

Series: The Upper Room Discourse

John 17:20-26

Unity that testifies

by Scott Grant

Brilliant music

Saliere, an old man, described for a priest his reaction years earlier upon examining the score for an oboe concerto by Mozart. It made no sense to him. He couldn't see how the music fit together. Then he saw the oboe part "way up above," with a clarinet part taking over. He was awed by its brilliance. All the parts constituted a stunning whole that deeply impacted the man before it was ever even played. So goes a scene from the movie "Amadeus."

God has so arranged individuals in the body of Christ so that they constitute a oneness that impacts the world. This oneness is dependent on God's enabling each of us to know him. God enables us to know him so that we may be united in a manner that testifies to the world regarding Christ.

In John 17, we see the heart of Jesus as he prays to the Father. In the first 19 verses, we see his heart to die for us, share truth with us, pray for us, protect us and set us apart. In 17:20-26, we see his heart that we present a witness of oneness to the world that stems from our relationships with God. It is all based on knowing God.

In verses 20-21, we see the result of knowing God: oneness among believers that witnesses to the world.

The result of knowing God

John 17:20-21:

(20) "I do not ask in behalf of these alone but for those also who believe in me through their word, (21) that they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me."

Up until now, Jesus' prayer has seemingly been for "these alone," or his disciples. Here we see that all along he's been praying the same things for all those who believe in him and will believe in him. The word "but" (*alla*) is emphatic. He is not praying here that people would come to believe in him; his prayer concerns what happens to them after they come to faith. They will come to faith the only way anyone can come to faith - "through their word," that is, the word of the apostles, who are responsible for the New Testament. The word is the gospel, which Jesus gave to them (17:6-8).

The purpose of his including all believers in his prayer is that they may "all be one." This concerns unity, or oneness. Jesus then defines and exemplifies oneness, as evidenced by the words "even as." This oneness is based on and exemplified by the oneness that exists between the Father and the Son, who are "in" each other. How are the Father and the Son "in" each other? First, the word "in" implies intimacy. Jesus used it in connection with his treatment of the spiritual temple in John 14. The Spirit of God would dwell not in the temple but "in" believers (John 14:17, 20), creating intimacy with God. In their relationship, the Father and the Son hold nothing back. It is a deeply intimate and passionate relationship. Second, the relationship between the Father and the Son is one of deference. Each is seeking glory for the other. There is intimacy because each is seeking the other's good.

Believers in Christ are brought into this circle of intimacy, for Jesus prays that believers may be "in us,"

meaning, in the Father and in the Son. As in John 14, we hear echoes of the temple. We are each individual temples in whom God dwells. But all of us together dwell in God and constitute his corporate temple. Jesus' prayer echoes the corporate sense of the temple. Together, in God's house, in the Father and in the Son, we can enjoy intimacy with God and with each other. We, too, can hold nothing back, enjoying deeply intimate and passionate relationships. As with the oneness between the Father and the Son, the oneness that Jesus desires for us is based on other-centeredness. Such humility is what establishes oneness.

But it isn't unity for unity's sake. The temptation when such relationships are established is to horde them. But oneness has a more glorious purpose than simply meeting our relational needs. Jesus says to the Father that it is so that "the world may believe that you sent me." The world is hungering for this kind of belonging, these kinds of passionate relationships. Such oneness among believers testifies powerfully to the world of Jesus' relationship to the Father. Even beyond such earthly relationships, the world is hungering for a oneness with God, which is exemplified by oneness among believers. The church's most significant witness to the world is its oneness, which is based on other-centeredness.

Several years ago I interviewed an 80-year-old man who was selling his liquor store and retiring. A crusty old character, he had run the store for 30 years. Despite his crustiness, he admitted that leaving the store would be hard. Relationships sprung up over the years. He got to know his customers well. He said, "I'm going to miss the good people that I see in here - maybe some of the creeps, too!" If such relationships spring up around a liquor store, what kind of relationships - what kind of unity - can spring up around Jesus Christ?

If such oneness is to develop in the body of Christ, something has to happen in the hearts of its individual members. Oneness happens as individuals know God more deeply and passionately and they thereby abandon their self-oriented patterns of belief. The rest of Jesus' prayer, then, concerns knowing God.

