A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF UNITY

JOHN 17:21

by

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Obviously, John 17:21 records a portion of a prayer in which Jesus requests of the Father that a unity would exist.  Scholars disagree, however, on what actually constitutes the manner in which this unity would find fulfillment.

The grammar of this verse reveals the possibility of the fulfillment of unity.  There are many possibilities as to when the unity might occur.  The grammar simply suggests the high probability of fulfillment.

The context of this verse is of supreme importance and reveals that Jesus asked for this unity in verses 11, 21, 22, and 23.  It is valuable to notice that Jesus is praying not for all of mankind, but for those who believed on Him.  This narrows considerably the ones who form the union.  Furthermore, it seems inconceivable that God's own Son would ask the Father amiss.  If not, then God the Father must have been answering this request beginning with the eleven disciples.

The theology of the Scriptures teaches a balance between separation and fellowship.  It is proper to fellowship within the spiritual family.  But it is also proper to separate oneself from a sinning Christian.  The desire to maintain a doctrinal purity is not sin, and such activity does not counter the prayer that Jesus made for unity.

After gaining an understanding of the grammar, the context, and the theology of the Bible, one must be guided by these guidelines to the proper understanding of the nature of this unity.  This unity must be seen then, not to be organizational but organic.  That is a spiritual union which unites all believers into one body.

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# INTRODUCTION

The ecumenical movement is growing throughout the world.  Christians on every continent are being invited to unite and join forces for the purpose of providing a united front before an unbelieving world.  Consequently, little thought is given to doctrinal compatibility, with the Scriptures being reduced to "essentials" and "nonessentials".  It does appear that the "essentials" are the lowest possible common denominator and yet provide some shadow of meaning beneath the umbrella of Christendom.

The Christian seeking to practice doctrinal purity is challenged by the ecumenist who often cites John 17:21 as sound biblical justification for unity.  This argument was presented to this writer, when he was asked to support a mass-evangelism effort in 1977 in Buffalo, New York.  A quick perusal of John 17:21 seemed to provide biblical support for such a position.  If this is so, then the implications would be many.

One's understanding of this verse will reveal itself in practice by one's fellowship and extent of fellowship.  To put it negatively, this verse will determine one's separation.  It is the pre-supposition of this writer that the Bible does speak clearly and without contradiction on this

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vital matter of unity.

Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to examine John 17:21 to discover the unity that is prayed for by our Lord.

CHAPTER I

VARIOUS VIEWS OF THE UNITY

PRAYED FOR IN JOHN 17:21

It is necessary to examine the four major viewpoints
as to the nature of this unity for which Christ prayed. It
will be important to notice which of these viewpoints can
withstand a proper exegesis. It stands to reason that the
proper understanding of this unity must be supportive by
means of the grammar, the context, and the theology of Scrip-
ture.

Of these four variant views, the first two are less
prevalent, with the last two occupying the bulk of litera-
ture.

## Viewpoint #1: A Unity of Spiritual Interest

The unity of spiritual interest suggests that the
unity of believers is a unity of function. That is, be-
lievers are united in the proclaiming of a redemptive mes-
sage. This position centers upon function, not form; and
therefore structure is not considered.

This nature of the unity is held by David Brown. He
suggests:

> Had our Lord been here speaking of the absolute or essen-
> tial unity of the Father and the Son in the Godhead, He
> could not have prayed that believers might be taken into

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that unity. But we have already seen what He meant by the Father and Himself being 'one thing'. They have <u>all in common</u>, they have one interest - in the Kingdom of Grace, the salvation of sinners, the recovery of Adam's family. Oneness of essence is the manifest basis of this <u>community of interest</u>, as only on that principle would the language be endurable from human lips. But the oneness here meant 'oneness in thought, feeling, purpose, action, interest, property - in the things of salvation.' And it is into this unity that Jesus prays that all believers may be taken up; so as to become one with the Father and the Son <u>spiritually</u>, yet really for all the purposes of salvation and glory. (emphasis mine)[1]

