

ONE BODY

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we complete our studies of the *Upper Room Discourse*, as we look together at the great prayer with which Jesus concluded his message, particularly as it relates to the whole church down through the ages. In the greatest summit meeting ever held, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are looking down through the intervening ages, laying out the plan and the program by which a world would be reached. The closing part of Jesus' prayer has to do with the church, from Pentecost until his coming again -- every believer who ever lived and ever will live. This is made clear in the words of Jesus in Verse 20:

**"I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word."
{John 17:20 RSV}**

That gathers up all believers here this morning, as well as believers all over the world, who have come to Christ through the word of the apostles. Notice how our Lord indicates here the great fact which has been true throughout the ages -- that there is one holy, catholic church. In the Apostles' Creed, recited every Sunday in many churches, is the phrase, "I believe in ... the holy catholic church ..." Many Protestants have squirmed at that phrase, not realizing that the word *catholic* merely means universal -- one universal, world-wide, holy church -- not two or three, or three hundred fifty, which is the approximate number of denominations in the United States today, but one church. Our Lord recognizes this in his prayer.

This is a church which stretches not only around the world but across the centuries. I do not know if you have ever thought about that, but it has always intrigued me to remember that I am a member of the same body to which the apostles belonged, and Martin Luther, John Wesley, David Livingston, and all the other great saints of the past; that we are as much members one of another as you and I today are members one of another in Christ. The church is one body, one great, catholic church.

And it is entered, as Jesus indicates here, only by one means -- by faith in him -- "those who believe in me." It is so helpful to understand that. You do not join the church by signing a membership form, or by attending regularly, or by going through a baptism or a confirmation. These things have nothing to do with membership in the body of Christ. There is only one way -- by a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus himself. In these words Jesus indicates how available he will be throughout all the course of the church age.

Remember what he said at the close of Matthew's gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" {Matt 28:19a RSV}, "and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age," {Matt 28:20b RSV}. It is this fact which makes possible that personal entrance into the church -- a born-again relationship with the Lord Jesus.

Notice that Jesus says this is based upon the apostolic witness -- "those who believe in me through their word." Many times I find people who attach little importance to the apostles and their writings -- especially the Apostle Paul. Many people are ready to reject Paul outright. In these days of "Women's Liberation," he is commonly regarded as the highest expression of a "male chauvinist pig" because of some of his statements about women. Evidently these statements are not clearly understood, for no one holds women in higher regard than Paul. Nevertheless, there are many who reject the Epistles. But it must be clearly understood, and Jesus underscores it at this point, that these apostles are his chosen messengers, his chosen means of expressing himself to a waiting world. And to reject their witness is to reject him. The only Jesus we know anything about is the Jesus of the apostles.

We are being presented today with many different Jesuses. There is the Jesus of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (how I wonder who you are!), and the Jesus of *Godspell*, and various other presentations -- the Jesus of the

Mormons, the Jesus of the cults, the Jesus of humanism. It is no wonder that people are confused sometimes as to which is the real one. You want to ask, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?" That real Jesus is the Jesus presented by the apostolic writers. They knew him. They were chosen by him to be eyewitnesses who would convey to us the Jesus who really is. It is so important that we grasp this great fact. There is only one historic Jesus, and any deviation from the Jesus of the apostles is an impostor.

In this prayer which Jesus prays we have two great requests for the continuing church. One is found in Verse 21: "that they may all be one," and the other in Verse 24: "Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory ..." One is a prayer for unity, the other is for vision, that the church may see something. This great prayer unquestionably has been and is being answered all through the centuries of the Christian era. And we will see how it is being answered today.

Let's go back now to this request for unity and see what Jesus says in connection with it:

"I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me." {John 17:20-23 RSV}

Three times Jesus prays for the unity of the church. Note the gradual stages of growth:

- In verse 21 he prays, "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."

What is this unity? We hear a great deal these days about the unity of Christians. There is an effort which has been going on for some time now to bring about a union of believers, to unite them in one great worldwide church under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, or some similar organization. We are told that this will at last be the answer to this prayer of Jesus. But I find it impossible to accept that explanation. I do not believe that the church has to wait twenty centuries before the prayer of Jesus is answered, or that the World Council of Churches will accomplish what the Holy Spirit (seemingly) has been unable to do. I believe that the Holy Spirit has been answering this prayer from the very beginning, and when we understand the nature of the unity for which Jesus prayed we will see that the prayer is indeed being answered and has been all along.

What is the nature of that unity? Several things here in this passage give us a clue.

The first is in Verse 21 -- "that they may all be one." What does this "all" mean? If you look back in Verse 20 you will see that he prays, "not ... for these only." Who are "these"? The apostles, the eleven for whom he has been praying in the previous section. He continues, "but also for those" who are to believe in him through the apostolic witness -- the great body of Christians around the world and through the centuries. "These" and "those," he now says, are all to be joined together, "that they may all be one." In other words, the unity of the church is a unity with the apostles. We are to be made one with them. And since the primary task of the apostles was to give us the truth about Jesus, this unity is that of shared truth -- one faith delivered unto the saints, one record about Christ, one set of beliefs about Jesus given by the apostles. Thus the first basis of unity in the body of Christ is the unity of shared truth. We belong to one another.

