

WHAT ABOUT THE BODY OF CHRIST?

UNITY: NOT AN OPTION

PART III

(John 17:1-26)

John 17 is a prayer from the lips of Jesus Christ. It is sometimes called His high-priestly prayer because it begins with a personal intercession and then expands to embrace His 'present' and 'future' followers. This is how the high priest in Israel functioned on holy days both to sacrifice and to intercede first for himself and then for the remainder of the nation.

Yet John 17 is certainly not a private prayer. Jesus prayed aloud in the hearing range of the apostles who were with Him in the upper room at Jerusalem. We would probably say today that He was "leading" a prayer in that setting and perhaps the apostles even said what would have been only a partially comprehending "Amen" when He concluded it. I certainly think this prayer constitutes part of His larger final discourse to His disciples who were so anxious about His pending departure.

While it may be a bit tricky to frame a prayer that is both truly personal and appropriate to one's own situation and simultaneously communicates to those who overhear it, Jesus was certainly capable of doing it. And so can we . . .

Jesus Prays for Himself

Against previous disclaimers that His hour had not yet come (cf. John 2:4; 7:6, et al.), Jesus is fully aware that "the hour has come" now (v.1). It was time for Jesus to finish His task on Earth, glorify the Father and return to the glory He had

experienced with the Father from eternity 'past'. "The hour" is thus defined for us as the total experience around the death, resurrection, appearances and ascension of the Son of God. So He proceeds to pray for everything and everyone involved in the climactic move of His ministry among humankind.

After Jesus had spoken these words, He looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" (17:1-5).

For Jesus to glorify the Father would be for Him to honor Him through the obedience that would mean suffering and death. He understood that! Gethsemane, injustice, humiliation, abandonment, death – He knew that all these were entailed in glorifying His Father. This being the case, He saw the cross as both a duty and an honor rather than an embarrassment or failure. It was His ultimate instance of surrender and obedience that qualified Him to be the Savior of all who would in turn obey Him (Hebrews 5:8-9).

So the first movement of this prayer was personal and for Himself. There is nothing resembling arrogance or perceived self-importance here. It was instead – as with those mortal high priests whose brief tenures had anticipated His once-for-all function – a prayer of consecration. It was a proclamation of intent. It was a plea for strength to endure and complete the task. In the honoring of His mission and the glorification of the Father, eternal life was in the offing – for all who would ever know Him through Jesus (cf. John 14:6).

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

Because the task He was bringing to fulfillment was for others rather than for Himself, Jesus immediately shifted the focus of His prayer to others. First, in verses 6-19, He prayed for the little group of His immediate disciples represented by their leaders who were with Him in the upper room. These people were the original readers of John's Gospel. Then, in verses, 20-26, He prayed for those of us who would be second-, third-, and

later-generation Christians on the basis of the witness of those first disciples.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth" (17:6-19).

The first thing He asked for them was **unity**: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (v.11b). With Jesus returned to His Father's side, it would be more important than ever for these disciples to be one. Jesus would continue to be the "glue" to hold them together, but it would no longer be through His physical presence. He would empower and support them henceforth through Holy Spirit-presence and ministry in their midst. And the Spirit's presence would be more obvious to onlookers and more powerful within the body through the manifest unity of these diverse followers.

The next thing He prayed for those early disciples was **protection from satan**. Again, Jesus had taught these earliest followers, negotiated their quarrels with one another, and

protected them from satan's devices through His personal presence. Only Judas – who had made His own conscious choice to embrace the darkness – had fallen away. The remaining group would still be under assault from the Evil One, and they would need daily protection. Again, it would be the work of the Holy Spirit as their Advocate (i.e., defender, protector) that their needs would be met. Even so, He would meet their needs – to a significant degree – through Spirit-presence as mediated through the men and women in whom the Spirit would take up residence in the post-Pentecost world. Thus the earlier plea for unity had come first for a reason.

Finally, He prayed for them to be “**sanctified in truth**” before a watching world. The word “sanctify” (Gk, *hagiazō*) means to set something apart for special purposes. Yet Jesus had already made it clear at verse 15 that He was not asking the Father to “take them out of the world” – one way, I suppose, of setting them apart. His plan was different. He wanted them to remain in the world but to follow His example of not conforming to and being overcome by it. “**They do not belong to the world,**” said Jesus, “**just as I do not belong to the world**” (v.16). But it was understood among those earliest disciples that sanctification meant marching to the beat of a different drummer, exhibiting the presence of the Spirit in one's life by a Christ-imitating, God-honoring lifestyle (cf. Romans 12:1-2).

Jesus Prays for Us

In the third movement of His prayer, Jesus looked far beyond the time and place of that upper room to the second audience for whom the Gospel of John was written – those of us who would be Christians in subsequent generations. And He prayed for us.

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. 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 have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:20-26).

