

John 17:20-23

²⁰"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ 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.

ONE



A man tells of being on a bus tour in Rome which was led by a guide who spoke English. Their first stop was a basilica in a piazza which was surrounded by several lanes of relentless Roman traffic. After they were all safely dropped off, the group climbed the steps for a quick tour of the church. Then they spread out to board the bus, which was parked across the street from the church. The frantic guide shouted for the group to stay together. He hollered out them, "You cross the street one by one, they hit you one by one. But if you cross together, they think you will hurt the car!"

There are many reasons to call for unity among a group of people, and this is undoubtedly one of them. But today we are not speaking of a group of people in general. We are speaking of the family of God, the Body of Christ, the One Holy Christian Church. Unity in the church is not an option. It is a command. And in this text it is Jesus' prayer request to His Father.

I. THE FACT OF OUR UNITY

True spiritual unity is much more than a feeling. It cannot be produced by holding hands and singing "Kumbaya." In fact, it cannot be created by human effort at all. Our unity is God's creation. It is His work, His plan, His eternal decree.

- **Our oneness is created by God's Word.**

Remember that when God speaks, things happen. A universe comes into being. A sea is parted. A soul is saved. God's Word creates what it names. That's why the book of Romans refers to the Gospel as "**the power of God unto salvation**" (1:17).

It's also important to remember that God's saving Word does not originate in the plans and programs of man. It comes from God right into history. It interrupts our lives like a lightning bolt. God's Word is not native to us. It is foreign. It is literally "out of this world." This means that, when God decrees that His church is one (Eph. 4:4-6). His Word cuts through our lives with no regard to our prejudices, resentments, or comfortable cliques.

When I taught in our Bible College I accompanied students to southern Mexico as part of their study program. We had to be tutored on the proper etiquette for that foreign land. Most in the village we visited did not speak Spanish, but an Indian dialect. They had only had electricity for about a year. They were old fashioned, to put it mildly. Our female students had to learn not to look a man directly in the eye, because that would be giving him and improper invitation. And we all had to learn that to walk between people who were having a conversation was considered rude and demeaning anywhere in Mexico. So what did I do on our first night in Mexico? I walked obliviously right through a group of tough looking guys on a sidewalk in the town of Poza Rica. I didn't notice anything until I sort of felt uncomfortable, and realized they were all staring at me with hostility. I made some sort of apologetic gesture and kept on walking. Thankfully they stayed where they were.

God's Word is always an interruption of our preoccupations. God doesn't care if it seems rude to us. His Word tells us that we are one in Christ, period—and then commands us to "get with the program." This means that, as the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, "**from now on we regard no man after the flesh**" (5:16). Our resentments, bigotry, or personal tastes have no standing before God (*coram Deo*). We

Sermon Summary for June 5, 2011

are one in Christ. Now live that out! God's Word creates our oneness. Our words merely demonstrate it.

- **Our oneness is forever.**

When you marry someone, in most cases you get the family along with the spouse. It's a package deal. The mother-in-law and all the cousins come as part of the deal. Sometimes that's a joy. Sometimes it's a sorrow. But it almost always happens. When you become the Bride of Christ, the whole family of God is part of the deal. This happens every time.

Jesus puts this in the strongest possible language He can use. He prays ***"that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us..."*** (21). God cannot be more emphatic. We are united together with the same eternal reality that binds the Father, Son and Holy Spirit into One. That's even stronger than human marriage! People take their marriage vows "until death do us part." That is "not applicable" to our heavenly marriage. Take a quick glance at the folks around you. Every one you can see who is trusting Christ as Savior and Lord is stuck with you forever. There is no breaking this family bond. So get used to it.

- **Our oneness is necessary for our mission.**

Jesus puts it this way: ***"²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I 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."***

I want to suggest three reasons why our oneness is necessary ***"so that the world may know."***

1. When we are disunited our focus turns inward, away from our mission to the world. The devil loves to stir up disunity among believers. Congregations and ministry teams are his prime targets. We take little notice of storming the gates of hell when we are throwing rocks at one another's windows. Disunity in all its forms – resentments, criticism, gossip, clique-forming, and unforgiveness – is one of Satan's best strategies for causing us to take our eyes off the harvest field.
2. When we are disunited we are deprived of each other's spiritual gifts. We need everyone in the body so that we may receive the full measure of God's blessing and power (Ephesians 4:15-16). When we are distant and distrustful, we fail to be open with one another so that we may lift one another up in earnest prayer.
3. When we are disunited, unbelievers are not attracted to our fellowship. Now I want to make it perfectly clear that being a nice person or having a warm and loving church has never saved anyone. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ saves. Our performance and piety have no additional power to add to the Gospel. But when we are unpleasant, when we are in conflict with each other, people are turned off. They won't stay around to let the Gospel message soak into their hearts. Our love for one another is an invitation for people to consider how much they need God's love.

