

Our Lord's Vision For the Church

by Mark Jarvinen

*²⁰"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that 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. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ 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. ²⁴"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. ²⁵"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (**John 17:20-26**).*

This text is the finale of **Jesus' High Priestly Prayer** in John's Gospel. In these verses Jesus prays for the church down through the ages, setting forth His vision for its future. In v. **20** Jesus says, "***My prayer is not for them alone (the eleven disciples). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,...***" We should see ourselves included in this prayer. In fact, every believer from the day of Pentecost (the birthday of the church) to the day of Jesus' coming again is included in this prayer of our Lord. **And what is the basis of our inclusion? Faith in Jesus**, gifted first to those who believed through the proclamation of the Gospel, by Jesus' own disciples, then passed on to successive generations. That places us in the company of names like **Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley** and a host of other great saints of the past.

Strictly speaking, we're not members of a church by filling out a form, meeting with the elders, and being voted in by the congregation. Nor is membership in the "true church" brought about only by the externals of regular church attendance, taking communion, or going through confirmation exercises. There is only one way to truly become a member of the church universal from God's point of view – i.e. **through a living faith in Jesus Christ**. Somewhere along the way, another individual or church group obeyed the Great Commission of Jesus and shared the gospel with you, and you believed – thus making you part of the answer to this prayer of our Lord.

This final portion of Jesus' prayer in **John 17** sets forth **two great requests**. First, in **v. 21** - "**that they may all be one,**" and the second, in **v. 24** - "**...that they also, ... may be with me where I am, to behold my glory ...**" The first request is for the **unity** of the church, the second is for the **destiny** of the church.

I. CHRIST ENVISIONS THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH. (VV. 21-23).

Three times Jesus prays for unity in the church.

V. 21 - "that all of them may be one.

V. 22 – "that they may be one as we are one (referencing the unity of Jesus and the Father).

V. 23 – "May they be brought to complete unity ..."

A. What is Unity?

In each of the above three verses, the unity that Jesus prays for among believers is to be like the unity He shares with the Father.

Notice v. 21 – ***“just as you are in me and I am in you.”***

Then in v. 22 – ***“that they may be one as we are one.”***

And finally v. 23 – ***“I in them and you in me.”***

Jesus teaches here that only because unity exists between He and the Father, is unity among fellow believers even possible. Look again at Jesus' words in v. 23 – ***“I in them and you in me.”*** We're part of the ***“them”*** referred to here. We're connected in what is called a ***“mystical union”*** with Jesus. He's in us in the same kind of mystical bond that unites He and the Father. We don't often speak of our salvation in terms of being united with Christ. It seems we most often speak in terms of having received the forgiveness of sins or possessing eternal life or having been justified, or sanctified. All are correct terms, but tend to describe different facets of salvation. But union with Christ, to be in Him or for Him to be in us, is really the **essence** of salvation. There's a **deep connection** at the spiritual level between Christ and the believer. This same type of deep spiritual connection is the bond that fellow believers share with one another. In **Ephesians 1:5**, the apostle Paul says that the Father ***“predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ,”*** In earthly adoption, not only does the adoptee receive new parents, in some cases he or she receives new brothers and sisters as well. It's the same concept at work in reference to the Church. In Christ, God is truly our Father in a family sense. Our fellow Christians become our **new brothers and sisters**. Taking this one step further, just as a child is not usually allowed to choose his family in real life, neither is that choice granted in the body of Christ. Our unity in the church is something objective, declared by God, and not something we choose on the basis of common preferences or cultural

similarities. In a previous congregation, as part of a Missions Conference, we sponsored an **international dinner**, during which we watched our Chadian partner in missions, **Pastor Abel and his wife Louisa**, express their thanks to us on video tape for our support in their ministry to the Muslims in Northern Chad. I found myself rejoicing in the bond of unity we shared with the Abels, even though we had never met them personally. God declared our unity through our common faith in Christ and in that moment, separated by thousands of miles, we were one in Christ and partners in mission.

Along similar lines, theologian **Merrill Tenney** once stated:

“Within the church of historic Christianity there have been wide divergences of opinion and ritual. Unity, however, prevails wherever there is a deep and genuine experience of Christ; for the fellowship of the new birth transcends all historical and denominational boundaries. Paul of Tarsus, Luther of Germany, Wesley of England, and Moody of America would find deep unity with each other, though they were widely separated by time, by space, by nationality, by educational background, and by ecclesiastical connections.”