## The Strengths of This Viewpoint

This view has two strengths. First, this allows the purpose of the unity to find fulfillment. The expressed purpose is found to be the believing upon Christ. If the Christian's unity is to focus upon an evangelistic message, the common interest, then the purpose of this belief is made possible. Second, this unity is stated to be composed of believers alone. This fits in with the contextual understanding of John 17. Brown writes "but the Spirit of Christ illuminating, transforming, and reigning in the hearts of the genuine disciples of Christ, drawing them to each other as members of one family and prompting them to loving cooperation for the good of the world. . ."[2]

## The Weakness of This Viewpoint

Although the unity of spiritual interest has a couple of strengths, it has weaknesses. It is far too shallow in

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[1]Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, <u>A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments</u> (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., Reprinted, 1978), p. 453.

[2]Ibid, p. 453.

its' interpretation. It does not address the contextual assumption that the Father would answer this request by the Son; it merely presents a function among the believers. It does not present the proper understanding of the unity that exists between the Father and the Son. The "one thing" that is common between Father and Son is not the recovery of "Adam's Family." Though it is part of God's redemptive plan it is not the central principle that causes God to move, as Brown believes. The main principle that causes God to action is the glorification of Himself.

This is the major problem with this interpretation, that it is based upon a problematic assumption that the "oneness that exists between the Father and the Son is an interest in evangelism. Therefore, this understanding is an improper interpretation of the nature of unity which Christ prayed.

## Viewpoint #2: Ethical Unity

The prayer by the Lord Jesus in John 17 represents a plea for the ethical likeness of all believers. H.A.W. Meyer states:

> Jesus now also includes all who shall believe on Him, through the apostle's word. The purpose for which He also includes these: that all may be one (ethically, in likeness of disposition, of love, of endeavor, as the ground of faith.) This ethical unity of all believers, to be specifically Christian must correspond as to its original type to the reciprocal fellowship between the Father and the Son.[1]

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[1]Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament, vol.3, trans. by William Urwick (Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 470.

### The Strength of This Viewpoint

This view has only one main strength.  That is that
in any ethical unity there must consist only believers.  This
view understands the generations for whom Christ prays.  The
Lord prayed for two groups of Christians.  This prayer is not
for mankind in general.  The Father and the Son share a unity
of being, and therefore have the same ethical qualities.
Christ is praying for a similar unity of being, and not just
for a moral likeness of all believers.

### The Weakness of This Viewpoint

Having revealed the strength of this position it
must be recognized that this view has serious problems.
First, it must be mentioned that a carnal church could
thwart the prayer of Christ.  Stauffer, while holding to
this position, properly points this out:

> The church is the new humanity whose author is Christ.
> It is the καινὸς ἄνθρωπος (Eph 2:15).  The new
> situation of the world created by the unique Christ
> event is a positive reality in this eon only in the
> form of the church.  Like every divine reality, how-
> ever, it is attained in the church only to the degree
> that the church takes this reality seriously in faith,
> thought, action. (emphasis mine)[1]

This position is in error because it is not based
upon a proper understanding that the Father is answering the
request and not the Christian.  Ernest Pickering notes this
when he writes:

> The Lord's prayer is not for something we should do, but
> expressing something He has done!  He is addressing the
> Father and requesting Him to keep His people within the

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[1]TDNT, s.v. "εἰς," by Ethelbert Stauffer, 2:434.

unity He has created (vv 11,21,23).[1]

Second, this view fails to address the essential need for such a prayer. Since the Christian receives a new nature at salvation, this ethical or moral likeness to God would have become a reality within the realms of progressive sanctification. It is true that no Christian ever became pure here on earth through progressive sanctification, as is evidenced by Paul's writings. Yet, this position deals with the fruit of salvation and not the root. This is a serious problem, and in fact nullifies even the need for Jesus to pray such a prayer.

These two shortcomings are sufficient to consider this view improbable.

### Viewpoint #3: Organizational Unity

This view presents Jesus praying for the external unification of Christendom through organization and super-structure. Proponents of this viewpoint include Billy Graham,[2] Donald Grey Barnhouse,[3] Nelson Bell,[4] Donald Bloesch,[5]

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[1]Ernest Pickering, Biblical Separation (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), p. 203.

