant denomination? Should Bridgeway repudiate its Protestant identity and become a parish church within Roman Catholicism? Should Bridgeway dispense with its statement of faith and those theological beliefs that

differentiate us from Eastern Orthodoxy and Lutheranism and the Methodist Church and a wide array of other professing Christian groups?

Should we *minimize* what we believe the Bible says about God and salvation and the nature of the Scriptures and the person and work of the Holy Spirit so that we might enter into some sort of alignment or unity with as many other professing Christians as possible?

My answer is No. In fact, I don't think that the so-called "unity" that we see in the World Council of Churches or in the many Protestant denominations or even in Roman Catholicism is what Jesus had in mind when he prayed to the Father that we be one. So let's look closely at what our Lord had in mind. You can quickly see that he refers to unity no fewer than four times in John 17. Here they are:

"Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, *that they may be one*, even as we are one" (v. 11b).

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, *that they may all be one*, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (vv. 20-21a).

"The glory that you have given me I have given to them, *that they be one* even as we are one, I in them and you in me, *that they may become perfectly one*, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (vv. 22-23).

What does Jesus mean by this? What sort of unity or oneness does he have in mind? And perhaps most important of all, we need to pay heed to the *purpose* of this unity as stated in v. 23, namely, "so that the world may know that" God sent Jesus and that God loves us in the same way that he loves Jesus himself.

What kind of "Unity" or "Oneness" is not in view?

There are several kinds of unity that one might conceivably pursue and put into practice that have little if anything to do with what Jesus is talking about. For example:

Name. I don't think Jesus means that we should all go by the same name, as if we could eliminate our differences by everyone agreeing to be called Baptists or Reformed or Charismatic or even merely calling ourselves Christians, with no additional label. That might create the semblance of unity but it is at most a surface unity that doesn't go anywhere near what Jesus is talking about.

Meeting place. I don't think Jesus means that all Christians in any one city should agree to join forces and meet regularly in one building. Aside from the fact that it would be logistically impossible, it would do little to eliminate the many differences that exist among Christians.

Finances. Some say that unity is achieved when we all pool our financial resources and draw from the same monetary pot.

Mission statement. I don't think you can achieve the sort of unity that Jesus has in mind by agreeing to organize under the same mission statement. The fact of the matter is that given the multiplicity of different cultural and socio-economic and even racial contexts, every church is going to sense a call to accomplish something slightly different from every other church. And all of them, though equally valid, are hardly uniform or identical.

Governmental authority. Consider the Mormons. Although I don't regard them as orthodox Christians they do operate as a unified governing body based in Salt Lake City, Utah, under the authority of fifteen apostles. And the Roman Catholic Church claims to be unified under the authority of the Pope and the College of Cardinals in Rome. Southern Baptists maintain a central administrative office in Nashville, Tennessee, and money is sent to the Cooperative Program to fund missions and evangelism. But Southern Baptist churches are themselves entirely autonomous and resist any top-down governmental control.

Style of worship. Would we be consistent with what Jesus prayed if we all agreed to worship in the same way, both in terms of whether or not musical instruments should be used and the physical postures that would be allowed, as well as the type of songs we would sing? No.

Theology. Others have argued that we need to find theological unity by agreeing to embrace only the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed. In other words, let's set aside all differences of interpretation on secondary issues and agree to a minimal affirmation of foundational truths like the deity of Christ and the Trinity and salvation by grace.

No. I don't think that any of these suggestions is the solution. I don't believe that any of them is what Jesus had in mind. So let's look closely at what he actually said.

True Spiritual Unity

If you paid close attention when we read our texts you would have noticed that each of them contains a common refrain. The unity that Jesus prays we, as his followers, would experience is in every case ***analogous to or based on the same principles as the unity that exists between the Father and the Son***. Look at these texts again:

“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, ***even as we are one***” (v. 11b).

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, ***just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us***” (vv. 20-21a).

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they be one ***even as we are one***, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (vv. 22-23).

There it is: our unity with one another is to be ***“even as”*** or ***“just as” the Father and Son are one***. So it seems clear that whatever Jesus had in mind when he prayed that we would be one it has to be a ***spiritual*** unity of sorts, a unity that goes deeper than organizational structure or a shared theological statement of beliefs. The Father and the Son, and also the Spirit for that matter, share many things together at a level that is profoundly mystical and intimate. In some sense, our unity with one another is to be like theirs with each other.

As we think about this, we need to keep one thing in mind right from the start. Although the Father and Son and Spirit are “one” God, they are also three distinct persons who relate to each other differently and take up differing assignments in order to accomplish our salvation. The Father sent the Son. The Son came to do the Father's will. And the Spirit is sent by both the Father and the Son to apply to us the saving benefits of what Jesus accomplished on the cross and in his resurrection. So there is not only unity in the Godhead but also diversity.

The unity that is shared by members of the Godhead would include, at minimum, their nature as God, as well as mutual love, a single divine purpose, and truth.