What makes this kind of unity possible? Recognizing our common bond through faith in Christ is the starting place. But beyond that, it involves **an intentional commitment to major in the majors, refusing to major in the minors.** **What do I mean by that?** Simply that as **v. 20** teaches, we recognize that our unity hinges on **a common faith in the message of the apostles.** This includes the primary doctrines of Scripture concerning the Trinity (One God in three persons) and the work of Christ in his sinless life, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection, for our salvation. Also included as an indispensable truth is the fact that only through faith is

Christ's righteousness, imputed to us as a gift of grace – not faith and works or faith and ritual.

Where there is no agreement over these primary issues, there is no unity. But most often these doctrinal issues are not the issues that divide Christians. Most divisions occur over secondary issues – sometimes issues as minor as the color of carpet chosen by the church, or the length of ceremonial candles. I heard recently that **in the year 1900 there were approximately 2,000 different denominations in Christianity. In 1980, however, there were 22,000.** Just think, for 2,000 to 22,000 in a span of 80 years. That sounds like a lot of majoring on the minors to me. Someone has said, and I'm afraid rightly so, that **11:00 AM on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the week.** Fundamentally, it's pride, prejudice, and a major dose of self-righteousness that separate most Christians, and with tragic results. **Verse 21** says, ***“May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*** And **v. 23**, says, ***“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me”*** In other words, world evangelization is hindered to the extent that the church of Jesus Christ does not experience and model ***“the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*** (Ephesians 4:3) A saying that is most often attributed to **St. Augustine**, in the early 5th century, that has come to be very meaningful to me in terms of preserving unity in the body of Christ is: **“In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.”**

II. CHRIST ENVISIONS THE DESTINY OF THE CHURCH. (VV. 24-26).

In v. 24, Jesus prays: ***“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory,....”*** This is Jesus’ heartfelt desire for all believers, that we may be with Him in glory. What a magnificent basis this provides for the believers hope of heaven – the fact that Jesus wants us to be with Him in order to enjoy His eternal splendor. **We don’t know an awful lot about what heaven will be like – but heaven will be heaven only because we will be with Christ. There is something about being in the direct presence of Christ that prompted Paul to say in II Corinthians 5:8-9 – *“We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”*** In other words nothing in this life can compare with the glory of heaven.

Samuel Rutherford was a great Scottish Christian who stood firmly in the face of persecution from the Church of England as they tried to stamp out evangelical faith in Scotland. Gracious and godly, and a great witness to the love of Christ, Rutherford was placed in prison for his testimony. While on his deathbed he was summoned by the king of England to appear in London to answer charges of heresy. Samuel Rutherford sent back a message with the king’s messenger stating: **“Go and tell your master that I have a summons from a Higher Court than the King of England. And ere this message reaches him, I’ll be where few kings or great folk ever come.”** Rutherford’s powerful hope of heaven helped him die without fear in the face of persecution. The hope of heaven can help us face our adversities with courage as well.

Jesus wants us to be with him, but He also wants us to see his glory (v. 24) **What is His glory?** Certainly, His eternal splendor is in view here. But there's got to be more in view than a "**celestial fireworks display.**" **Verse 26** contains a clue, where Jesus says to the Father, "***I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the LOVE you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.***" **It seems that somehow the glory of Christ, i.e. his splendor, must be connected to our realization of God's love for us.** The glory of Jesus is the glory of love, God's love for mankind. After all, isn't that what grips our hearts, changes our lives, forgives our sins, and encourages our spirits? The realization that God loves us as much as He loves Jesus is the revelation of Jesus' glory to us.

Let me close with a quote from **J.I. Packer**, in his book **Knowing God**, which beautifully sums up this thought:

What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it – that He knows me. I am graven on the palms of His hands. I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him because He first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when His care falters. This is momentous knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort ... in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that His love is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion Him about me, in the way I

am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench His determination to bless me.

As Jesus envisioned our destiny in His prayer, He saw heaven for us and the splendor of His glory. But the prelude to heaven begins in the here and now through the revelation of the Father's love for us. Just think, a love that knows even the worst about me and still is not disillusioned. A love that substituted the life of His own precious Son for our lives, so that we might live forever is something special. Jesus envisioned a lot for us when He prayed this prayer. Knowing how the Father feels about the Son, do you think He intends to answer this prayer? Of course, and this prayer is answered incrementally as we seek to live with other believers in the unity the Father has declared for us in Christ, and as we live in Christ's love and latch onto the hope of heaven that is ours because of all He's done. **A-men.**