Knowing God through his glory

John 17:22-24:

(22) "And the glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as we are one. (23) I in them and you in me, that they may be completed into one, that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (24) Father, I desire that they may be with me where I am, in order that they may behold what you have given me, my glory, which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world."

"Glory" is the manifestation of God. God's glory, or his presence, dwells in Christ, and Christ gave the glory of God to his disciples. This anticipates the day of Pentecost, when God's presence will fill each of the disciples, just as it filled the physical temple (2 Chronicles 5:14). We in whom God dwells are therefore glorious, because God's glory dwells in us.

God's glory is present in us for the purpose of oneness. The Jews would gather as one to worship at the temple, in which the glory of God was present. David longed for the tabernacle because he wanted to be near God (Psalm 27:4). The glory of God is no longer present in any physical temple, but it is present in each believer, for Jesus has given us God's glory. There is sin in each of us, but there is no sin in God, who dwells in each of us and expresses his glory in each of us. We therefore can see God in each other. We can see something of God in each believer, no matter how difficult that person may be. Although we will be disappointed in each other, both because of others' sin and our own sinful expectations, God nevertheless dwells in each. We don't worship each other, but we do worship the God who dwells in each spiritual temple. The life of each believer, therefore, can tell us something about God. If we want to know and worship God, one of the best ways to do it is to know each other.

Therefore, relationships among individuals in the body of Christ are integral to relationships with God. In order to see God, we need each other. Paul prays in Ephesians 3:18 that his readers would be able to comprehend the depth of Christ's love "with all the saints." With the saints, we can comprehend the depth of Christ's love. Without the saints, we can't comprehend it. Isolation from each other breeds isolation from God.

The Son dwells in us, and the Father dwells in the Son, which means both the Father and the Son dwell in us. This is true because the Holy Spirit, who is from both the Father and the Son, dwells in us (John 14:26, 15:26).

Seeing God in each other enables being, literally, "completed into one." Individual spiritual temples combine to form the corporate temple of God. The church is a temple in progress, so to speak. The work is not finished. As of now we are "being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22). When Christ returns for his own, the work will be done.

The unified temple of God - believers together dwelling in God - has the purpose, once again, of witnessing to the world. Our development toward being completed into one enables the world to know that the Father sent the Son and that, therefore, the Son is the only way to the Father.

Our oneness also enables the world to see that the Father has loved us in the same manner that he has loved the Son. The world can see how much God loves us by virtue of the oneness he gives us: the depth of relationship both with God and each other that everyone longs for.

Jesus expresses the desire that we be with him where he is. It is an amazing thing, simply, that Jesus wants us to be with us. Where is Jesus? He's in the Father (17:21, 23). We too are in the Father, in God's house. As such, we can behold the glory of Jesus - we can behold who he is. And we can worship. Moses asked to behold the glory of the Lord, but he was allowed only partial exposure (Exodus 33:12-23). Today, we are not so limited. What transpired between Moses and today that we are able to behold the glory of God in a way that Moses couldn't? Two things: Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christ died, rose and ascended to the Father, enabling the sending of the Spirit to dwell in each believer. Through the Spirit, then, we can behold the glory of God, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "But we all, with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

It is the Spirit who enables us to see the glory of the Lord - who the Lord is. We are being transformed by the Spirit, and the Spirit is transforming us by showing us the glory of the Lord. We know God through his glory, by seeing and appreciating him for who he is. When people are exposed to the glory of the Lord in scripture, they are transformed (i.e., Isaiah 6). They are humbled. And the transforming effect that has on each individual believer contributes to oneness. Our self-oriented patterns of thought tend to melt away in the presence of the white-hot glory of the Lord.

Of course, our ability to see the glory of the Lord often comes about as our self-centered patterns of thought begin to deteriorate. We are fiercely focused on our self-oriented devices, so much so that we don't see God. But because they are outside God's design, they fail to achieve what we want. They certainly bring us no closer to intimacy with God and each other. When we see these patterns for the sin that they are, and when we see that these patterns fail us, we begin to see God, and other-centered transformation begins. And other-centeredness creates oneness.