Unity of Nature

There is a sense in which all true Christians share much the same sort of unity. All who are born again have been given the same divine life through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Here is how the Apostle John described it in his first epistle:

“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:9-10).

What unites all of us at the most basic and fundamental level is that ***God's “seed” lives inside us***, that is to say, ***his life-giving, indwelling divine presence is in us by virtue of our having been born of God through the Holy Spirit***.

So we also, in a very real sense, share a common nature. We are more than merely humans who all share a common *human* nature. We are the children of God who have within us the presence of God himself, enabling us to “practice righteousness” even as he is righteous. Paul had this same truth in mind when he said this in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

Paul tells us to “be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). This unity is “*of the Spirit*” in the sense that he creates it. Any so-called “unity” that is not “of the Spirit” is not worth preserving.

Notice also how Jesus described this unity: it entails the *mutual indwelling* of Father in the Son and the Son in the Father and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all in us. Look again at v. 21,

“just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us” (v. 21).

And again we read the same thing in v. 23 – “I in them and you in me.” Do you remember how Jesus said this back in John 14? There he said,

“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:10-11a).

“In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20).

“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23).

And a bit earlier in John 14:17 Jesus promised that when the Spirit comes he would be “in” us. The point of all this is that *our unity begins first and fundamentally with the recognition that our great Triune God dwells in all of us and we all live in him. We share as a common experience this glorious reality.*

Unity in Love

Another facet of the unity between Father and Son is the love they have for one another. We’ve seen this all through the final discourse of Jesus:

“but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31a).

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (John 15:9).

“just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10b).

“so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:23).

“I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:24).

So, the unity between the Father and the Son that is seen in their sharing a common divine nature and in their mutual love one for another is likewise present in us. We share a common nature, having been born of God, and several texts describe the mutual love we are to have for one another.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12; see v. 17).

Unity in Purpose or Will

But there is more. The Son and the Father have but one purpose together. Back in John 6:38 Jesus said, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” And again here in John 17:4 Jesus

said, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” So also we are “one” in that we share a common purpose. It’s right there in John 17:18 – “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Our purpose is to go into the world, even as Jesus was sent into the world, with the same glorious good news of the gospel. And in sharing that one purpose we see our unity come to fruition.

Unity in Truth

Finally, the Father and Son are one in that they together embrace one truth, one ultimate understanding of reality, one gospel message. That truth is found in the words that God gave Jesus to speak. We’ve seen this repeatedly here in John 17.

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me” (John 17:6-8).

Again, our unity is grounded in the gospel message itself. This is the “word” that Jesus imparted to them and to us. In Ephesians 4:13 the Apostle Paul says that pastors and teachers are to equip the saints “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). In other words, ***the unity we pursue is always unity in the truth. Christian unity is certainly more than shared truth, but it is never less.*** In fact, there can be no unity at all unless it is rooted and grounded in our common confession of biblical truth, primarily the truth of the gospel itself. (For more on the unity of mind, purpose, and will shared by the Father and the Son, see John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:15-16, 29; 14:9-11.)

Unity in Worship

By unity in worship I don’t mean the same style, or agreeing on what are the best songs, or even whether or not musical instruments be used or we sing a cappella. I mean focusing our worship on the same God, the only God, as he has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. Here is how Paul put it in Romans 15.

“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5-6).

The Apostle Paul’s Appeal for Christian Unity

Perhaps it would help us to look at this question of Christian unity through the eyes of the Apostle Paul. Here is what he said about it in Philippians 2:1-4.

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:1-4).

First, strive to be “of the same mind” (v. 2a), which simply means, “be like-minded.” He’s not telling us to think about the same things, but to ***value*** the same things; to be of a similar disposition and aim for the same goals. He’s talking about ***our common purpose as a local church***. As different and diverse as we may be in terms of personality and political affiliation and style and external appearance, there has to be an underlying unity when it comes to the foundational truths of the Christian faith, a commonality in what we believe to be most basic. We see this in our Statement of Faith for covenant membership.

If we are going to cultivate a relational atmosphere and culture that is unified and healthy and prosperous and appealing to outsiders and effective in making Christ look great and glorious, we have to be of one mind on the nature of the Scriptures and their authority over what we believe and how we behave. We have to be of one mind on the nature of God, that he is Triune, existing eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have to be of one mind concerning who

Jesus is and what he has done. We have to agree on the nature of the gospel, that it is the gracious work of God in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to satisfy God's wrath and reconcile us to himself, through faith, forever. We must be of one mind when it comes to the nature of God's saving grace, that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from any work of our own or any religious ritual. These are the fundamental truths that unite us, apart from which we have no hope of making a meaningful impact on our city.

Second, have "the same love" (v. 2b) for one another and be "in full accord and of one mind" (v. 2c), or more literally, be **"together in soul."** This is almost a repetition of the first phrase but with emphasis on the totality of their unity: let it be true not only of your mind but also of your feelings and soul. His emphasis is on a life directed towards one ultimate goal.

