

John 17 Sets Standard for the Body

John 17:20-23

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

As I have both studied church history and been a practitioner who has been forming large coalitions and networks of networks since the late 1980's I have learned to appreciate the vast implications of John 17:20-23.

I believe this passage correlates to and is the corporate equivalent of the Great Commandment in Matthew 22:23-25 which tells us to love God and love our neighbor. Thus, loving God is our vertical responsibility that rules our private and inner lives which then is lived out by the horizontal dynamic of our private faith which is to love our neighbor.

First and foremost, in John 17 “unity” is the union that we as the church are called to have with the Godhead which results in us having experiential unity with other believers that make up the church in general.

In my studies of the First and Second Great Awakenings in America, I have seen how a united, praying church was essential for a move of God in a community, city and nation. For example, Jonathan Edwards initiated Concerts of Prayer in New England, which was a united prayer movement of churches that spread across the world to the United Kingdom. This

resulted in sustaining an awakening in those nations.

In another example, Charles Finney would always attempt to have several churches in one community united in prayer before he would commence revival services. In one particular incident, he said the Lord was grieved by disunity among churches in a certain town that grieved His Spirit and thus hindered a move of the Spirit to win souls and bring revival.

Also, in 1857, Jeremiah Lanphier initiated weekly Fulton Street prayer meetings in New York City that resulted in the Third Great Awakening, which spawned united prayer across the nation and about half a million new conversions in just one year!

In 1991, I initiated a united prayer movement in New York City called All City Prayer in which I received a word of the Lord to gather the pastors leading 12 of the largest Pentecostal churches in our city for a day of fasting and prayer. We had one event every six months for several years with about 60 churches participating and thousands of believers showing up to pray. (It wasn't a preaching or worship marathon but a hardcore prayer meeting for the nation!)

We eventually joined our movement with Concerts of Prayer, because I found out they started in 1987 and I didn't want to practice division in the city between Pentecostals and Evangelicals. By 1993, the crime rate in the city dropped about 40 percent; we eventually became the safest city with over one million people in the USA! This is merely a small real-life snapshot of what the Bible teaches regarding unity.

What Jesus is praying in John 17 is that each believer would be one in spirit with the Trinity as well as with one another so the world would believe that God sent Jesus as the Savior and Lord of the world. The idea behind His prayer is this: How can the church expect the world to believe we love them if we can't even walk with God or love other believers? Thus, unity

in the church is not just formal unity or ecclesiastical unity or organizational unity but real covenantal unity based on sharing our lives together as the early church did (Acts 2:42-47).

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

While many pastors (including myself) have used this passage to encourage unity in their local churches, really this passage is referring to having a united church in a city, a “one church, one city” model, which is the reason the church of the first three centuries was able to convert the Roman Empire by AD 313. Notice that Paul was writing this letter *not* to a lone congregation in the city of Corinth, but to the church of Corinth. This means the early church had many congregations in Corinth but God viewed it as only one church.

Furthermore, I have found that God has spoken some of the most extraordinary things to me when I was involved with corporate prayer gatherings in my local congregation and in the context of praying with and for other pastors. (Since 1991, I have always been in contexts when I am praying with and for other pastors at least once per month as well as praying with my local church leaders.)

I love to connect to God alone more than in groups because I am an introvert. But, I found out that I hear from God a lot more frequently when I am in prayer with other people. This is

because there are some things God will not speak to a person alone. He wants us to have interdependent relationships with other people so we can function as one body as taught in 1 Corinthians 12. This is why Jesus commanded us to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!

Revelation 2:9

“He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Obviously, this is another example of Jesus speaking a word to a regional city church. There are some things God will not and cannot speak to the church in a city unless there is united prayer, love and cooperation between brethren and churches. This also means there are some things God cannot and will not do unless the church in a city unites. You will never see the greatest works of God until you unite. You will never see a sustainable revival resulting in a reformation until you unite the churches.

We will probably never be able to unite every church in a big city, so God requires that we start off with Evangelical churches and leaders who are willing to work together. After that, God will bless and add other gospel preaching, Bible-believing churches to the mix.

What else did Jesus say in the book of Revelation pertinent to our discussion today regarding the need for unity in the church?

