

Be United With One Another

John 17:11, 20-23

Rev. Brian Bill

March 6-7, 2021

One weekend, a pastor was giving a children's sermon to all the kids in church. A bright-eyed three-year-old girl was listening intently as he explained how God wanted them all to get along and to love one another. She was tracking with her pastor until he said, "*God wants us all to be one.*" The little girl stood up and loudly protested, "*But I don't want to be one. I want to be four!*"

Unfortunately, this girl might be speaking for many of us who don't want to be one either. It's much easier to splinter into four groups, or forty groups, or four hundred groups, or 4,000 different groups. While it's difficult to get an exact count because the number keeps going up, there are thousands of different denominations and religious groups in the United States alone.

Because we're going through a few of the "one another" statements in our sermon series, I decided to write them all out, but ran out of room. This phrase occurs 100 times in the New Testament, making up 59 specific commands. Last weekend, we handed out puzzle pieces to help establish this truth: *God has placed you to live out your purpose in this place for His pleasure.* Today, we'll consider how we can be united with one another.

Let's begin with a brief survey of some verses which speak of the importance of unity.

- Judges 20:11: "***So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one man.***"
- 2 Chronicles 30:12: "***...The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the LORD.***"
- Psalms 133:1: "***Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.***"
- Jeremiah 32:38-39: "***And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.***"

- John 10:16: “*And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*”
- Romans 15:5-6: “*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”
- 1 Corinthians 1:10-11: “*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.*”
- Galatians 3:28: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”
- Philippians 1:27: “*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.*”
- Philippians 2:2: “*Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*”
- 1 Peter 3:8: “*Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.*”

How are you doing in your quest for unity within the community of faith? Would you say Edgewood is united as one person so we can, with one voice, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Are we living together with unity of mind and singleness of heart as we go with the gospel message?

These are tough questions to answer, aren't they? Left to ourselves, we don't automatically drift toward unity. In fact, our default setting is disunity. History is littered with a lack of harmony among humans.

The good news is we're not the first group of believers to display dissonance. Even the disciples, who spent three years with Jesus, demonstrated more discord than accord. James and John caused envy and jealousy when they wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His coming kingdom.

Unbelievably, right after Jesus celebrated His last supper with His followers, while they were still at the table, Luke 22:24 says, “*A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.*” After washing their feet and explaining He was about to offer Himself as their sin substitute, they can only

think about which one of them was the greatest. Their selfishness led to a “*dispute*,” which means, “*strife, faction and dissension*.” More literally it means, “*a love of contention*.” The disciples were divided on the very night Jesus was preparing to deliver His life for them.

In the final moments before His arrest, Jesus could have prayed for His own strength. He could have requested the eleven to support Him. His intercession to the Father could have been filled with a desire to make the disciples better teachers, servants, givers, or leaders. Instead, His prayer was dominated by a single thought – *Jesus wanted them to be a community of unity*.

John 17:1 begins, “*When Jesus had spoken these words, He lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said...*”

- **This is the true “Lord’s Prayer.”** The prayer we commonly refer to as the “Lord’s Prayer” is actually the disciple’s prayer.
- **This is the longest prayer of Jesus.**
- **This prayer is saturated with urgency.** We can hear the agonized intensity as Jesus pleads with His Father to make His followers one. In fact, He pleads for our unity four different times!
- **The word “that” is used 19 times.** This is a purpose clause, often translated as “*so that*,” to indicate Jesus has a purpose behind His prayer. Specifically, He is praying *so that* His followers become united with Him and with each other.
- **This prayer was prayed aloud for the disciples’ benefit.** His followers couldn’t help but be moved and convicted about their disregard for unity as they heard Jesus pour out His heart for harmony to the Father.
- **We need supernatural strength to be united with fellow followers.** If the early Christians struggled to maintain unity, and we do as well, it’s obvious we need God’s help in this area. The very fact Jesus prayed for unity indicates we can’t accomplish this on our own.

I see three themes in His prayer:

<u>Verses 1-5</u>	For Himself...that He may be <i>glorified</i> .
<u>Verses 6-19</u>	For the disciples...to be <i>sanctified</i> .
<u>Verses 20-26</u>	For future followers...to be <i>unified</i> .

Jesus is praying for us to be a community of unity. The reason I put this in the present tense is because of Hebrews 7:25: “...**since He always lives to make intercession for them.**”

Listen to John 17:11: “**And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.**” Jesus knows He is about to leave His believers behind in a bombastic world. He can foresee the upcoming persecution and every temptation they are going to face. He knows how the Deceiver will work to divide His disciples. So, He prays for their unity.

