

Introduction

I, therefore the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavouring [*Gk. spoudazo: to make haste, be zealous, diligent, hardworking*] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Eph. 4:1-6)

The following chapters contain a series of studies based on Paul's exhortation in Ephesians to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). Paul follows the exhortation with seven 'ones' which express areas in which the Lord's people should be united, the seven are: one body; one Spirit, one hope of your calling; one Lord; one faith; one baptism; one God and Father of all. This introduction gives some background to the subject of unity, taking the words of Jesus from John chapter 17 as the basis for study.

John 17: Jesus Desires Unity Among His Disciples.

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. (Jn. 17:20,21)

'Unity' has become something of a buzz word amongst Christians today, and attempts are being made to unite, in the broadest possible terms, the Christian church. From Roman Catholics to Reformed Presbyterians, and all that's in-between, unity has become something highly desired and sought after. Jesus' words in John 17:21 are often quoted in this respect, and we are told that these attempts to unite the Christian church across all denominations and doctrinal differences are fulfilling the desire of Jesus, expressed in His prayer, for a united church. But is it that type of inter-church unity what Jesus meant? A closer look at Jesus' words in John 17 should, I believe, convince that He was in fact envisioning something quite different to the end-times conglomerate of a church, where all the various streams of Christianity converge, which is being promoted so vigorously today.

The words of Jesus recorded in John 17, are of course, highly important, they are the essence of His last public prayer before He went out to face Gethsemane and the cross. In them are expressed His desire for His disciples, both those present with Him at that time, and all who would believe in Him throughout the subsequent years. He included those of us today who have accepted Him as our Saviour. Verse 18 is key to understanding Jesus' intention, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world," and it raises the important question as to how is a disciple of Jesus sent into the world in the same manner as He was? The answer lies in close scrutiny of Jesus' prayer, and I would here suggest three main points:

1. “I have glorified You on the earth” (Jn. 17:4a)

John said of Jesus, “we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” (Jn. 1:14), by which John was indicating that in Jesus the true character and presence of God was manifested fully and perfectly. Jesus the Son of God gave, during His life on earth, a perfect declaration to the world of the character of God. Because He was and is the brightness of God’s glory, and the express image of His person (Heb. 1:3), Jesus never in any way at all misrepresented God His Father; in Jesus we see perfectly what God is like. So when Jesus said in John 17:10 that He is glorified in His disciples, it impresses upon us the incredible truth that those who are truly His will manifest His character and presence in the world, just as He perfectly manifested His Father’s character and presence. This shows us that one of the great, unifying desires shared among Jesus’ true disciples is that our lives, individually and corporately, must manifest the true character and presence of God the Father, and of His Son the Lord Jesus. We share together this understanding, and must recoil at the thought of doing, or being associated with anything, that does not bring glory to the Father whom we are sent to represent.

2. “I have finished the work which You have given Me to do” (Jn. 17:4b)

Jesus came to the earth to fulfil a specific task, to be the propitiation for the sins of the world, a work which required His absolute obedience to the Father’s will, and which culminated in the sacrifice of His life on the cross. Jesus could say, “The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him” (Jn. 8:29). From a very young age, Jesus knew that He had to be about His Father’s business (Lk. 2:49), and He spent His life doing just that. No disciple of Jesus can of course do the work that He did on the cross, but, we should all, like Jesus, be seeking daily to do God’s will for our lives, to always be doing the things that please Him. Individually, there is great peace when we are at the centre of His will; corporately, there is great power and unity of purpose when Jesus’ disciples come together with the attitude of, “not my will, but Yours, be done.” If we could all learn to submit self with its ambitions, reasonings and desires to the will and purposes of God for our lives, what great things might God do, what problems might be easily resolved, and what a powerful witness the true church would give to true Christian unity. May we each seek to glorify God, by knowing and doing the works that He sends us to accomplish in our lifetimes.

3. “... the love with which you loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn. 17:26)

True Christian faith is rooted in loving relationships. The true disciple, understanding something of the love that the Lord Jesus showed, loves Him in return (1Jn. 4:19). That love is expressed in obedience to Jesus, and those who love Jesus are loved by the Father, and Father and Son make their home with them (Jn. 14:23). Such scriptures express the expectation of a very profound depth of intimate, personal relationship between Jesus’ disciples and their God. While this relationship is something quite inexpressible by human language, and incomprehensible to human intellect, the scriptural reality of it must be acknowledged, and entered into with joyful delight,

wonder and thankfulness. I have to be honest, and admit that I so often fail in this respect, somehow it is all too easy to forget and neglect this relationship aspect of faith. I do not believe I am alone, too often, many of us plough on in our respective paths, doing our ‘things’, while giving little time to spending time with our Lord Jesus, and listening to His voice, and receiving His instruction for the way forward. We forget He said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (Jn. 10:27). When was the last time you clearly heard the voice of the Good Shepherd? True disciples are united in their love of Jesus, and in their longing to hear His voice and walk in obedience to His words. May the world see in us, as in Jesus, that same great love that God showed when He sent His Son into the world.

You may like to use the above points to test those who are promoting Christian unity: Are they glorifying God by true Biblical declaration of His truth and character? Are they seeking to do His work, claiming no glory for themselves, but directing all to the glory of God, doing the things that are pleasing to Him? Do they love the Lord Jesus and the Father, and their lives manifest the obedience which is the fruit of deep relationship with Him? But let us also test our own lives with the same measure, and may we be found to be such people, who together genuinely seek to fulfil Jesus’ prayer, and manifest in our fellowship with one another the true unity which Jesus desires and expressed in His prayer.

Characteristics of Those United in Jesus

John 17 gives further indication of the particular characteristics of true disciples of Jesus, which are defining attributes of the unity which they share. The following list of uniting aspects regarding Jesus’ disciples is presented as an aid for further study:

- They are given to Him by the Father; Jesus gives them eternal life (vv. 2; 6; 9; 11; 10-12; cf. Jn. 6:37; 44; 65).
- The truth about God the Father has been supernaturally manifested (i.e. revealed) to them (v. 6; cf. Mt. 16:17;).
- They have received the words of Jesus (v.8; cf. Jn. 8:31).
- They know and believe that the Father sent Jesus (Jn. 17:8; 25).
- They are sanctified by the word of God and by the truth (Jn. 17:17; 21).
- They are one in Father and Son, partaking of God’s glory (Jn 17:19; 21; 23).
- Their witness is testimony to the world that the Father sent the Son, and may elicit belief (Jn. 17:21).
- They are loved by the Father, as He loved Jesus (Jn. 17:23).