

JESUS PRAYED FOR UNITY

Based on an address by John Stott

SETTING THE SCENE

Jesus's high priestly prayer, recorded for us in John 17, includes his longing that the church might be one. It has come to be the proof text of the ecumenical movement, in a desire to bring harmony. We look now at this prayer. What a beautiful gift to the church that the Lord should have prayed aloud, and given us John's record. As we listen, in the same way the disciples listened then, we stand on holy ground.

We often hear it taught that Christ prayed for unity above everything else, so we should strive for unity at any cost. We

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TRUTH?*

are hearing this now as we face a fractured Anglican Communion with divided views on identity and sexuality. 'Disagreement is a bad witness to the world. Why can't evangelicals lay differences aside?' Are evangelicals wrong to stand for apostolic truth, and accept instead the costs of separation, even fragmentation?

Let's first look at what Jesus prayed, then begin by identifying one obvious and key question: 'Who is this desired unity between?'

⁶ “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. ⁸ For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹ I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

Jesus goes on to pray that the disciples might be sanctified, or set apart, by the truth ¹⁷ ‘Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth,’ he prays. Scripture is our God-given means of learning truth, and absorbing it in our minds and hearts. By anchoring ourselves on the Bible, we will be able to withstand the enmity

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of the world. More, as the psalmist wrote, ‘in your light, we see light’ (Psalm 36:9), for scripture acts as a lens through which to interpret the world – and our culture – in a true perspective.

WHO IS THE UNITY BETWEEN?

As Jesus then peers into the future, we see the answer to our question, 'Who is the unity between?' This is the key to understanding Christ's prayer — and the key to being able to engage with other interpretations of it.

Note the words 'them' and 'those', simple, clear, and important. 'My prayer is not for them alone [the disciples for whom he has just been praying.] I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message' (v20). Christ desires

that 'all of them' (v21) that is, the apostolic church and the future church, should be unified. The Lord sees generation after generation

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after generation of his followers. He calls them 'believers', for they will believe in him; and their belief will be the fruit of the apostles' words, passed down from one generation to the next; spread from one nation to another. The pattern is always the same: the Word is given, received, heard, believed, and passed on.

You may have come to faith through your family, or through your church, or through a friend at school, or university, or at work. Perhaps it was through reading a book, or listening to a talk. God uses many ways to sow the seed of the gospel, and to plant it and nurture it in our lives. In whatever way that seed was

sown, in whatever language it was sown, it can be traced back to the apostles.

Let's pause a moment, and not miss this. Jesus is praying that the church down the centuries might believe the same truths, obey the same teaching, and look forward in the same hope as the apostolic church. Luke tells us that the early converts, 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship'

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(Acts 2:42). This is the unity for which Jesus prayed, unity in the truth which was taught by the apostles, and passed down. How different from the commonly-mispreached message we hear to 'lay differences aside, because Jesus prayed for unity'.

Further, Jesus prays '*May they* [believers down the centuries] *also be in us.*' The Son's eternal fellowship with the Father embraces his church. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the evening before his death on the cross, Christ was praying for you and me. What a wonderful thought.

TAKING A STAND

We are told that divisions, such as we see today, will weaken the church's testimony. We would be perceived in a better light and as more in-touch with the world if we were accommodating, and less alienating in our views. Yet we see that Christ's prayer for unity in apostolic truth was precisely for the

sake of mission 'so that the world may believe' (vv 21,23). Evangelism and mission are central to the calling of the whole church. Indeed, spreading the truth is the very object and purpose of this unity.

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It is no easy thing to stand against the tide of western culture, with the pressures of social media and political correctness waging against the ancient, abiding text of God's word. But we know that Christ, our great high priest, is praying for us, at his Father's right hand, as he 'ever lives to make intercession for us' (Hebrews 4:12).

Let's take heart as we work to maintain unity in apostolic truth for Christ's sake, and as we play our part in passing on the apostles' teaching to the younger generation. This was Christ's prayer, in order that the world may believe.

Available as a mini-ebook. Epub 978-1-915934-13-0. Also in a format to print out for churches. (Request using the contact form at dictumpress.com)

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See below

Based on the final part of a plenary address on John 17 given by John Stott to North American students at the Urbana Missions Convention, 1970. The full original text is published as 'The Master's Final Prayer' in John Stott et al, *Christ the Liberator* (IVP-USA 1971; Hodder and Stoughton edition, 1972 pp 67-89). Audio may be found in the growing archive at urbana.org

This piece appears as 'Jesus prayed for Unity: The anchor of apostolic teaching' in *Authority and Joy: The Bible in your Life* by John Stott and Sinclair Ferguson (Dictum / EFAC, 2023 edition, pp37-42). ISBN 978-1-9996621-8-9 Epub 978-1-915934-10-9

Published by the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (EFAC), February 2023.