

“The Binding Work of Prayer:
God’s Unity”
John 17:20-23

Introduction

Have any of you teenagers ever used a centrifuge? A centrifuge is a device that rotates rapidly, creating an increase in the pull of gravity. It's used to separate different substances. What it does is speed up the process of separation. If you let certain things set for a long time they will separate. Look in an old paint can or some liquid medicines and you'll see different layers of things.

I got to wondering, if a centrifuge is a device used to separate things, is there any kind of device that puts things back together? Well, I found out that chemists often use a magnetized mixing platform to speed up the process of putting things together. They take a beaker full of stuff and put it on a vibrating table – and with the aid of a magnetized stir stick, they can put things together very fast and sometimes even get them to bind together more permanently than if you just stirred them with a stick.

I got to thinking about this whole thing this week when I was studying our passage for this morning. Our text is from Jesus' wonderful prayer in John 17 where He asking the Father in heaven to bind Christians together in unity. There are lots of things that tear Christians apart today – different doctrines, different kinds of worship, different approaches to ministry – and sometimes just an inability to get along with one another. It's like the

world and our surroundings are a centrifuge, pulling us apart.

But Jesus shows us in this passage that He desires to bind us together in unity. And because He prays for it, we know it's possible. So today, we are going to see how we can be united together as Christians.

[John 17:20-23]

What is unity? Some Christians, when they think about unity, think only in terms of organizational oneness. To them, unity would be the absence of denominations. For others, unity is a mystical, hidden harmony that exists in the invisible church. But a couple of things that are clear from Jesus' prayer is that He is asking for more than organizational unity – for He prays for unity of all believers, in all places – something that is physically and organizationally impossible. But at the same time we can also readily see that He intends something beyond a mere invisible, mystical unity because His stated intent is that the world would see the unity of the church and believe because of it.

So what is unity? One good definition comes right of the New Testament. Philippians 2:1, 2 says this. *Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.*

- encouraging one another in Christ
- consoling one another in love
- fellowship together in the Spirit
- a genuine, heartfelt warmth and concern for one another (affection and compassion)

- united in the truth (same mind)
- committed to harmonious living
- moving in the same direction

Certainly the church through the ages has struggled with this. At the heart of denominationalism are deep divides in our understanding of truth. There have been bitter, uncharitable times of theological mud slinging. Church splits and bitter in-congregational feuds are all too common. It's not hard to see why Jesus prayed for unity.

On the other hand, mere organizational unity is not necessarily the answer, nor the intent of this prayer. Through much of post-resurrection history there was essentially one organizational church. Yet we have labeled that time period *the dark ages*. Even in the New Testament, the unity we observe is rather loose from an organizational standpoint. The churches were divided by distance, culture, emphasis and even practice.

So where do we begin in our thinking about unity in the church?

I. United in the Gospel.

Some of our mid week Bible studies are beginning a study in Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Perhaps there is no other letter in the New Testament that, on the surface, is more divisive. When we met this last Wednesday we noticed how Paul is quick to call down curses upon people. He calls people foolish and bewitched. He says that he wishes certain people among them would mutilate themselves. He tells certain ones they have fallen from grace.

That's certainly not unifying language! What could possibly cause Paul to be so riled up? What would incite him to language that drives wedges? The answer, of course, is the gospel. The one true foundation we have for unity is the gospel. If anyone preaches a different gospel then the basis for unity

evaporates. In fact he is stronger – *let him be accursed!*

There are a lot of important things in the Bible. But the one thing that stands as most important it is the message of Christ's work to save us from our sin. Paul calls it "of first importance".

1 Cor. 15:1-3 - Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

Jesus said it like this: *Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. And also, the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.*

In short, there is nothing more important in life than being reconciled to God and experiencing forgiveness from your sins through Jesus Christ. Anything that distorts the message of Christ's work on the cross is cursed. Ephesians 4:3-6 spells it out. We are to be *diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

It's the gospel that binds us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. The few times I've traveled overseas, there is always an extraordinary emphasis on the differences. You tend to get overwhelmed with a different language, different food, different smells and sights, different customs, a different race of people. But then to meet another Christian in that setting is somehow a magnificent experience. There is a bond of unity, a warmth of spirit, a common experience that is very unifying.

