
Seeking Leadership Unity

John 17:11-26

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Introduction

What is black, oily, flows rapidly from high pressure places and is highly disruptive if not lethal to living things? Disunity. Take a look at this:

What led to this? Well, you can read hundreds of media reports attempting to answer this question. One clearly emerging factor, apart from technical and operational failures, appears to have been a heated argument, a spat, a skirmish, a disagreement, a dispute. Transocean and BP officials did not agree about how to close the well... and 11 hours later it blew up. It is interesting; you will not find any news outlet that chose the word “disunity” to describe what happened. But it is clear that not only the “skirmish” but the multiple mistakes made leading up to the disaster were evidence of a system that was not working as it should. In other words, despite having processes and programs in place, the people were not working together as they should. The failed blow-out preventer increasingly appears to be symptom, not cause.

Disunity can have disastrous effects. And the biblical record is certainly no stranger to this fact. Among God’s people, there is a long history of disunity and consequences... review your Bible stories: Joshua, Caleb, and the other ten spies (Numbers 13), Absalom and David (2 Samuel 15), or the Church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1). The trend continues today. The news chronicles story after story about schisms and splits in churches. Beyond this, there are the 1000’s of stories of disunity in the church which never reach headlines. It is likely that most of you have witnessed significant disunity in the church and its crippling effects. As an elder, I can speak first hand to the sensitivity of the body to disunity. If we on the elder team, even for a week, a day, a moment, allow disunity to creep in, the effects are visible.. To circle back to our opening illustration – disunity is like an oil spill at 5000 feet below sea level... at first, hardly anyone notices. There was a blow up. Blow ups happen. There were casualties. People can be harmed in blow ups. But no one suspected... giant oil slicks contaminating large bodies of water and threatening fragile ecosystems. This will likely take years, if not decades, to recover from. This oil, uncontrollably spreading, toxically coating, irretrievable and devastating, is like disunity. On the news every hour we have a visual illustration of the initially subtle, but finally lethal and far reaching, effects of disunity.

Hence our topic today: Seeking Church Unity in Leadership. This message follows on Pastor Dale’s unity in ministry message from last week. Our passage today, as read by Trevor, is John 17.

The Context of Christ's Last Moments with the Disciples

In order to fully appreciate the importance of Christ's prayer here in John 17, we need to begin by understanding precisely when this passage is occurring. We are at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. He has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. From this moment on it is as if every word Jesus' speaks, every move he makes, is laden with a prophetic foreboding. The momentum that started as stream is now rushing like a swollen river toward the crucifixion. In the middle of this swiftly moving body of water comes, momentarily, an island *almost* isolated from the rising fury. It is in the upper room. The disciples have gathered with Christ for a final meal, a final teaching, and a final prayer.

This short period of time in the upper room is almost surreal. John says of it, *"Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end"* (13:1). Fully man *and* fully God, Christ lovingly bears with the disciples and continues to engage them in their seeming silliness and slowness. He eats with and washes the feet of a naïve and barely believing group of unimpressive and socially little-regarded men. This is no less than God himself fully and tenderly condescending to the impoverished condition of man.

Christ begins to teach them, as he so often did, and every bit of what he has to say now is suggesting a future in which he will not be physically present¹. This world-transforming period in history is drawing to a close. Christ, in these final moments before his tortuous journey to the cross, lays out, essentially, a picture of the church and the age in which it will exist. And then after his teaching in the upper room, he prays...

This prayer represents the very last personal interaction that Christ will have with his disciples as a group prior to the cross. It gives us an incredible insight into his heart – where his affections and concerns lie as he nears his own death. Excepting Christ's anguished prayer on the cross, what we overhear in the upper room is the final prayer of not just a man who is about to voluntarily lay down his life, but of the God-man, the cosmic creator who holds all things together, who will take upon himself the sins of all his children and therefore the fury of God. What lies heavily upon his heart at this moment? What will he bring to his Holy Father in petition? What is it that is so important that his last prayer, during his last hours, with his last breaths, is full of? With these questions in mind, we pick up in John 17 in the middle of what is often referred to as the high priestly prayer.

[Let's Pray.]

The Content of Christ's Last Prayer with the Disciples

The 17th chapter of John is devoted entirely to Christ's prayer. This prayer is rooted in a very real and present context, but it is clearly eternal in its scope. Christ is not merely reflecting on the present hour, but on eternity past (17:2) and eternity future (17:24). It is a prayer for the ages, as important for us now as it was for the disciples then. For our pur-

¹ John 13-17

poses this morning, we will break Christ's prayer into three sections and we will focus primarily on the middle section (vv. 11-19) less so on the first and the last.

