

## An Exposition of John 17:20-26

### Introduction

Four times in this chapter, in making His prayer on behalf of His disciples, the Lord Jesus petitions the Father for the unity of His disciples, His request is that they may be one (vs. 11,21,22,23.) Here is a prayer for the unity of His disciples, the unity of His church—this was one of the great concerns that the Lord Jesus expresses in His prayer: Father, I pray that they may be one (vs. 20-21.)

But is this a request that was not granted? Surely this cannot be a request that the Father refuses to honor. It is inconceivable that He would deny any request made by His beloved Son.

Or is this a request that will only be realized at Christ's return in glory? But it is not enough to say that this is a request that will be fulfilled only at Christ's return. It must be more than that, for according to verse 21, Jesus prays for this unity so that the world may believe that the Father sent Him—i.e.; a visible unity that will serve as a compelling witness to the world that Jesus really is the Messiah. If this unity is only realized on the day of Christ's return, it will be too late to do the world any good as a witness that was intended to bring the world to the Savior. But, the visible unity of the Christian church cannot be said to be a present reality in our day.

What is the solution to this dilemma? The answer lies in the fact that Christ's request for a visible unity of His church has already been fulfilled. Let us look more closely at this request for unity, and seek to understand exactly what Christ is speaking about and how His request has been granted—and how it will be granted in the future.

### I. The Meaning of John 17:11

*I will no longer remain in the world; they are in the world, but I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name—[the name] you gave me—so that they may be one just as we [are one].* (Jn. 17:11)

Here is the request that there be a unity, a oneness, a cohesion among Christ's disciples; and that it be of the same kind as that which exists between God the Father and God the Son, an unbreakable unity:

*Hear, O Israel, Jehovah our God, Jehovah is one.* (Deut. 6:4)

*Jesus therefore responded to them by saying, I tell you the truth, The Son can do nothing by himself, but [only] what he sees the Father doing; for whatever [the Father] does, the Son also does in the same way. <sup>20</sup>[This is so because] the Father loves the Son and [therefore] shows him everything that he is doing.* (Jn. 5:19-20a.)

According to Jesus' testimony, given in John 5:19-20a, it is contrary to the Son's nature to do anything on His own, and it is the Father's good pleasure to display all His works to the Son—such is their unity of nature and purpose.

Furthermore, our Lord prays that God His Father would create this unity and assure its continuance by keeping the disciples in the saving relationship they have with the Father through Christ the Son.

It must be understood that Jesus' request is made in the light of His testimony recorded in Matthew 26:31. On the evening of the Last Supper, Jesus declared to His disciples, *"This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"* Again, He warned His disciples of the impending trial they would face, a trial that would threaten to rupture the unity they have with Him, with the Father, and with each other: *"Listen, the hour is coming, in fact it has come, when you shall be scattered, each one to his own [home], and shall forsake me. However, I am not forsaken, because the Father is with me"* (Jn. 16:32.)

There had been a number of contemporary movements that had ended in fragmentation and had come to nothing. The respected Jewish scholar, Gamaliel, had reminded the Sanhedrin of those failed, fragmented movements headed by false messiahs:

*... a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ... addressed them, Men of Israel, ...<sup>36</sup>Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing.<sup>37</sup>After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.* (Acts 5:34-37)

Jesus is now urgently requesting the Father that He would prevent the same thing from happening to His disciples; in effect, Jesus is praying: "Father, my disciples are about to be violently scattered. But, Father, please see to it that this scattering does not result in apostasy. Even in the midst of their crisis, cause the relationship they have with You to be preserved; gather them as a shepherd gathers his sheep."

## II. The Outline of John 17:21-23

Again in verse 21 Jesus speaks of a unity among believers; this time envisioning a larger body: not only the eleven true disciples, but also those who believe in Christ through their word (vs. 20.) Jesus requests that they may **all** be one: *"[My prayer is] that they may all be one—just 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 sent me."*

Again this unity is described as a heavenly unity: the unity among believers is to be of the same type as that which exists between the Father and the Son. Furthermore, the unity among the disciples is to also be a communion with the Father and the Son. This unity spoken of in verse 21 must also be a visible unity; its purpose is to cause the world to believe that the Father, indeed, did send Christ—or, at the very least, give the world sufficient grounds and reason for believing.