[2]Billy Graham, "Billy Graham on Separation" Eternity 9 (November 1958):17.

[3]Donald Grey Barnhouse, "We Are One Body in Christ" Eternity 8 (March 1957):4-5.

[4]Nelson Bell, "On Separation" Christianity Today 16 (October 8, 1971):26.

[5]Donald Bloesch, "Burying the Gospel" Christianity Today 16 (October 8, 1971):12-14.

Klaas Runia,[1] and George Eldon Ladd.[2]

Billy Graham states his understanding of the Lord's prayer as follows:

> In the prayer that our Lord offered in John 17, He says, 'that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us.' It is clear that Christ means visible unity such as can be seen by the world. (emphasis mine)[3]

This visible unity is thus thought of as the great goal of the church. It would then appear that visible division must be thought of as sin. Donald Barnhouse states:

> The problem of the lack of oneness among believers is the greatest problem in Christendom today. Beyond question, the church is divided; and, in the clear light of scripture, such a condition is scandalous.[4]

Furthermore, Donald Barnhouse is not content with identifying separatists, that is nonvisible-unity-proponents, as sinners; but continues in paralleling them to the scribes and the pharisees that Jesus rebuked. He states:

> The purpose of this present article is to discuss the danger of scribism and pharisaism in our own century. . . If I believe that God has truly saved a man I must seek to be as close to him as he will let me be. I recognize that there are some who will not allow us to get close to them. Whatever members of the Roman Catholic Church are members of the true body of Christ are usually so blinded by their ecclesiastical polity that they will have no Christian fellowship with any who are not in

[1]Klaas Runia, "When Is Separation a Christian Duty?" Christianity Today 11 2 parts (June 23, 1967):3-5 and (July 7, 1967):7-8.

[2]George Eldon Ladd, "Doctrinal Purity vs. Visible Unity" Eternity 13 (June 1962):7-9.

[3]Billy Graham, "Billy Graham on Separation," Eternity 9 (November 1958):17.

[4]Donald Grey Barnhouse, "We Are One Body in Christ," Eternity 8 (March 1957):5.

their rut of submission to the Pope. The blame for broken fellowship, therefore, lies upon them.[1]

## The Strength of This Viewpoint

The strength of this view is the grammatical possibility found in the use of the subjunctives. By the church having to realize this unity of organization itself, the possibility of failure could occur, or the unity may be still future. This alone represents the strength of this position.

It must also be mentioned that this position attempts to bring visible unity to the body of Christ, the church, which seems to be fragmented so often. Christians must attempt to live at peace with all men, especially with those who would call themselves Christians. The ones who hold to the organizational unity position may be commended for their zeal to bring fellow Christians together. However, John 17: 21 does not teach that the unity for which Christ prayed is to be organizational.

## The Weakness of This Viewpoint

The unity of organization has many serious problems, which center upon the contextual consideration. It will be noted from the context that it is the Father who will answer the Son's request--not the Christian. If there is to be a "oneness", this "oneness" must come from the Father. Assuming that Christ would not ask amiss, the Father must

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[1]Barnhouse, "Twentieth Century Pharisaism," Eternity 8 (August 1957):7.

have begun answering with the unity.  But where is the visible manifestation of unity that should saturate church history?  It is conspicuously absent.  Nor can this unity have yet a future fulfillment because Christ prayed for His disciples to have this unity.  This unity began with them and the manifestation of this unity is clearly seen in the early chapters of the book of Acts.

Furthermore, since this prayer of Christ's was to include two groups, those with Christ then and those who would believe through their word, it is impossible to unite them into one visible manifestation.  Either this viewpoint is in error, or the contextual understanding presented in chapter two of this thesis is wrong.