Christ's Testimony of His Work (vv. 1-11)

The first part, verses 1-11, immediately places the glory of the Father at the center of Christ's prayer. Christ is ever-conscious of his father's will and his father's glory *and* of his own status as co-equal member of the Godhead (v.1). And though co-equal, Christ recognizes his unique role in contributing to the Father's glory. He will accomplish his Father's work by saving those he has given to him to keep (vv. 3-5) thereby giving life to the children of God as promised². Christ is returning to the Father, but it will be by way of Golgotha. And the world, and we, will never be the same.

Christ goes on in verses 6-11 to confirm the true belief of the disciples. Christ is able to confirm this because the disciples believe³ not only that He is *from* God, but also that he was *sent* by God to do his work – in other words, Christ and the Father are one in mind and mission. How can the disciples believe this? Because they have been transformed by the living Word (v.8), and in the unique scope of their lifetime, this included the physical presence of Christ. Transformation through the Word is *always* the gospel pattern, even as manifestations of the Word change across history (vv.6-9).

In verse 10 we see the "chain" of glory, so to say, completed. Christ receives glory from his people, the church. Christ receives glory from the Father even as he is lifted up to the cross. Christ in turn delivers all this glory to the Father. And we, the Chapel, are part of this unfathomable reality – glory-making for the almighty God. What an extraordinary reality. Two brief observations: First, Christ's understanding of himself and his mission was completely immersed in the Father's plan (v.4). Second, God's work is always accompanied and finally achieved by the ministry of the Word, this is true of even the Son of God's ministry (v.8). [comment]

Christ's Prayer for the Disciples (vv. 11-19)

So what does this have to do with unity in leadership? In this second part of the prayer, we will begin to see the answer to that question. The disciples are going to become the Apostles. They will be responsible for penning the remaining revelation that God intends to give to man. They will also be responsible for the spread of the gospel and the inception of the New Covenant church. We could sum up their role as ministers of the Word. They will bring Christ to the people through proclamation.

It is on this point that I make the connection to church leadership today. The specifics are different. No church leader (pastor, elder, deacon, ministry leader) should be thinking that he is penning Scripture, or that he is starting the "true" church. But the responsibility is essentially the same. Bringing the Word to the people. Therefore, what Christ

² Genesis 3:15

³ John 16:27

prays for the disciples, contains wisdom and instruction for those who lead the church today.

What then does he pray? *“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one (v.11b).”* This is one of two main petitions Christ makes for the disciples, the other in v.17 we will come to in a moment.

Keep them in your name (vv. 11-16)

So what is this “keep them in your name, which you have given me”? It is the name that God the Father has given to Christ. When you hear “name” don’t think Kaity or Brock or Morgan or Merrick or Nick or Stephen... think of “name” as being short hand for reality. It is not just how we get a person’s attention, but it has to do with who the person is and therefore what they do. Reuben, my son, is both a Berry and will grow up to *be* a Berry. In other words, being a Berry is about more than simply writing Berry where a last name is required. Being a Berry is about who Reuben is, and what Reuben does. John tells us that those who believe in “his name” have the right to be children of God, and that is by asking in Christ’s name that the Father will hear his children⁴. Paul tells us that the name given to Christ by the Father is the “name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father⁵.”

So what does this “name” represent in Christ’s prayer? Verse 6 tells us that Christ manifested this “name.” And verses 7 and 8 go on to tell us what this meant. Note what Christ says about himself in these verses: “everything that you have given me is from you...” “for I have given them the words you gave me...” “I came from you...” “you sent me...” And in these same verses we can ask about the effect of Christ manifesting the name: “Now they know...” “and they have received them [Christ’s words]...” “[they] have come to know in truth...” “they have believed...” Said plainly, to be kept in the name is to be kept in relationship with God through Christ. One commentator put it this way, “The *name* is the point of contact between Christ and his disciples in the Father⁶.” This is a prayer for protection, for persevering, for loyalty and faithfulness, that the disciples would remain in the saving work of Christ which places them into relationship with the Father.

Oh? That’s all? That’s it? I knew that! Do you? Do you truly believe that? If you do, then being kept in the name will be no small thing. No shrug of the shoulders. No glib brushing aside of what you’ve known since you were four. Does it comfort you that Christ prays like this for those God has given to him? Will not the Father give good gifts to his son? Will not this request be honored? Oh beloved, God will certainly honor the Son’s request. We will be kept. Christ prays, keep the disciples from

⁴ John 1:12, 14:13, 15:16

⁵ Philippians 2:9-11

⁶ Whitacre, R. *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: John*. Intervarsity Press.

falling from the gospel, from being disloyal to it, from walking away from it. Keep them captivated and awed by the Father's work through the Son, protected from the world, protected from the evil one. Keep them, Father, Christ prays, keep them.