Notice, He refers to God as “**Holy Father,**” indicating His Father is far above the wickedness of the world. The Father’s “**name**” stands for all of His resources, power, and abilities. Jesus is asking the Father to stand guard over those who have put their faith in Him by unleashing His arsenal of protective oversight.

Satan’s strategy throughout church history has been to destroy unity within the body of Christ. If he can attack our oneness, our power will be diffused, we’ll get discouraged, and our message will be destroyed.

This protection Jesus prays for His disciples has a purpose in mind: “**that they may be one, even as we are one.**” In the original this is even more forceful. The meaning is this: “so that they may constantly be one...” or, “that they may keep on being one.”

This request is amplified in verse 20 when Jesus expands His intercession to include you and me: “**I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.**”

Notice, belief comes through the hearing of the message, just as it always has. The disciples were faithful in spreading the word and millions of people have come to Christ in every generation, all over the globe.

Robert McCheyne once said: “*If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me.*” I’d like you to close your eyes and picture Jesus praying for you as I read verses 21-23: “**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.”

This request for oneness is made with increasing intensity in each verse.

In verse 21: *“That they may all be one ...”*

In verse 22: *“...that they may be one even as we are one.”*

And in verse 23: *“...that they may become perfectly one...”*

- Jesus doesn't pray for *uniformity* (for everyone to be the same)
- Jesus doesn't pray for *unanimity* (for absolute agreement of opinion)
- Jesus doesn't pray for *union* (for absolute affiliation)
- Jesus prays for *unity* (oneness of heart, faith, and purpose)

Let's ponder five principles from this prayer.

1. The parameters of oneness include all believers (21a). Jesus doesn't want us just to get along with a few people, but *“that they may all be one.”* His prayer is much deeper than *“us four and no more.”* True believers in Christ are one, no matter what name is on the church sign. We're redeemed by the same blood and going to the same Heaven. That means we share a common unity or comm-unity, with believers in the past, in the present, and in the future, here in our community and all the continents.

Before I baptize someone, I often say something like this: *“Imagine all those who have been baptized since the time of Christ. You are standing in a long line of obedient followers. Now, imagine all those who are getting baptized this same weekend, all over the globe. You are standing with obedient followers right now.”* BTW, our next baptism services are March 13-14.

Let me add some cautions:

- **Abandon extreme separatism.** Some believers refuse to acknowledge there are true Christians in other churches. Some groups criticize and label people just because they don't hold to the identical outward standards as they do.
- **Avoid ecumenical sloppiness.** The push for ecumenical uniformity among churches should also be avoided. There *are* doctrinal differences and

biblical distinctions which must be maintained. Earlier in this same prayer, in verse 17, Jesus linked sanctification with the truth of the Word of God: ***“Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth.”***

Truth alone must determine our alignments. Frankly, we are not all headed in the same direction and we do not serve the same God. Only those who are born again are our brothers and sisters in the faith. Sadly, many churches have pursued “ecumenical union” at the expense of biblical truth.

In the 1970s, the struggle was for biblical inerrancy while today the debate seems to more centered on the authority of Scripture. Will we hold to the authority of Scripture as it relates to biblical creationism, gender, sexuality, the definition of marriage, and the exclusivity of Christ? What will we do when “cancel culture” leads to the canceling of Christians because we believe the Bible?

In a recent debate in congress about the Equality Act, one brave congressman read from the Bible. In response, another congressman made this unsettling statement: *“What any religious tradition describes as God’s will is no concern of this Congress.”*

On a related note, Josh Mulvihill tweeted this statement: *“Many young people are not on a truth quest, but a happiness quest. We must convince young people that they will be happiest when they live according to God’s truth found in the Bible. Happiness is found in holiness, not apart from it.”*

- **Unity doesn’t mean uniformity.** I quote Augustine again: *“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”* It’s possible to be diverse and yet not divided. As we learned last weekend, we’re all distinct pieces of the puzzle, and our variety is valuable. We have different gifts, abilities, personalities, thoughts, and opinions. We’re not called to be the “same,” we’re called to be one. We can have harmony even though we’re not homogeneous. Don’t expect everyone to be exactly like you and to think the way you think. It’s impossible within a diverse church.

Jesus is praying for us to be a community of unity.