Ron Ritchie and I were in Bellingham, Washington last May, and were invited to participate in a television panel on the subject of the church. The other two members of the panel were local ministers from the same denomination, a rather liturgically-oriented denomination. These men were disturbed by some of the things we shared about our Body Life services here. I don't think they cared much for the freedom of them, the openness, the absence of formula, the unstructured order, for they said, "We much prefer a more ordered service. We like to go back and feel that we have a tie with the Reformation church. When we go through the Order of Service, we know that we are doing it exactly as the Christians did in the days of the Reformation.

This gives us a sense of security, for it ties us in to the ancient church." I leaned forward and said, "My dear brother, I could not agree with you more. I think it is very important that we be tied to the ancient church. But, you see, we don't stop with the Reformation; we go clear back to the days of the apostles, and are tied in with the early Christians who spread the gospel throughout the world in the 1st century."

This is what Jesus is saying. We are to be tied to the apostles. The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, upon their witness to the historic Jesus. Our Lord goes on to say,

**"that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one."
{John 17:21-22 RSV}**

Here is a different aspect of unity, based upon a glory which the Lord himself will give to the church, just as the Father had given it to him. What is this glory? Have you learned to ask yourself questions like this in your Bible study, and thus discovered the excitement of finding the clues which the Holy Spirit has given? Jesus speaks here of the glory which the Father had given him, which he gave to the church. What is that glory? You only have to look back to Verse 6 to find it: "I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world"; and to Verse 8: "I have given them the words which thou gavest me" -- the name and the words of God -- in other words, the power by which the Lord Jesus acted. He acted always in the Father's name, by the resources of the Father, and according to the directions, the words, of the Father.

Here then is the second level of unity -- not only shared truth, but shared power. The church is one when it operates from the same resource and by the same direction -- by the name and the words of God. This is the glory of the church.

Have you noticed that wherever the church begins to adopt the same means of operating as the world around, it immediately loses its distinctiveness and its power? As soon as we begin to try to accomplish things by organizational techniques, by mobilizing human resources, and by raising funds -- as though money were the only thing which could accomplish what is needed -- the church immediately becomes nothing more than another worldly organization trying to make its impress upon society. But when the church remembers that it has a unique power which is absolutely different than anything else -- the power of the living God in its midst, the name of God -- and that it has the Word of God to direct it, there is a glory in the church which no other organization can possibly rival. It is entirely different. This is what Jesus prays for, that this kind of glory will be visible.

Then the third aspect of unity, Verse 23: "I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one." That is the glory of a shared life. Jesus in us, the Father in him, and thus, in the remarkable words of Peter, we are made "partakers of the divine nature," {2 Pet 1:4}.

Do you believe that? Do you ever think of yourself as linked with the life of God -- so much so that you cannot be known or understood apart from that life? One of the reasons why we Christians are so weak is that we will not really believe these magnificent claims about us which Scripture sets forth. We always think they apply to someone else, to Paul and David and Abraham maybe, but not to us.

But God insists that we are the very ones whom he is talking about, that Jesus is in us, and God the Father is in the Son, and thus the Trinity indwells us by the Spirit, and we are linked with the life of God. The understanding of that is what produces unity among believers. Here is what Jesus is praying -- that we may understand the sharing of truth, the sharing of power, and the sharing of life, and that thus the church may be one.

What is the purpose of this unity? It is a strange kind of unity. What is it all about, and why does it exist? Twice our Lord tells us -- once in Verse 21: "so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me," and again in Verse 23: "so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me." First, that the world may believe something; and, second, that the world may know something:

First, that the world may believe that Jesus has come from God. When the church begins to demonstrate the unity of faith, the unity of shared truth, of shared power, shared life, the world is hit by an inescapable impression that Jesus is Lord, that he indeed holds the key to history and to reality, that he is indeed the revelation of the invisible God.

Now, the world may not accept this. That is another problem. But the purpose of the witness is not to convince everybody, but to give them a basis upon which they may decide. I think it is very important that we understand that the world is not necessarily going to be convinced. Many will be, thank God. Many will understand when they see that Jesus is Lord, and accept him. As Paul said, referring to himself, he was a savor of life unto life to some, and of death unto death to others; but in any case, God was glorified {cf, 2 Cor 2:14-16}. Here our Lord reflects that same idea. Evangelism, you see, is really intended to give everybody a chance to make an intelligent choice as to whether to accept or reject Jesus. It is to present before the world a unity so beautiful that the world will believe that Jesus is Lord. And, further, that they will know that Christians are loved by God as much as Jesus is loved by God. That is an amazing testimony, isn't it? But that is what constitutes the reason for our witness before the world. As John R. Stott has so ably put it,

Our motive must be concern for the glory of God; not the glory of the church or our own glory. Our message must be the gospel of God as given by Christ in his apostles, not the traditions of men or our own opinions. Our manpower must be the whole church of God, every member of it, not a privileged few who want to retain evangelism as their prerogative. And our dynamic must be the Spirit of God, not the power of human personality, organization, or eloquence. Without these priorities we shall be silent when we ought to be vocal.