There are three specific ways in which this unity of mind and soul and affection should be expressed. That is to say, the unity and harmony Paul desires for them and for us can only be achieved if we reject all forms of rivalry, self-seeking, and conceit.

First, we must be diligent to "do nothing from rivalry or conceit" (v. 3a). Here Paul has in mind that sort of **one-upmanship** where people are always trying to outdo others so that the attention and praise will come their way. Simply put, **the spirit of competition may be great on the football field or in business but it has no place in the local church.** Trying to trump one another to gain recognition and power is simply unacceptable and is a constant threat to true spiritual unity.

As for **"conceit,"** he is thinking of the tendency we all feel to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. In particular, Paul is probably thinking of the person who is puffed up because he/she is convinced they are always right on every issue. It's as if this person says: "What I think is more accurate, simply because I'm the one thinking it. How can everyone else be so dense?" In essence, arrogant conceit and the absence of a teachable spirit are in view, and they are absolutely contradictory to and destructive of genuine spiritual unity.

Second, instead we should be diligent "in humility" to "count others more significant than" ourselves (v. 3b). This **doesn't** mean that they **are** more important or more significant, as if they have more value in the eyes of God than you do. Rather, he means you must "regard" them as such or "count" or "esteem" them as such so that you treat or care for them more so than you do for your own self. It means to put their needs ahead of your own. Will you serve them and encourage them and seek their welfare above your own, even if it comes at great cost to you?

The only way you can do this is through **humility.** In the ancient world, humility was considered a vice, a reflection of weakness and something to be despised. But Jesus transformed it into a virtue. Perhaps the single greatest reflection of humility is **the willingness to allow others to say of us in public what we freely admit in private.** Are you self-defensive when people confront you with what you know to be true about yourself? Or do you acknowledge your shortcomings and sins and then repent and seek to learn and grow from the correction that others have brought?

Humility at its core is simply **the antithesis of entitlement.** Entitlement says, "I deserve this" and "you owe me." Humility says, "The only thing I deserve is eternal death. God owes me nothing other than judgment, and he has chosen in grace not to give it to me but to Christ in my place." That is the soil where humility grows. If you don't relate to other people from that vantage point, from that perspective, you will never grow in humility or genuine Christian unity.

Third, you should rather look attentively and with deep and sincere concern to the other person's "interests." The word "interests" might be more literally rendered, **"one another's things."** It likely means things related to their job, their family, their physical health, their emotional and spiritual state, their children, their knowledge of God, their personal property, their reputation, their overall success in life, their happiness, their salvation, etc.

That, I suggest, is how true spiritual unity is pursued and maintained in the life of the local church. So let's bring this to a very practical and somewhat painful conclusion by asking several questions.

(1) Are there specific things I've done or doctrines I believe that make it difficult to be of the same mind and share the same love and embrace a common purpose with other believers in this church? Identify what those might be and

humbly reevaluate whether you were justified. And if you should discover that you were in the wrong, lay it down. Repent. Go and make it right with that individual.

(2) Have I formed judgments against another Christian in this church body because they failed to embrace my agenda or disagreed with my opinion about what is of ultimate importance or didn't get on board with something that I believe is crucial to living the Christian life?

(3) Have I contributed to disunity and disharmony by arrogantly holding on to things that in the big picture are only of secondary importance? Have I based my sense of personal value on whether or not I could get others to agree with me on these matters? Have those who disagreed with me been made to feel inferior or judged or sub-spiritual? If so, what ought I to do to make it right with them?

(4) What are some very specific and concrete ways in which I can begin to take a greater interest in the needs and desires of others, even if it means setting aside my own preferences?

(5) Have there been occasions when the opportunity existed to change your schedule and lay aside your goals in order to be of help to someone truly in need, but you chose not to because you regarded them as undeserving and less important or less significant than yourself? If so, meditate on how God in Christ loved you and gave himself for you that you might have eternal life.

Conclusion

As one casts an eye across the panorama of biblical history, it is evident that God has employed a variety of means to make himself known to the world, whether by miracles or by the godly lives of his people. But according to John 17 ***one particular way in which God desires to make known his existence, his glory, and his grace is through the unity that ought to exist among Christians.*** Our unity is never to be thought of as an end in itself, but always as a means to bear witness to the world of the truth of the Gospel.

The word of Jesus here in John 17:21 is unmistakable. ***Our unity in the new life granted by the Holy Spirit is to be visibly manifest to the eye of the world to such an extent that by observing us the world might be convicted of sin and come to a saving knowledge of Christ.***

But how can that happen? How is our spiritual unity seen by the world? It can only be through the fruit or effect of our oneness in spirit. And that, surely, would be our love one for another. "By this," said Jesus, that is to say by our love for one another, "all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).