

A study of the Concept of UNITY based on John 17

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Purpose: To help the churches of Christ to establish and strengthen the unity of the Spirit for which our Lord Jesus Christ prayed.

LESSON ONE

Understanding the focus on unity in the context of John's Gospel

John is concerned with the formation of disciples.

To understand the power of formation, John develops concepts like the mutual indwelling of disciples and Jesus (15:1-11), and the union with Jesus and with one another (17:20-25; cf. 1 John 1:3). God's power is at work, but on the human side this unity is dependent on the disciple's obedience to Jesus' commands.

Unity is the result of properly formed disciples.

Unity is based on the unity of the Father and Son

- John 1:1-5, 14, 16-17; 1:29
- 3:16; 5:18; 6:35-42
- 8:12,18-19, 48-59
- 10:29-33
- 14:6-11

This is the context of John's Gospel. How should one understand Chapter 17 based on this larger context?

The Spirit's Role in Unity

The Spirit not only works in the continuance of Jesus' ministry among his disciples, it is the Spirit's presence that makes possible that the disciples as a community become one with Christ. This is Jesus' prayer in John 17. (Compare also Eph. 4:3).

Unity comes from the Spirit and not from human endeavor or accomplishment.

The unity of the disciples was to be like that of the Father and Son.

John 17, the Prayer of Jesus

After Jesus declares that his work has been completed and prays for glorification, he intercedes for his disciples (6-19), and for those who will come after (20-26).

Jesus gives a summary of his ministry of the word to his disciples, given to him by God (6-8).

Jesus is glorified in them (10), meaning that his is revealed in them and through them, even as Jesus is himself glorified by revealing God in his death (1, 5). Those who belong to Jesus believe through the word, and also speak that word to others (20). When Jesus prays for the future church as well as for his present disciples, he asks that they may be one with him as he is with the Father (21). (We must ask what kind of unity this was, and not immediately jump to contemporary understandings of unity. We must study and understand the context.) This is a unity in glory (22), because God reveals himself in the Son, and both the Father and Son make themselves known in the believers. The purpose of this unity is mission—that the world may know and believe (23, 21). The key to this unity is love (26). Unity binds together the Father, Son, and believers, and such unity (community) is the essence of the church.

When Jesus speaks of the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and disciples (21), the substance of that unity is love (17:26; 14:21, 23). Jesus speaks of the disciples abiding in him through the parable of the vine (15:1-8). The key to unity is again love (15:9-10) and Jesus defines love as self-sacrifice (12-13).

Unity implies sharing life of Christ in God. John does not echo Peter's ideas of believers sharing the divine nature, but for John it is through union with God that believers come to share in the life of God.

Unity and John 15, the Parable of the Vine

The Johannine parable of the vine is similar to Paul's image of the body, a metaphor of the church. John emphasizes the importance of the believers' unity and direct relationship with Jesus. Genuine unity is not possible without direct relationship. Believers who have received the knowledge of God (a Johannine concept) live together in mutual love and no longer misunderstand Jesus, as his opponents misunderstood him. Being a disciple means not only believing in Jesus, but belonging to him, being united with him, and obeying his commands.

Unity is the Result of Transformed Lives

Thus the transformation that Jesus brings is not only the experience of an individual but involves unity with other believers and unity with Christ. The expression of unity is love, and love is nothing more than obedience. The announcement of a new era is the existence of the church as the eschatological people of God, united with Christ and with one another through mutual, reciprocal love.

Unity like that of the Father and Son

How were the Father and the Son one? What does it mean that we are one like they are one? How does our unity look like their unity? What make them one? Can we seek and apply the same things in our own lives to bring about unity?

- Intimate relationship
- In constant communication
- One in plan/purpose
- One in thought
- One in action

LESSON TWO

This lesson was presented without additional notes. It was simply a textual study of John 17, noting especially the context of John's writings.

[See also my sermon, John 17: Four Dimensions of Church Renewal, available at bobyongresources.com, Sermons, Textual Sermons]