Jesus compares our unity to the unity He has with the Father. That's the unity we have with other Christians. Jesus lives in us through the Holy Spirit. That is a real unity and it is the starting point for our unity as believers here on earth.

If you are not yet a Christian – that is, you have not confessed your sins to God and trusted in the life and death of Jesus Christ as the only grounds for your forgiveness, then you have no way of experiencing the kind of unity Jesus prays for here. Your greatest need is to be reconciled to God. Only through faith in Jesus is that possible.

II. United in Our Purposes

Look at verses 21 & 22 (read). Our unity is to be in harmony and in accord with the unity of the Father and the Son. Their unity was based upon a mutual desire to redeem a fallen world and to bring forth the glory of God in all creation.

So how can we be united in purpose? The Bible gives us a very descript metaphor to help us understand. The metaphor is that of the body. First Corinthians 12 gives the details. *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.*

In that chapter Paul goes on to explain that we can be united in purpose without being cookie cutter replicas of one another. We can have different focuses, different ministries, different callings and different gifts. But we can still pull in the same direction. And the reason is we are like a body. A body has eyes and ears and hands and feet. But only one head that controls and directs all things. So in the church we have unity without uniformity.

One of the things we want to keep promoting in this congregation is the idea that God wants you to be involved in His work. There are many existing ways that could happen. You might get involved with student ministry. You might become a volunteer at the jail. You could teach; minister to children or the youth. Maybe you become involved in leading evangelistic Bible studies or some other form of outreach. . . Or, you could find God leading you into something entirely new. The point is, if we know that God desires the church to witness to and disciple a lost world, we will begin to follow Him as the head. Our unity flows from His purposes.

So, we are united first in the gospel.
We are united in our purposes.

III. United in our Relationships

Maybe this last one is the place we most easily slip up. Unity is most easily seen when you watch how people relate to one another. Verse 23 says *I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.*

We are going to talk more about love next week, but for now at least, we need to see that unity has it's most important witness in how we treat each other. How many churches have been torn apart by bickering, back biting and bitterness?

There is a reason that the strongest picture given to us of the church is the picture of a family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. God is our Father in heaven. What is a family? A family is a place of love and acceptance. A family is place where you are known as you really are – strengths, weaknesses, gifts and struggles, your beauty and your warts. A family is place where you don't choose your other family members, but you are

expected to love them and work with them. A family is a place of permanence, where you don't run from your problems and disagreements, but you are forced to work them out. Not all of you come from solid, functioning families. Not every church functions as it should. But this is no less our calling. Our unity is to be found in how we treat each other week after week.

So how do we function as a family unit?

1. We live humbly before one another by confessing our sins to each other. Sin breaks unity.

Confession restores it. There is no road to unity that is not paved with a willingness to admit our sins and seek forgiveness.

2. We live humbly before one another by being willing to forgive one another. Sometimes it's harder to forgive than it is to seek forgiveness. Are you willing to do both?

3. We live humbly before one another by seeking holiness together. None of us has arrived at perfection. So together we walk toward Christlikeness. Although we may be at different places in our sanctification, we are united in our common experience of falling short of the glory of God and desiring to be more like Him tomorrow than we are today.

4. We live humbly before one another by being willing to serve one another. The world will see our unity in our self-sacrificing love for each other. If we die to self and live for others, people will know the Jesus lives.

So this, at least in part, is unity.

- We are united in the only message of salvation. Faith alone in Jesus Christ.
- We are united in our purpose – to glorify God and see His kingdom come.

- And we are united in our relationships of love with one another.

Our unity is not yet perfect. But let's strive together to be one as the Father is one with His Son.