In our own Christian heritage, we have frequently used these words as a springboard to making a plea for unity. And that unity has more often than not been the sort that would be created when others came to our point of view on baptism, the Holy Communion, church organization, worship practices, and the like. It’s interesting to me that not one of those things is mentioned in this text. Instead, Jesus prayed for the love that bound Him and His Father to each other to become an enlarged circle that would connect Christians to them (i.e., Father and Son) and then to one another. **This is the unity of relationship – not doctrine, name, organization, polity, ecclesiology, pneumatology, or epistemology!** Everybody who knows the Father through Jesus has been prayed for to experience the loving unity with one another that is a gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And love covers a multitude of sins, doctrinal flaws, and personal peculiarities (I Peter 4:8; cf. I John 4:13ff).

I used to love to read the syndicated columns of the late Mike Royko. In one he wrote about a conversation with his literary creation Slats Grobnik. Slats had once sold Christmas trees, and he remembered one couple in particular that had come to his lot. He described the guy as skinny, with a big Adam’s apple and small chin. She was kind of pretty to Slats. Both wore clothes from the bottom of the bin of the Salvation Army store.

After finding only trees that cost too much, they found a Scotch pine that was all right on one side but ugly and bare on the other. Then they spotted another one that wasn’t much better – full on one side, scraggly on the other. The woman whispered something to her husband, and he asked Slats if \$3 would be okay. Slats figured that neither tree would sell anyway, so \$3 was a good price to get them to haul them away.

A few days later, Slats was walking down the street and saw a gorgeous tree in the couple’s apartment window. It was thick and well rounded. He knocked on the couple’s door to ask them about their beautiful tree. So they told him how they had managed to work the two trees together snugly in their thin sides. They tied the trunks together. The branches overlapped and formed a tree so thick that nobody could see the occasional

piece of wire that bound the two as one. Slats concluded that the resulting beautiful tree was a tiny forest of its own. "So that's the secret," Slats stated. "You take two trees that aren't perfect, that have flaws, that might even be homely, that maybe nobody else would want. If you put them together just right, you can come up with something really beautiful."

God Hates Sectarianism

Some degree of difference, disagreement, and separation is inevitable among human beings. God has made us marvelously different in temperament, outlook and tastes.

We are wired and oriented so differently and pursue different dreams and careers; join different political parties – or shun politics altogether. We read certain biblical texts differently and are members of different churches. God's heart is great enough to tolerate those differences, for He has made all of us one in Christ. But we sometimes can't tolerate each other and become arrogant, judgmental, and sectarian.

Sectarian judgments in religion defy the teaching of Christ and distort the task and mission of the church. Our churches – whether Baptist, Catholic, Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, or whatever franchise you know best – are not referees of truth. Those of us who are members of those churches are not charged by God to judge one another. To the contrary, there is this apostolic challenge to us: **"Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Romans 14:10).**

The time has come for us to be mature enough to admit our limited grasp of the truth without feeling compromised. Strong convictions don't have to be carried with an ugly, hypercritical attitude toward people with whom we disagree. If I didn't believe my view on this or that was either correct or the best I'd change my view to some other. If I didn't think the church within which I function seeks to honor Christ under the authority of Holy Scripture, I'd find another and ally with it. We've slain the faith of enough people through our arrogant sectarianism. It's time that we laid down the weapons of judgmental arrogance for the sake of seeking Christ and finding our identity in Him.

Conclusion

Most Americans seem unaware that during a mere 100 days in 1994 some 800,000 people died in a genocidal rage in Rwanda. The government of Rwanda called on its Hutu majority to kill everyone in the Tutsi minority. A machete-wielding, largely Hutu militia set about to exterminate moderate Hutu and ethnic Tutsi. The incredible bloodshed of that brief springtime of murder has left a scar on the soul of the world that may never heal. It is the most unambiguous case of genocide since Hitler's war against the Jewish people in Europe.

Philip Gourevitch, in closing his moving book on that event, tells of seeing TV footage of a man who confessed to helping with one of those murderous rampages two nights earlier. He and his party killed seventeen schoolgirls and a 62-year-old Belgian nun at a boarding school in Gisenyi. About 150 of them broke into the compound, roused the teenagers from their sleep, and ordered them to separate themselves – Hutus from Tutsis. But the brave students refused the order. To a person, the girls said they were simply Rwandans. So they were beaten and shot indiscriminately.

May God bring the day when the Body of Christ will experience a unity that is larger than our religious tribalism and fratricidal conflict. A day when more and more people will say we are simply Christians.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, in John 17 we hear our Savior in prayer today and we are reminded of the importance of spiritual discipline in His life and in ours. Let us also hear the concerns of His prayer for faithfulness to the life-mission to which each of us is called and to the unity of the Body of Christ in which we fulfill those various missions in mutual support. Teach us to pray one for another, to value one another, to guard the spiritual welfare of one another. Thereby may we make your name known in the world through our love for you and one another. We pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.