Revelation 1:9-11

“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day when I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, Write what you see in a book and send

it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

Revelation 2:1

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.”

Essentially, these passages pressure and convict the Protestant Evangelical Church because we must ask ourselves: if Jesus were to deliver a letter to New York City, who would He deliver this message to?

If He wanted to deliver a message to the Orthodox, Anglican or Roman Catholic churches, then He would probably deliver it to the bishop representing their diocese. But who in the Evangelical Church can He or would He give it to? It would have to be to a leader or collection of leaders that have united together as one network or a network of networks, capable of working, partnering and praying together to obey Jesus’ commands!

Here is a simplistic explanation of the historical dilemma for the global Evangelical Church:

Up until the 11th century there was only one Holy Catholic Church. Then there was a nasty split (that was brewing for centuries) between the Eastern and the Western churches. However, the Eastern Church remained united because they already had unity under their bishops and patriarchs; thus in organization and even in liturgy they were very similar to the Roman Catholic Church. The result: approximately one quarter of the church stayed with the Eastern Church and three quarters stayed under the authority of the pope and the Western Church.

The Protestants threw the baby out with the bath water when Martin Luther inadvertently launched the Protestant

Reformation, doing away with all ecclesiastical titles, organization and liturgy except for pastor and teacher. The catastrophic result was that over the next several centuries the Evangelical Church became more and more fragmented and divided, with the establishment of literally thousands of denominations and independent local congregations (they call themselves churches, but I use the term congregation intentionally). This was the beginning of the demise of Christendom (a civilization based on Christianity). Centuries later even the biblical worldview was taken away from Eastern and Western Europe and North America!

I believe God judged the Roman Catholic Church because too much authority was given to one man (the pope) along with all the abuses and corruption, and putting church tradition and canon law over and above scripture. Thus, even though the Roman Catholic Church had a semblance of organizational and ecclesiastical (horizontal) unity they largely missed the most important unity (vertical) which is based on true spiritual unity with the Trinity. (However, the Roman Catholic Church has always had many true believers and Christ-followers, both in their leadership and among their congregations.)

The Protestants went to the other extreme and largely threw out organizational ecclesiastical unity by rejecting the authority and concept of bishops and the common understanding of church hierarchy and ecclesial structure (although Luther attempted to have unity through the state resulting in Lutheran state churches, mostly in Germany at first; Calvin did the same with Reformed churches mostly in France and Sweden; Anglican churches did the same in England). Thus, there was no real base or foundation to hold the church together. This resulted in fragmentation and a diminution of the united Christian voice in the modern nations resulting in what was recorded in the book of Judges after Joshua and the elders under him died: every man did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). Thus, while the Roman Catholics have one

pope they follow, each Protestant and each pastor has their own little book (the Bible) that serves as their pope!

So what should Evangelicals do? Go back to the Roman Catholic Church? I don't believe this is the answer for many reasons too numerous to get into now. But I will say that, though the Catholics still have ecclesiastical unity they are in major decline because of scandals, liberal seminaries, unconverted priests and clergy serving as leaders, and political and financial corruption now leading all the way up to the top leadership in the Vatican (for example, the money laundering scandal involving the personal butler of the pope), as well as the fact they are losing the next generation in Western Europe and North America (although they are still gaining adherents in Africa, Asia and Latin America). Thus, as much as I would love to see one church, God is still working on reforming the Roman Church to have both vertical unity with Him and horizontal unity—a work that needs to progress fast if they are going to survive another generation in their present form.

(Side note: I wish Erasmus, who wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church from within, rather than Luther, would have won the day in the 16th century.)

What I espouse is that all Bible-believing Evangelical leaders and churches (including willing historical Roman, Eastern and Anglican denominational leaders and churches as well as independent, non-denominational Evangelical churches) in each community begin to pray together to hear what the Spirit is saying to them regarding how Jesus wants them to reach their cities.

Until we do this our communities and churches will get progressively worse and worse and we will never fulfill the cultural commission of stewarding the earth and influencing every realm of life for King Jesus. We can't expect the world to believe in Jesus if we as believers don't obey the prayer of Jesus for unity in John 17!