

Living as One
By Rick Ezell

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:20-23 NIV).

Knowing the end was near, Jesus prayed one final time for his followers. Striking, isn't it? With death breathing down his neck, Jesus prayed not for our success, our safety, or our happiness. He prayed for our unity, as we would fulfill his purpose. He prayed that we would love each other, as we went forward to love the world to him. He prayed for his disciples and for all those who would come to faith in Jesus Christ, becoming his followers. That means you and me. In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I be one.

Jesus prays for unity among believers four times (vv. 11, 21, 22, 23). When Jesus prays for something four times he is making a major plea. Jesus does not take unity lightly? It is of a major concern for him. It should be for us as well.

Is the answer to Jesus' prayer of unity just so there will be harmony among the brethren or is there a deeper purpose? Of all the lessons we can draw from these verses, don't miss the most important: Unity matters to God. The Father does not want his kids to squabble. Disunity disturbs him. Why? Twice Jesus says that the reason we are to unite as believers is as a witness to a watching world. Jesus prays, “. . . so the world may believe You sent Me. . . so the world may know You have sent Me” (vv. 21, 23). The reputation of God is at stake. When Christians stand together in unity, they bear living proof of the truth of the gospel. A unified church will convince people that there is a God in heaven. Unity creates belief.

If unity creates belief, then disunity fosters disbelief. How can the world come to believe the gospel if those who already believe it are battling among themselves? When the world sees denominational leaders fighting over control, or young and old members of the same congregation dueling over worship styles, or a church splitting over the color of the new carpet, it says, “Thanks, but no thanks.” When Christians splinter over frivolous and nonessential issues, observers have reason to doubt the validity of the gospel. Is it fair to say that one of the hindrances of people being drawn into evangelical churches today is the way we treat one another?

Paul Billheimer may very well be right when he says: “The continuous and widespread fragmentation of the Church has been the scandal of the ages. It has been Satan's master strategy. The sin of disunity probably has caused more souls to be lost than all other sins combined.”

Could it be that unity is the key to reaching the world for Christ?

One theologian stated, “The proclamation of the gospel apart from the unity of the church is a theological absurdity.” Unity is the evidence to the world that our faith is real. May unity be evident to all. When unity is present, we answer Jesus’ prayer. If unity isn’t experienced, how must Jesus feel?

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