2. The pattern for oneness is linked to the unity within the Trinity (11, 21c, 22). In verse 11, Jesus prays for His disciples to experience the oneness which exists in His relationship with the Father. In verse 21, He prays, ***“that they also***

may be in us...” And, in verse 22: “...*that they may be one even as we are one.*” The unity Christ prays for us is so intimate, so personal, and so vital that it is patterned after, and based upon, the relationships which exist in the Godhead.

Ephesians 4:4-6 captures how this truth is tied to the Trinity: “*There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call --one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*”

3. The purpose of oneness is to accelerate evangelism (21b, 23). Look at the last part of verse 21: “...*so that the world may believe...*” and verse 23: “...*so that the world my know that you sent me...*” Notice we’re not just to enjoy unity for our own sakes because ultimately our oneness is designed to accelerate evangelism. When unity is fractured within a church, or between churches, the bridge between believers and the world is effectively blown up. A divided Christian community denies by its behavior, the message it proclaims.

One who is seeking truth is attracted to the oneness and harmony in churches. When unity is absent, they can smell it and will be turned off. I’m convinced that dissension and disunity have hindered more revivals than we can even imagine. Lost people are not looking to be part of another organization which is fighting among themselves. When a future believer looks at followers who are launching verbal grenades at each other, he or she may say, “*If they can’t even agree on the truth among themselves, how could they possibly teach me the truth?*”

One example of how unity among believers led to evangelism happened this past month when 16 gospel-preaching churches participated in Moody Radio’s initiative to bless 2,000 healthcare heroes in our community. Edgewood contributed over 1,300 of the 3,400 thank you cards that came in. These notes were put into bags with a Chick-fil-A sandwich gift card and the gospel book, Anchor for the Soul.

Jesus is praying for us to be a community of unity.

4. The practice of oneness puts God’s reputation on display to the world (22). Verse 22 says we have been given the glory which was given to Christ: “*The glory that you have given me I have given to them...*” The word “**glory**” means, “*weighty*” and represents the visible manifestation of all of God’s attributes. Literally, Jesus is saying, “*And I the glory.*” The glory God the Father gave to Jesus has been given to us! Now that’s weighty!

Brothers and sisters, when we are united, the world will stand up and take notice of God because they will see Him glorified in us. Matthew 5:16: ***“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”*** Oneness gives credence to our claims. Specifically, according to John 17:23, the world will know two things:

- **God’s Mission:** *He sent His Son to be Savior of the world.* The world will not believe the Father sent the Son until we demonstrate spiritual oneness.
- **God’s Message:** *God loves Christ-followers as much as He loves Jesus.* People will be attracted to the love of God when they see it manifested in our lives and in our church.

This means when I violate true Christian unity, I am hindering the gospel and ruining God’s reputation. His mission and His message get lost in a cacophony of discordant sounds when we are disgruntled with fellow followers of Christ.

Have you ever wondered whether Jesus’ prayer has been answered? Actually, the first church in Jerusalem exhibited extravagant oneness according to Acts 4:32: ***Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.*** This unity had an eternal impact on the lives of the lost because according to Acts 2:47, people were becoming Christians every day: ***“And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”***

5. The point of oneness is for us to be absolutely united. Listen again to verse 23: ***“I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one...”*** The word “perfectly” derives from a root which conveys the idea of “end” or “aim” and has the idea of “maturity and completeness.” The aim of Jesus’ prayer is for us to be perfectly one. A mark of a mature disciple is absolute oneness. Our unity with Christ and our submission to Him should give us a spirit of humility and sweet harmony with other Christ followers.

Jesus is praying for us to be a community of unity.

Steps to Unity

Several years ago, I came across a website called, “One Prayer.” I’ve never forgotten their purpose statement: *“We pray to Jesus asking Him to answer our prayers...what if we became the answer to His?”* Let’s bring this closer to home:

“How can I be an answer to Jesus’ prayer by fostering unity within the community at Edgewood?”

1. Be a grower. 2 Peter 3:18 says, **“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”** Have you heard the phrase, *“absence makes the heart grow fonder?”* While that might be true in human relationships, in our relationship with God, absence makes the heart *wander*. When we wander, we often go to war with others. Distance from God can cause discord with others. When you’re out of whack with God, you can end up taking a whack at others. Are you growing in your walk with Christ? If you find yourself out of sync with someone, ask yourself some honest questions: *“Am I walking with Christ? Is there any sin I need to confess? Am I too full of myself or am I fully surrendered to Christ right now?”*

2. Be a peacemaker. Instead of judging, gossiping, or slandering others, practice being a peacemaker. Someone has said, *“A gossip is just a fool with a keen sense of rumor.”* Proverbs 11:13: **“A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.”** Remember this rule about gossip: *“The more interesting it is, the more likely it is to be false.”* Proverbs 6:19 says among the things the Lord hates is the **“one who sows discord among brothers.”** Stop being abrasive and cut others some slack. Let’s stop looking down on those who sin differently than we do.