A third difficulty with this position is that doctrinal differences in the desire to establish a visible unity may be minimized.  Alva McClain, addressing the issue of dialogue in "oneness", states:

> Does Dr. Vernon Grounds really think that we might profitably engage in an exchange of ideas with blasphemers who suggest that our only Lord and Master was begotten in the womb of a fallen mother by a German mercenary and that the God of the Old Testament is a dirty bully?  Basically, the problem here is ethical rather than theological.[1]

John Whitcomb opposes this viewpoint of organizational unity and clearly sees the fact that truth is what is being sacrificed.  He writes:

> A basic element of the perfect spiritual unity exists between Christ and the Father as that of truth.  Our Lord

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[1]Alva J. McClain, "Is Theology Changing in The Conservative Camp?" The Brethren Missionary Herald 19 (February 23, 1957):124.

prayed: 'sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy Word is truth' (v. 17). But it is highly significant that truth is the one element that is being sacrificed today for the sake of 'unity', even among those who profess to be true believers.[1]

It is the proper understanding of the context that causes this viewpoint its greatest difficulties. This unity for which Jesus prayed is to be answered by the Father, among believers who are set apart in the truth. Martin Lloyd-Jones is correct when he asserts that the context of John 17 supports the fact that Christ was only praying for believers, not even all of "Christendom", but those who "have kept Thy Word" (v. 6). Furthermore, He prays for those who "knew of a truth that I came forth from Thee" (v. 8), and "for them which Thou has given me." Also, Lloyd-Jones suggests that the context of John 17 never encourages believers to seek an organizational union.[2]

It is the contextual consideration that eliminates this viewpoint as the possible understanding of the nature of the unity that Christ prayed. In fact, both the unity of spiritual interest and the ethical unity have greater evidence supporting their viewpoints then does the organizational unity view.

## Summary

Chapter one dealt with three understandings of the

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[1]John C. Whitcomb, "Christ's Prayer For Unity," The Brethren Missionary Herald 26 (March 21, 1964):138.

[2]Martin Lloyd-Jones, The Basis of Christian Unity (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1967), p. 41.

nature of the unity for which Christ prayed. They have been examined and each of the three viewpoints has not sufficiently endured careful analysis.

The proper viewpoint must successfully pass through grammatical consideration, the contextual consideration, and the theological consideration. There remains but one viewpoint to be considered and this position will be dealt with in chapter three.

# CHAPTER II

## NECESSARY BACKGROUND

It is imperative when considering the nature of the unity mentioned in John 17:21 to examine the text, the context, and the whole text of the Scriptures to ascertain the biblical teaching upon the subject at hand. This will insure a proper understanding of John 17:21. Ramm puts it this way: "The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passage of Scripture."[1]

This is possible because the Scriptures contain a system of truth that is non-contradictory. That is, the Bible speaks with one voice. This is important to remember when examining difficult sections of Scripture. A good exegesis will incorporate the entire weight of teaching upon the subject. Again it is worthy to note Ramm:

> The basic assumption here is that there is one system of truth or theology contained in Scripture, and therefore all doctrines must cohere or agree with each other. That means the interpretations of specific passages must not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point. This is similar to saying that Scripture interprets Scripture.[2]

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[1]Bernard Ramm, _Protestant Biblical Interpretation_ (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 105.

[2]Ibid., p. 107.

This then will be the approach by this writer in his effort to determine the nature of the unity presented in John 17:21. Three primary considerations must be viewed. First the immediate text will be analyzed. This is the grammatical consideration. Next, the immediate context will be explored. Finally, following contextual consideration, the entire Word of God will be examined for theological consideration.

## The Grammatical Consideration

John 17:21 is an interesting verse in that it contains ἵνα three times along with the subjunctive mood of the verb each occurrence. According to Abbott-Smith, ἵνα "denotes purpose or end."[1] Dana and Mantey agree with this usage adding "its most common occurrence is in purpose or final clauses, and it occurs regularly with the subjunctive mood."[2]

It is therefore not unusual for ἵνα to appear with the subjunctive. In fact, Sproule purports concerning and the subjunctive "a clause containing ἵνα and the subjunctive is used only where a general and theoretical situation is in view, and that ἵνα and the indicative where a specific and actual instance is in view."[3]

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[1]G. Abbott-Smith, _A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament_ (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937), p. 216.

[2]H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, _A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament_ (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1927), p. 248.

