



BETHEL
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And Then There Was One

Christ's Prayer For Unity

In His intercessory prayer in John 17, Jesus prayed four times that His disciples would be one.

John 17:11, "...Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are."

John 17:20-21, "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that [this is Christ's request] they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me."

John 17:22, "And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one."

In fact, in John 17:23 Christ prayed that His disciples would be "...perfected in unity..."

Indeed, "unity" was an important theme in one of Christ's last prayers to the Father. Now many take this prayer as if it were just a wish. They say, that as Christ anticipated the cross, His longing (His last will and testament) was for the unity of His people. In essence they say, "If only they would be one with

- No division."
- No separation."
- No disunity."

And yet don't miss it. This was not a futile wish expressed with the vain hope that the Father could pull it off. Since Jesus- as God- prayed for unity, you can be sure that His prayer was answered!

And that brings us to a very important question, "When and where was Christ's prayer fulfilled?"

Ephesians 2:11-12, "Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world."

In this text, Paul is addressing the place of the Gentile in the body of Christ, a very important consideration. In the Jewish mind, there were but two people; those who were saved- Jews, and those who were not saved, Gentiles or as commonly referenced by the Jew:

- The Dogs.
- The Scum.
- The Sinner.

As such, when the gospel began to spread throughout the known world, these question naturally arose:

- "What do we do with the Gentile who professes faith in Christ?"
- "Are they saved?"
- "Or do they first have to become Jews?"

Sadly, at the beginning many in the early church believed that the Gentile could not be saved as a Gentile, they first needed to become a Jew.

Acts 15:1: "And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

Galatians 5:5-10: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love."

On account of this problem, Paul frequently addressed the issue of the place of the Gentile in the body of Christ. The text we are addressing contains one example of Paul's teaching regarding the place of the Gentile in the kingdom of God. Notice the Outline: Paul discusses:

- The Former Division, vv. 11-12.
- The Present Reconciliation, v. 13.
- The Basis for the Gentile Reconciliation, vv. 14-18.
- The Results of the Gentile Reconciliation, vv. 19-22.

The Basis for the Gentile Reconciliation

Let's look more closely at Paul's third point here: The BASIS for the Gentile reconciliation.

Ephesians 2:14, "For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us."

Clearly this text is addressing the UNITY of the Body of Christ. Christ is in the emphatic position here. In other words, Christ is the basis of ALL peace in the body.

Now "the middle wall of partition" refers to dividing wall on the Temple mount in Jerusalem. The in the court was the Women's Court, and the Court of the Gentiles. Posted on the wall that separated the Women's Court from the Court of the Gentiles was a sign which stated, "No Gentile may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."

Now this barricade served a very important function during the time of the Old Covenant, it separated the Jews from all others. It helped to keep Judaism pure and unmixed. And yet, when we enter into the time of the New Covenant, we discover that this "barrier" had a detrimental effect on God's kingdom. For once the Gentiles started getting saved it kept the Jew and the Gentile as two distinct groups! Yet would you notice that in Christ this barrier has been removed.

Ephesians 2:14b, "and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us."

Now this has reference not only to the *physical barrier* separating the Jew and the Gentile, it wouldn't be but a little while for the temple to be destroyed once for all in 70 AD, but primarily to the spiritual barrier which God had erected during the time of the Old Covenant. Recall Peter's vision of Acts 10.

Acts 10:9-14, "On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour: And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean."

It is this "barrier" that Christ tore down; which raises the question of, "How?"

Ephesians 2:15, "**Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances;** for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace."

This verse indicates that Christ once and for all fulfilled the Ceremonial and Judicial laws of purity that prohibited the Jew and the Gentile from uniting. Again, it was these laws that kept the Jew separate from the Nations and the Nations separate from the Jew!

Now, when Christ died on the cross, what happened to this "SEPARATION"?

Ephesians 2:15, "Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; **for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace.**"

The word for new, *kainos*, references NOT newness in time, BUT newness in quality. From this I want you to notice a very important point. The "new" person in Christ is not simply a Jew or a Gentile who now happens to be a Christian; he is a NEW CREATURE (2 Corinthians 5:17), and thus now a Christian. EVERY OTHER CHARACTERISTIC (that set them apart as a distinct people) IS "FORMER" (cf. v. 11)!

Ephesians 2:16, "And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby."

Notice, it is not just the Jew and the Gentile that are brought together, BUT that together, they are brought to God through the Cross! And that really is the point here. The Cross is the BASIS for all Unity in the body of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation to each other is inseparable from reconciliation to God. As both are brought to God, they are brought to each other. This is what Caiaphas' prophesied about in John.

John 11:51-52, "And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that **also he should gather together in one the children of God** that were scattered abroad."

The Cross-work of Christ ABOLISHED the division that existed between the Jew and the Gentile by abolishing the division that existed between God and man! And thus we read this:

Ephesians 2:17-18, "And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father."

The "access" used in this passage is related to the concept in ancient times of having access to a king. The access that one had to a king in the ancient world did not carry the idea of an "access in our own right" but of being *granted the right* to come to God with boldness. In the ancient world, it was the Court Official who granted this access.

It is Christ's blood that grants us access. It is through His cross, the child of God is brought into the presence of God and so lives there! All that we do, say, or think is now done, as it were, in the presence of God.¹

This is why disunity in the body of Christ is so awful. Can Christians who have entered into the presence of the same God and yet, IN HIS PRESENCE, continue to be at odds?

It is unthinkable!