According to verse 22, in order to achieve this unity—and to help promote it—Jesus has given to His disciples the glory the Father has given to Him. The glory of which Christ speaks appears to be further explained by His following words, *“I in them and you in me”* (vs.23.) The glory of which Christ speaks appears to be a reference to the Holy Spirit. It is by means of the Holy Spirit that Christ dwells in and among His disciples: *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—<sup>17</sup>the Spirit of truth ... <sup>18</sup>I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you”* (Jn. 14:16-18.) Note, too, the testimony of the Apostle John: *“Those who obey his commandments live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us, we know it by the Spirit he gave us”* (1 Jn. 3:24.) With regard to the Father’s dwelling in His incarnate Son (“you in me,”) we may consider what occurred at the time of our Lord’s baptism:

*As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.* (Matt. 3:16-17)

The New Testament epistles teach that true spiritual unity is created by and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesian church, *“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”* (Eph. 4:3.) Consider, too, his teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13,

*The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.* (1 Cor. 12:12-13)

In verse 23 Jesus makes a further request, namely, that the body of believers may be brought into perfect unity: *“May they be brought into perfect unity; so that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them just as you loved me.”* (The N.I.V. translates the Greek as “complete unity.”) Here Christ is speaking of a **process**, the process of believers being perfected into one. The final outcome of this process is a perfect unity. The final result of this perfected unity shall cause the world to **know** that the Father has sent Christ, and that the Father loved the church (the body of believers) just as He loved Jesus Christ His one and only Son.

Thus, when our Lord prays for the unity of His church/His disciples, we can discover three phases or stages of unity: 1) He prays for an initial and visible unity: “[My prayer is] that they may all be one—just 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 sent me” (vs. 21); 2) He makes reference to a continuing, spiritual unity: “The glory that you gave me I have given them; so that they may be one, just as we are one” (vs. 22); and 3) He then goes on to pray for a final, perfected unity: “May they be brought into perfect unity; so that the world may know that you sent me and [that you] love them just as you loved me” (vs. 23.)

By way of illustration, we may compare these three stages of unity to the three stages of a rocket: there is an initial, spectacular, very visible launch; there then follows a sometimes imperceptible, but always on course, flight; and finally, there is the return to earth and the landing that is witnessed by all.

### III. The Initial, Visible Unity Fulfilled at Pentecost and Immediately Thereafter

Notice the emphasis on the visible unity of believers in the opening chapters of the Book of Acts:

*Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. <sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup>Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>**All the believers were together and had everything in common.** <sup>45</sup>Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. <sup>46</sup>Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. **They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,** <sup>47</sup>praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the LORD added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)*

***All the believers were one in heart and mind.** No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but **they shared everything they had.** <sup>33</sup>With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup>There were no needy persons among them, for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup>and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:32-35)*

*... they were all with one accord in Solomon’s porch. (Acts 5:12b)*

Notice, secondly, that the unity among the believers was of the same kind that exists between God the Father and God the Son: a mutual sharing, a mutual possession of all things, the same type of unity Jesus testified exists between the Father and Himself (Jn. 5:19-20a.) Again, Jesus would testify, “*All that belongs to*

*the Father is mine” (Jn. 16:15a), and, “All that is mine is yours, and [all that is] yours is mine” (Jn. 17:10a.)*

Notice, thirdly, that this visible, spiritual unity was a powerful testimony and evidence that this, indeed, was a work of God. Although the religious leaders were minded to kill the apostles, the elder statesman, Gamaliel, quieted them with this warning:

*When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. <sup>34</sup>But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup>Then he addressed them: Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. <sup>36</sup>Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. <sup>37</sup>After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. <sup>38</sup>Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. <sup>39</sup>But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God. (Acts 5:33-39)*

The unity of the church, as it appeared on the Day of Pentecost, and the time immediately following our Lord’s resurrection and ascension, is recognized to be a testimony that this is, indeed, a work of God—and by implication, that Jesus is the Messiah.