[3]John A. Sproule, "Intermediate Greek Notes" (Unpublished class syllabus, Grace Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 63.

It is determined, therefore, that ἵνα is a particle which introduces a dependent clause showing purpose or result. It is also important to note that ἵνα and the subjunctive reflects only a general situation and not a specific occurrence. This usage is theoretical and is not actual.

The word that draws attention to the unity is the word ἕν . This, according to Abbott-Smith, is the "cardinal numeral one, as opposed to many."[1] It is this word that appears twice in this verse, and speaks of singularity either by simplicity--one, or collectively--one group.

## Use of the Subjunctive

John 17:21 has three verbs found in the subjunctive mood. The verbs ὦσιν which appear twice and πιστεύῃ suggest the probability of future action and nothing more. Dana and Mantey indicate:

> The subjunctive is the mood of mild contingency; the mood of probability. While the indicative assumes reality, the subjunctive assumes unreality. It is the first step away from that which is actual in the direction of that which is only conceivable, and therefore, properly leads the list of potential moods.[2]

Therefore, since the subjunctive mood appears in the text the action of these verbs is only probable. However, as it is only probable, the action of the verbs could possibly not occur.

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[1]Abbott-Smith, Greek Lexicon, p. 134.

[2]H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1927), p. 170.

## Grammatical Summary

It is significant that John 17:21 has three ἵνα and subjunctive clauses.  This requires the proper exegesis to state that the verse must be suggesting a general ideal, a possible situation and yet at the time setting of the verse, still an unreality.

At best, this is the most that can be determined from the grammatical analysis of John 17:21.  The unity suggested in this verse may have four logical understandings.

First, the unity has been accomplished since the time setting of John 17.  This would allow the probable action of the verbs to occur.

Second, the unity is currently being accomplished. There is no indication when it will be complete.

Third, the unity will be accomplished sometime in the future.

Fourth, the unity has never occurred and will never occur.  The subjunctive mood would also support this.

Therefore, since only the possibility of the action can be ascertained from the grammar, one must look to the context for further enlightenment as to the time and nature of this unity.

## The Contextual Consideration

By examining the context of John 17 one is able to gain many helpful insights into the nature of the unity that is found in this chapter.  It is important then to make two observations regarding this chapter.

The Nature of John 17

John 17 is the Lord's prayer to the Father.  William Hendriksen writes concerning the prayer of this chapter:

It is unique in the following respects:
A.  Its author is the second person of the Trinity, who has assumed the human nature. (17:5)
B.  It is addressed to Christ's own holy and righteous Father, the first person of the Trinity. (17:1,5,11,21, 24,25)
C.  It does not contain a single confession of sin; rather, the exact opposite.[1]

This is needful to glean the general oversight of this chapter.

The contextual understanding will be helpful in understanding the unity of John 17:21.  The "oneness" that is prayed for is mentioned by the Lord in verses 11, 21, 22, 23.  The Lord is requesting of the Father that this unity become a reality.  It seems inconceivable that God's own Son would ask the Father amiss.  If not, then God the Father must have answered the prayer of His Son, or is yet to answer it.

Verse 11 would support the thought that the Father must have answered this request.  This verse is speaking concerning the Apostles, "those whom thou gavest me I have kept."  Now if there was to be this "oneness" between them then this must have occurred prior to their deaths, and the unity for which Jesus prays must have occurred for them.

But the prayer includes more than the Apostles, therefore a second observation must be examined to determine the nature of the unity.

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[1]William Hendriksen, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids:  Baker Book House, 1954), pp. 347-48.

## Those for Whom Jesus Prayed

It is clear from the context (John 17:9,11,12) that the Lord is not praying for everyone everywhere but for a select group. In this chapter they are known as those who "have kept Thy word" (6), those who "believed that Thou didst send Me" (8), and those "whom Thou has given Me" (9). This is important in determining the proper understanding of the unity prayed for in verse 21. This unity is to occur among those who have received the Gospel message and not among those who are "of the world" (v.9).