Implications of Unity

And with this we are brought to the implications of our passage. It should be obvious that throughout this text, there is a repeated theme: Christ, in His life, death and resurrection

- ESTABLISHED ONE MAN!
- MADE PEACE!
- CREATED ONE BODY!

¹ Compare Ephesians 2:20-21

Now from this we **CONCLUDE** that the unity of the body of Christ is NOT something we create as we choose to live at peace with one another BUT something Christ ESTABLISHED/CREATED when He died on the cross, He Created a Body! And thus, something we as God's people are called to PRESERVE and MAINTAIN.

In reference to our unity in Christ, Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

"It's already there, it's not something you have to drum up; it's not something you have to seek; it's not something you have to chase; it's something you have to hold on to; it's something you have to preserve."²

Unity in the body of Christ is housed not in

- Our will.
- Our volition.
- Our decision to love another in the body.

BUT in the WORK of Christ on the cross by which He Made Us One!

Pax Romana

The peace of Rome was created by Caesar via much effort, labor, and warfare. And it was maintained by the Procurators. In fact, the primary job of the Procurator was oversee the collection of taxes from the region and maintain the Roman peace.

Acts 21:27-32, "And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul."

In this text, notice that the commander acted as he did NOT on account of Paul BUT because it was reported that "all Jerusalem was in confusion." This was a serious report, for at this point this commander was guilty of violating the peace that Caesar had created! And that is exactly the case when it comes to the "peace" Christ died to create!

Every time we sin against a brother or sister and thus compromise the peace of the body, WE SIN AGAINST THE UNITY OF THE BODY THAT CHRIST DIED TO CREATE. Every time we allow a brother or sister to be at odds with us- even though we are in the right- WE SIN AGAINST UNITY OF THE BODY CHRIST DIED TO CREATE. Every time we

² Dr. John MacArthur, quoted from his sermon on Unity, Ephesians 4:3

- Harbor a grudge against a sister in the Lord.
- Fail to think the best about our brother in Christ.
- Compromise the Fellowship that should exist in the Body on account of what someone did or said.

WE SIN AGAINST THE UNITY OF THE BODY CHRIST DIED TO CREATE, even if we are in the right! In the words of Paul:

1 Corinthians 6:7, "Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?"

In fact, we read in Scripture regarding our responsibility as it relates to the unity of the Body:³

Matthew 5:23-24: "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."

Amazing! Even if a brother or sister has something *against ME*, I SIN if I allow the unity of the Body to be comprised. Truly, our call in the body of Christ is to labor to maintain the unity of the body!

Now let us be careful not to misunderstand the implication here. While modern evangelicalism, of which we are apart, might be tempted to separate unity from doctrine, the truth is that unity and truth are not exclusive, but are bed fellows.

Recall the Corinthians.

- They were blessed with so many spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 12-14.
- Had some of the greatest teachers in their day- Paul, Apollos, 1 Corinthians 3.
- Had and enjoyed the freedom that Christ granted, 1 Corinthians 6:12-13.
- Were genuinely committed to serving the Lord such that they were willing to forgo marriage or physical relations with their spouses in order to serve Christ, 1 Corinthians 7.

And yet, nevertheless they were in complete discord and rebellion against each other.

- Some were of Paul, 1 Corinthians 3:4.
- Some were of Apollos, 1 Corinthians 3:4.
- They had excised the poor at their love feasts, 1 Corinthians 11:21-22.

In fact Paul said, "For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you..." (1 Corinthians 11:18).

What was the solution? Was it to throw away their divisive doctrine and just learn to love one another? Was it to ignore truth so that peace might reign?

NO! It was to grow in their knowledge of the truth!

³ Other passages that could be referenced here are Hebrews 12:14; 1 Corinthians 14:31-33; James 3:13-18.

1 Corinthians 1:10-11, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the **same mind** and in the **same judgment**. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you."

Brothers and sisters, don't miss it! Peace/Unity is not at odds with truth! When two brothers in the Lord are at odds when it comes to their profession of truth an outward unity may exist in that they are cordial and the like, but Biblical Unity *ALREADY* has been compromised!

2 Thessalonians 3:6, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition [the doctrine] which he received of us."

See, error in our understanding and profession of the truth will spread like gangrene in the body of Christ. And thus, rather than putting up with the "brother" who continually leads a life not according to sound doctrine, we are called to stay away from them.⁴

Philippians 1:27, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in **one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.**"

Unity and truth are not at odds but are intimately related! Truly as a people of God, it is our call to labor and strive at maintaining the unity of this body which will require a certain amount of commitment from each one of us. We must realize that to be mistreated by man is of little consequence. Our greatest concern must be Christ! Our salvation in Christ is most important, the praises of men; immaterial.

- We must be committed to rejoicing in God's acceptance of us, rather than in the praises of men.⁵ In essence, do we need man's praise?
- We must be committed to the glory and honor of God.⁶ When we harbor a grudge against a member of the body of Christ, we dishonor God.
- And we personally must be committed to an unwavering faith in God.⁷ When we are sinned against, unity will only be maintained as we "entrust our souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right."
- We must be committed to the growth of the gospel in each other.⁸ We must be committed to love.⁹

If Bethel Presbyterian Church is going to be a place in which God richly dwells, we must love Him enough to preserve the bond of Peace which He died to create!

⁴ Compare also Titus 3:10-11

⁵ Compare 2 Corinthians 3:1, 4-5

⁶ Compare 1 Corinthians 6:4-7

⁷ Compare 1 Peter 4:15-19

⁸ Compare 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

⁹ Compare 1 Corinthians 13:5

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 18, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.