The Bible calls us to be peacemakers instead of peace-fakers or peace-breakers. Whether you’ve been wronged by another believer, or you’ve been the one who has done wrong, the Bible says you’re to go and meet face-to-face and seek reconciliation (see Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17). We’re to initiate reconciliation whether it’s our fault or not. If someone has a grudge against you, follow God’s nudge and do what you can to make it right. If you have something against someone, go and meet with him or her. Don’t fall for Satan’s schemes; be an answer to the prayer of Jesus.

Are you filled with bitterness because you’ve refused to forgive someone for something they’ve done or said to you? It’s time to repair your relationships, whether they’re in your home or in the house of God. Keep short accounts with people. Be like the young child who was overheard reciting the prayer given to the disciples: *“And forgive us our trash passes, as we forgive those who have passed trash against us.”* Are you passing around any trash? Get rid of it before it starts to stink.

Romans 12:18 doesn't allow us to be nonchalant about unity: ***“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”*** In that ruptured relationship you're thinking about right now, have you done everything possible, as far as it depends on you, to deal with the discord, or are you being too passive?

3. Be a uniter. Ephesians 4:3 says: ***“Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*** The NASB is a bit stronger: ***“Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*** What one thing can you do this week to maintain the unity of the Spirit?

Thomas Brooks, a Puritan preacher, once said, *“Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous.”*

Are you willing to be an answer to Jesus' prayer today? The *Navigators*, a Christ-centered ministry devoted to discipleship, has developed a relational covenant they require of all their staff members. I'm going to read it and then I'll ask you to read it quietly in the hopes you'll make this covenant your own.

We personally and corporately agree and commit to:

- 1. Pursue reconciliation and, when possible, resolution in all interpersonal conflicts.*
- 2. Talk directly to those with whom we experience conflict rather than talking about them to others.*
- 3. Be edifying in our discussions about others.*
- 4. Hold each other accountable when we violate this commitment.*

A week ago, I painted our back room while listening to an audio book called, “Into the Wild” by Jon Krakauer. This book chronicles the tragic story of Christopher McCandless and his quest for purpose and meaning in life. After refusing to forgive his parents, his bitterness put down an ugly root in his life. Shortly after graduating college with honors, he gave all his money away and began traveling throughout the United States. Eventually, he made it to Alaska where he settled in an abandoned bus in the remote wilderness. At first, he seemed to enjoy the isolation but after a few months he experienced acute loneliness.

After accidentally ingesting some poisonous berries, he wrote these words in the margin of *Doctor Zhivago*, the last book he would ever read: *“Happiness only real when shared.”* He died unhappy, isolated, and alone. He scribbled these final

words next to this sentence from the book: *“And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that all unshared happiness is not happiness...and this was the most vexing of all.”*

God wants us to be one, but not alone because we are one, not four. *Jesus is praying for us to be a community of unity.*

Closing Prayer

Communion

We’re going to demonstrate our “common-unity” by celebrating communion right now. Listen to Luke 22:19-20 – *“And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*

Did you catch the language of substitutionary sacrifice? *“This is my body, which is given **FOR YOU**...This cup that is poured out **FOR YOU** is the new covenant in my blood.”*

The Savior died in your place, as your substitute. That means He died for you... instead of you...in your place in order to purchase you for His own purposes!

The bread and the cup remind us that the Lamb of God sacrificed Himself as payment for sinners, fully satisfying God’s justice. He poured out His life so our sins can be pardoned. He did for all in order to make us one.

Before we receive communion it’s important to reflect and take a spiritual inventory. 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”*

- **Consider your relationship with God**
- **Confess any sins that God brings to mind**
- **Commit afresh to the Great Commission**

We practice open communion here. You don’t need to be a member of Edgewood to participate, but you do need to be born again.

Directions for Opening Cup

1. Hold the cup with one hand and with the other find the clear tab and pull gently to open in order to take the bread → Take bread
2. Continue to hold the cup and now find the foil tab and pull carefully to open the juice cup. Be careful while pulling – you don't have to pull it completely off → Take juice