So I think our Lord's emphasis on unity here is a tremendously helpful guide to our understanding of the process of evangelism and of witness before a waiting world.

In the last section of Jesus' prayer we have a request for the vision of the church:

"Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."
{John 17:24-26 RSV}

Jesus closes his prayer with a great, heartfelt expression of his desire that we may be with him in glory, that all who believe in his name, from the beginning of Pentecost until the end of time, may be with him in his glory. What a magnificent basis for our hope of heaven! And yet, as this makes so clear, heaven is made heaven only because we are with Christ. This is the hope of every believer, that one day we will be with him. As Paul said, "To depart and be with Christ is far better," {cf, 2 Cor 5:8-9}. And in many places Scripture brings that hope before us. The joy of the Christian is that in heaven we behold the glory of Jesus, the face of Jesus, the manifestation of all the glory which is in him.

I never tire of reading about some of the troubles and tribulations of the church in the past. One of my favorite periods is that of the old Scottish Covenanters, who stood strongly against the persecution involved in the Church of England's attempt to stamp out the evangelical faith in Scotland. Among them was that dear old Scottish leader, Samuel Rutherford. He was a gracious, godly man, and a great witness to the love of Jesus Christ. But he was placed in prison for his testimony, and 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: "Go and tell your master that I've a summons from a higher Court. And ere this message reaches him, I'll be where few kings or great folk ever come." Someone has gathered together Samuel Rutherford's letters from prison, in which he speaks of the joy of Jesus as he is with him there in that prison cell. Some of his words have been put into a song, one of my favorite hymns, which speaks of that glory which is to come:

The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of heaven breaks;
The summer morn I've sighed for, the fair, sweet morn awakes;
Dark, dark hath been the midnight, but dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel's land.

O Christ, He is the fountain, the deep sweet well of love!
The streams on earth I've tasted, more deep I'll drink above;
There to an ocean fullness His mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel's land.

It is a great hope! In the Scriptures we are not told a lot about heaven -- just enough to make us want to be there, not enough to make us take our own life to get there. But the hope set forth for us is that we will be with Jesus to behold his glory in answer to this prayer. But we don't have to wait for heaven. There is a sense in which this prayer is being answered right now. I think our Lord intended it this way, for in the Spirit we are able, right now, to behold the glory of Jesus. And it is the vision of that glory, of who Jesus is, which changes us. Paul tells us that we are now seated with Christ in the heavenly places. And in Second Corinthians he says,

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. {2 Cor 3:18 RSV}

So the more we see and behold the glory of Jesus, the more we are being made like him -- even though we may not be aware the change is taking place. Have you experienced that? What is this glory? Our Lord defines it for us, Verse 26: "I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known [I'll continue to make it known throughout the course of the history of the church], that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." The glory of Jesus is the glory of love -- the love of God for man. That is what grips our hearts and changes our lives and makes us different people, forgives our sins, lifts us up again, and encourages our hearts. It is the realization that God indeed loves us as he loved Jesus.

I remember the story of the little boy who entered a Sunday school contest in reciting Bible verses. This little boy happened to be a cripple, a hunchback, who could hardly walk across the stage to recite the verses he had memorized. As he started to hobble across the stage as best he could, with his terribly humped back, an older boy who had come in off the street thoughtlessly cried out, "Hey, crip, take the pack off your back!" The little boy broke down in tears, and couldn't go on. A man came up out of the audience and stood beside him. He said, "I don't know what kind of a person would make fun of a little crippled boy, but I want to tell you who this boy is. He's my son, and he's got more courage than any of you! And I'm proud of him, because he is mine!" And he picked him up in his arms and walked off the stage.

I think of that story often when I read a verse like this which sets forth the love of God for us. We can understand how God could love Jesus -- who wouldn't love him? But it is difficult for us to believe what Jesus says here -- that we are to grasp the fact that in the manifestation of Jesus' life in us, God the Father loves us that same way. In all our hunchbacked, crippled, broken, beaten condition, he stands beside us and says, "I'm proud of him; he's mine!" And he picks us up and carries us on through life. That is the glory which Jesus says we are to behold -- the glory of the love of God for us as individuals.

This past week I was in Michigan at a conference, and I heard a group singing the hymn, *Near the Cross*. My thoughts flashed back to a day in a park in northern Minnesota when I was just a boy fourteen years of age. I had just come to know the Lord Jesus three months before, and the glory of his presence filled my heart. I remember sitting in that park, all alone, singing that song with tears running down my face:

Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain
Free to all -- a healing stream,
Flows from Calvary's mountain.

In the cross, in the cross,
Be my glory ever;
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.

That is what Jesus is saying to us here. There is a hope of glory in the future, and a present availability of that

glory to us now, so that we may manifest a unity of love among ourselves which will cause a waiting world to know -- even though they might not want to admit it -- that Jesus is Lord, and that God loves us just as he loved his Son.

Title: One Body
Series: Secrets of the Spirit
Scripture: John 17:20-26
Message No: 12
Catalog No: 3132
Date: September 2, 1973

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