Christ has a purpose in praying this beyond the immediate, he asks that the disciples would be kept in the name "...that they may be one, even as we are one." Surprising. Christ's final prayer for the disciples and he is praying for their protection – makes sense – but in order that they unified. Note that being kept in the name is now inextricably linked to unity. To be one of God's children, is to be unified with God's children. And this is not some lame or weak idea of unity, it is the kind of unity that is manifested in the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father who are perfectly united in their mission and their message.

So, how important is unity among those who will lead the church? As we will see with increasing clarity, it is very important. So important that it is *a* if not *the* major theme of Christ's final prayer with his disciples.

In verses 12-16 Christ makes clear why he is making this request. He will no longer be physically present to carry on this work. The physical manifestation of Christ will be gone. In addition, the world will hate them (v.14). And the evil one is present (v.15). We know from chapters 14 & 16 (Christ's teaching in the upper room) that Christ has already told the disciples of the Holy Spirit. It is not likely, however, that they fully comprehended this promise. In addition to the Holy Spirit, they will have Christ's words (v.13) and just as his words brought them salvation (v.8), his words will supply them joy.

Sanctify them (vv.14-19)

In verse 14 we see that Christ has entrusted the word to the disciples, just as God had entrusted the word to him. Though the world will hate the disciples for their ministry of the Word, Christ does not ask that they be removed from the world. Why? Because – the Father and the Son have agreed to a mission – and in their perfect union of purpose, they are now extending the mission, through Word ministry, to the disciples, and to the church. The disciples are being sent (v. 18). This is at least one reason we are not immediately whisked to heaven when we are saved. Rather, we are co-opted into the glory-making plans of the Godhead. To this end, Christ prays in the latter half of verse 15, essentially, the complement to the request in verse 11. Instead of being kept *in your name* he now prays that they will be kept *from the evil one*. So what is word-ministry like for those who will lead the church? They will be hated by the world and hunted by the evil one. So Christ has prayed, keep them in your name.

Christ now prays that the disciples would be sanctified, or set apart (v.17), by the word (v.17). Sanctified in this case, although it does not exclude personal transformation, is probably emphasizing being set apart unto a divine task. And here again we see the word in action. Through the word, by the word, the disciples will be set apart to this divine task. What divine task? The Apostolic task – they will now be

those who are sent (v.18). And as we noted earlier, they will be ministers of the word – by completing its revelation, inaugurating the church, and spreading the gospel. And a pattern emerges again, just as God sent Christ into the world with his word (v.4, 8), Christ will now send the disciples into the world (v.18) with the word. And to make this possible – Christ will consecrate, or set apart, himself to his work on the cross, so that the glory-making mission may go forward.

So let's summarize this prayer for the disciples and all those who would lead the church through word ministry...

1. Christ asks God the Father that they will be kept in his name. He also asks that they would be set apart unto a divine task.
2. The purpose of being kept in his name is that they may be one. The purpose of setting them apart is for word ministry.
3. Being kept in his name that they may be one, and being set apart for word ministry are intertwined, and we will see how in the next section of Christ's prayer.

Christ's Prayer for All Believers (vv. 20-26)

Starting in verse 20, the *who* Christ is praying for changes – that is, he is now praying for those who will believe as a result of the disciples words. *What* Christ is praying for, remains largely the same. I want to make three observations.

First, a clear link is established between the Father's words, Christ's words (v.8), the Apostle's words (v.20) and now the church. The Word originates in the God the Father, it is passed on to the God the Son (v.8), and then passed on to human ministers of the Word who will pass it on to the world. And this pattern is the means by which we come to believe. Ministers of the Word should not think little of their duty. It is from the personal and public ministry of the Word that men and women come to know the truth – that is, Christ reconciling us to God.

Second, and this is where the importance of the theme of unity becomes clear, Christ's main request for believers of all time is that they would be unified. Verse 21 says, "...that they all may be one...;" verse 22 says, "...that they may be one...;" and verse 23 says, "... that they may become perfectly one..." Just as in verse 11, the pattern of unity is Christ's oneness with the Father (v.21, v.23). But the purpose of unity is further elaborated upon by Christ: (v.21) "...so that the world may believe that you have sent me... (v.23) so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

So this is where this theme comes together. The glory-making mission that the Father and the Son have set out upon requires a unity in mission on their parts. They will fulfill different roles, the Father will send, the Son will die. For the divine plan to be perfectly implemented, they must be of one mind. But there is more. We, the church, have been brought into this divine plan. But just as with the Father and the Son, we must be of one mind, one mission, to carry out our divinely appointed role. Dale elaborated on

how unity in the church looks last week. But our unity is not for ourselves – it is for the divine glory-making plan. How so? It is our unity, created through Word ministry, that will provide the evidence to the world that Christ is all that he has said is and had done all that he has promised to do. In other words, unity is crucial to the mission of the church. We should not think we can co-join the Father and the Son in their work if we are not unified. Ministers of the Word, those who will lead in the church, must be especially conscious of this. It is through their unity that they will be able to carry out their ministry without being lost to the world or captured by the evil one.