Peter, James and John saw the glory of Jesus - who he really is - when he was transfigured before them (Mark 9:2-8). All three synoptic gospels record this event, but John does not. N.T. Wright notes: "John, by contrast, takes us up the mountain and says quietly, 'Look - from here, on a clear day, you can see forever.' 'We beheld his glory, glory as of the Father's only Son.' John does not describe the transfiguration, as the other gospels do; in a sense, John's whole story is about the transfiguration. He invites us to be still and know; to look again into the human face of Jesus of Nazareth, until the awesome knowledge comes over us, wave upon terrifying wave, that we are looking into the human face of the living God."

The Father gave his glory to the Son because he loved him before the foundation of the world. The Father dwells with the Son because he loves him. The fact that he loved him before the foundation of the world speaks of the depth of his love. Glory is given because of love. We too have received the glory of God - his very presence in our lives (verse 22). This has been given to us because Jesus loves us. This love is seen even more clearly in the next two verses.

Knowing God through his love

John 17:25-26:

(25) "O righteous Father, although the world has not known you, yet I have known you; and these have known that you sent me; (26) and I have made your name known to them, and will make it known, that the love wherewith you loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus addresses the Father as "righteous." Earlier he addressed him as "holy" in the context of the disciples' sanctification, which concerns holiness. Here the Father is addressed as righteous in the context of our knowing God. It is God's righteousness, given to us through faith in Christ, that enables us to know God.

The world, which didn't - and doesn't - know the Father is apparently without hope. But Jesus' relationship with the Father, and our recognition of that relationship, means there is hope for the world. The ministry to the world begins with the disciples, the reconstituted and ever-growing temple, the new community of God, and extends out to us.

Jesus says he has made known to us God's name, meaning, he has revealed God: his glory. And he will make it known. He will continue to reveal God through the crucifixion, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, continues to reveal God to us.

In verse 24, the purpose Jesus had in mind was our beholding his glory. Here his purpose is that we may know his love. The glory of God concerns the totality of who he is - all his attributes. His love is one of those attributes. We can behold the glory of God because he loves us. We should never stop at God's love. God's love simply draws us into all of who he is - the totality of his being. God is love, but love is not God. His love by no means exhausts who he is. His love draws us into worship all of him. God can be known in part through his love. God can be known in totality through his glory. But inasmuch as Christ gives the glory of God to us, he gives his love to us as well. God dwells in us. And if he dwells in us, his love dwells in us as well.

The astounding thing about God's love dwelling in us is that it is the same love with which the Father loves the Son. The Father loves us like he loves his own Son.

I had trouble with sprained ankles when I was younger. I had to sit out many a basketball game that I would have died to play in. After sitting out a few games, I deemed myself fit to play, and I had my ankle taped before the game. Near the end of the game, I was tripped up and re-sprained my ankle. The pain was excruciating, and I cried out. I don't remember much of the circumstances that proceeded immediately thereafter. But after the game, as I was applying ice to my ankle, another player told me of my coach's reaction when I went down: "You should have seen him. As soon as you went down he bolted for you on the floor. It was as if his own son was hurt." That impacted me deeply, and I've never forgotten it. The Father loves us like he loves his Son.

That love is so deep that it is described as being "before the foundation of the world" (verse 24). It is eternal love - love beyond measurement. Yet it is love that is as close as anything can get - it is in us. It is in us because Jesus is in us. Again, we hear echoes of the temple - God dwelling in us.

This love overwhelms us. God, through Jesus Christ, shows us his love. This love, as we recognize and appreciate it more and more, humbles us, and brings us into deeper, more passionate relationship with God. The love of God is transforming each of us, who together constitute the spiritual temple that witnesses to the world.

The desperation of the world

Our oneness as followers of Jesus testifies to the world. The people of the world, fragmented by hatred, are desperate for a place of peace - a place where they can know and be known. That place is the temple of

God, the church, the body of Christ. In order to be such a place, all of us individual temples must know God. It is an ever-deepening relationship with God that is transforming us into the other-centered people who foster irresistible oneness. The knowledge of God is manifested to us through his glory - all of who he is - and through his love.

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