Hear me, dear ones. This message so far has been pretty much of Word of the Law. God's Law accepts no compromises. It demands perfection. It drives us to repentance and faith in Christ. And that's where we need to go. None of us perfectly demonstrates our oneness in Christ. We all have personality conflicts, unhealed hurts, lingering resentments, and moments of insensitivity to others. So we "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). We need to remember that we are covered by the blood of Christ. We are still sinners, but we are forgiven sinners. In fact, we are saints and sinners at the same time. So let the Law do its work. Go to the cross for forgiveness and cleansing. And then go forth, knowing you will be returning to that Cross every day.

We are imperfect people in an imperfect world. Disunity is a sad fact of life. So I want to close this message by briefly discussing the three types of spiritual disunity that sadly exist today.

II. THE FACT OF OUR DISUNITY

A. Necessary disunity — Galatians 1:6-9

Sermon Summary for June 5, 2011

When a person or organization preaches “another Gospel,” when the person and work of Christ are denied or deformed, then there is no basis for spiritual unity. Paul says that if he ever changes his Gospel message, or even if an angel from heaven preaches a false Gospel, let him be “accursed,” condemned, damned. There is no ground for compromise when Jesus Christ is denied. There is no spiritual unity with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14). It doesn’t matter if they claim to be “Christian.” If “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is not their message, they are not to be recognized as brothers or sisters in the faith.

B. Temporary disunity — Acts 15:36-40

In one sense you could say that the first “denominational” division occurred back in apostolic times. Paul and Barnabas had been missionary partners for a long time. Barnabas was the one who stood by the newly converted Saul and helped the other apostles welcome this once-feared persecutor into the fellowship of the church. They had a precious shared history. Yet Acts 15 tells us that were forced to part company because of “doctrinal” differences. The issue was: what are the standards which are necessary for someone to be part of our missionary team? John Mark had started out on one of their trips, and then turned back when the going got tough. Paul believed that this disqualified him from further service. Barnabas disagreed, characteristically wanting to give the young man another chance. The disagreement is described by the New Testament as “sharp.” It was so serious that the two old friends parted company and went their separate ways on separate missionary journeys. Barnabas took Mark with him.

Now no one involved in this disagreement left the true church. They simply decided that they could not work together because of their different understandings of ministry. That is one way to describe the temporary disunity caused by different denominations. All who trust Christ as Savior and Lord are part of His Body, the Church. But for practical reasons they cannot work on the same “ministry team.” They may disagree about what doctrines to emphasize, about the administration of the sacraments, about church government, or other important issues. They can “be” the church together in terms of spiritual fellowship and evangelistic teamwork (e.g. the multi-church Billy Graham crusades), but they cannot “do” church together without compromising their doctrinal commitments. This is tragic, but it is true. And, thanks be to God, this disunity is temporary. There will be neither “Lutheran” nor “Baptist” nor any other denominational labels in heaven--only God’s “forever family,” the Bride of Christ.

C. Sinful disunity — 1 Peter 4:7-8

⁷ The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. ⁸Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

I included verse 7 in this reading to show how important loving one another really is. Peter is speaking about “*the end of all things*.” It’s clear we need to be “*sober-minded*” and “*self-controlled*.” But to “*keep loving one another*” is not added a sweet little option. It is “**above all**”! And that last phrase, “*since love covers a multitude of sins*”—how utterly realistic! We will sin against one another. And we will keep doing it over and over again. Fellowship in the church means we will suffer “*a multitude of sins*.” We will sin against each other, and we will be sinned against. The first requires an apology, a request for forgiveness. The second requires active forgiveness on our part, mercy if you will, love that covers.

If you are experiencing spiritual disunity today, you need to take it to the cross. If you have wronged a brother or sister, that means asking them to forgive you. Please don’t go to them if you have not actually wronged them and say “I have hated you and I want you to forgive me.” You confess sinful actions to the person wronged. You confess sinful feelings only to the Lord. If someone has wronged you, don’t hold on to your resentment or a “root of bitterness” will grow (Heb. 12:15).

Dear ones, spiritual unity is an eternal reality. We are one in Christ. When we deny that unity by inward resentment our outward action (word or deed), we “grieve the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 4:29-31). We cannot destroy our oneness in Christ, but we can diminish our spiritual joy and reduce our effectiveness in outreach. We are called to be who we really are: God’s one family. Ask, and the Lord will pour out upon you the love that covers a multitude of sins. After all, that’s His saving gift to you. Don’t withhold it from other members of His family. Accept this eternal reality and your heart will be set free.