The Passage Applied to Unity in Church Leadership

I have six observations to share with you by way of application.

Unity is Primary Theme

We've answered the question of what does Christ in his last minutes with the disciples pray for? A clear theme is unity in the church – patterned on the Godhead – made possible by the Father's "keeping" of us – and displayed to the world as witness of God's redeeming love in Christ. Let us be clear – the Godhead is emphatically interested in our practical unity. Don't think for a moment that how we live together does not matter, as long as we have good doctrine and strong programs, or as long as the auditorium is big enough to give us each ample space. How we believe together and live together matters greatly.

The Word is a Primary Thread

If unity is the clear theme, then the Word is the clear thread. And when I say "word" here I am referring to all aspects: the Bible, God's self-revelation in the Living Word, Christ⁷, and especially the good news of the Word, the gospel. The church, and therefore its unity, hangs on the strong thread of the Word. Apart from Word ministry, we are club at best. Just another earthly gathering brought together by interest or circumstance. The Word is God's causative instrument, by it we believe. By it, the church is built. By it, the gospel goes out. Without it, we are nothing.

The Godhead is the Primary Theater

If unity is the theme and the Word is the thread, then our relationship with the Godhead is the theatre or context in which this all plays out. There is no way that you can read through John 17 and not be confronted with the wonder of what is transpiring between the Father and the Son. The theater is not the world or even the cosmos. It the plan of Godhead who in eternity past made a plan to magnify their glory. And this is not a cold calculation of will and power... We rest in the sweet, comforting words of verses 25 and 26, *O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made know to them your name, and I will*

⁷ John 1

continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

What should those in church leadership note in regards to unity?

Christ-centered and Doctrinal

Church leadership must not only give verbal and cognitive assent to the words of Christ, they must genuinely believe them. To believe that Christ was sent by God, that his words were from God, establishes an absolute authority that the church leader must both love and tremble over. The implications demand a Christ-centered vision of the church and a very high regard for doctrine, or the teachings of the Bible. If we believe that Christ was sent by God with God's words, then we must bow to his lordship and trust in his salvation. Leading in the church is not a mind game – manipulating the mob, it is not a profession – managing the people, it is not a humanitarian exercise - mitigating the woes of the world... It is genuine submission to the words of God at all times in all ways. A leader thinks otherwise will place at risk the unity of the church.

Church-focused and Relational

Leadership in the church cannot ignore the relational reality that Christ is praying for in the church. And, just as with the disciples, the relational reality must begin with the leadership. Elders, to simply make motions, approve actions, implement programs, share schedules, is not enough! Our hearts must be knit together in the mission of the Father and the Son. Be clear that an early sign of danger in regards to being "kept in the name (v.11) is disunity. And disunity may indicate infiltration of the world or the evil one. One other thought, we may be tempted to play mental and semantic games by believing that there is somehow a difference between disunity and a lack of unity. That is, we may say something like, "Well, we may not be unified but I don't think there is any 'disunity'" and therefore relational difficulties are closeted and real dissension and discord is hidden. Given that the model of "oneness" that Christ prays for is depicted in his relationship with the Father, I do not believe there is any room for this approach. Beloved, our pursuit of unity must be serious and inspired. Serious because it is evidence of our faith and inspired because we know that Christ himself has prayed that we would be one. A unity of mind, mission, and motivation is what we are after. We must not settle for anything less. We need not settle for anything less.

Gospel-driven and Comissional

Finally, leadership in the church must realize that the one of the clear products of oneness or unity, is the declaration Christ and the Father's plan to the world. Our unity is not for ourselves only. It is a witness to the world. It is a representation of the oneness of the Godhead – the Lordship of Christ – the validity of his message – the power of his name. If we at the Chapel live out our unity in a way that is hidden from the world, we are making a grave mistake. We are hiding the gospel, an indictment that is both sad and fearful. I have wondered in preparing this message if the vast disunity in the church-at-large explains what seems to be the low level of influence the church has for the gospel in the world today. The question for us is what is the Chapel doing, both as

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individuals and as community, to allow the world to see our unity? To obscure the world's view of our unity is to obscure the world's view of Christ. [Let's Pray].