Furthermore, not only are those who are prayed for identified as those who have received the Gospel message, but there also seems to be two groups of believers prayed for.

## The Initial Group

The Lord prays in verses 6-19 for the Apostles. William Hendriksen states "He (Jesus) is thinking of all the elect, but here particularly of the disciples who are with him in the Upper Room."[1]

Jesus offers two requests for this first group. First He prays that they would be kept from evil, since He was soon to leave them (v.15). Secondly, Jesus prays that the disciples would be sanctified (v.17). This latter request involved the disciples being set apart for the service of proclaiming the Gospel message.

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[1]William Hendriksen, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), pp. 347-48.

The Subsequent Believers

There is found in verse 20 a second group that is prayed for. Jesus is found requesting "for those also who believe in Me through their Word." This then represents all of those believers who would follow.

Charles Erdman agrees, "having prayed for Himself and His disciples, Jesus now prays for all believers."[1]

This prayer for unity by the Lord can be illuminated by the use of an illustration.

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Jesus is praying to the Father (v.1) for:
    1.  'The men whom Thou gavest Me.' (v.6)
        'that they may be one.' (v.11)
    2.  'For those also who shall believe on Me.' (v.20)
        'that they may be one.' (v.21)
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The Purpose of The Prayer

Jesus prays for the unity of all believers. It is noteworthy to see that this unity would result in others believing in Christ. This could not be a mere organizational union, because history tells of division and difference among Christians while souls are still being saved.

This, then, refers to a spiritual unity which God would use to bring ones to the saving knowledge of Christ.

Contextual Summary

In order to understand the nature of the unity requested by Jesus in John 17:21 it is imperative to locate the verse within the setting of chapter 17. This chapter is the recording of the Lord's prayer for those who have

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[1] Charles R. Erdman, The Gospel of John (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1940), p. 146.

received or will receive the Gospel message. They have be-
lieved or will believe.

These believers are seen within two groups. The ini-
tial group is that of the disciples, and the second group is
made up of subsequent believers. This chapter reveals that
unbelievers are not part of this requested unity.

Therefore, the context of John 17 limits the meaning
of the proposed unity in two ways. First, if there is to be
any unity, this would be brought about by the Father of our
Lord. Since Jesus would never ask amiss then the Father must
have begun answering with unity; and must continue to do so.
Second, this unity is seen to be limited to believers only.

## A Theological Consideration

The final phase of good interpretation involves the
overall teaching of the Scriptures. This will involve three
areas of focus.

### Theological Instruction on Unity in the Old Testament

Israel was to be a unique people unto her Lord. She
was warned in many passages of Scripture as to the dangers
of uniting with those outside of Israel. Leviticus 20:26
specifically states, "And ye shall be holy unto me; for I
the Lord am Holy, and have separated you from other people,
that ye should be mine."

### The Basis of This Unity

The Old Testament presents the fact that God is Holy
and therefore God's people are to be holy. The prophet

Habakkuk graphically elucidates God's thinking about sin, even among God's people. "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity" (Hab 1:13).

It is the Holiness of God that governs all of God's activity. It is not the love of God. God's holiness governs the operation of His love. Strong notes:

> That which lays down the norm of standard for love must be the superior of love. When we forget that 'righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne' (Ps 97:2), we lose one of the chief landmarks of Christian doctrine and involve ourselves in a mist of error.[1]

Since holiness is the basic criteria for God's relationships, it should be the same for His people.

Instruction Regarding Union With Unbelievers

Dr. Ernest Pickering, a well-known advocate of ecclesiastical separation, points out that:

> Inclusivism is strongly repudiated in Numbers 25:1-3. Balaam, the hireling prophet was not able to pronounce destruction upon Israel as their enemies had hoped. The devil, however, had a far subtler plan which Balaam put into operation. The people of God began to commit whoredom with the heathen. This was done through friendly associations followed by marriages, and resulting in false worship.[2]

Separation is a major theme found in the Old Testament. Time and time again warning was given not to be united with those who were improperly related to Jehovah. Joshua strongly urged isolation from unbelievers, not unity with them in Joshua, chapter 23. It is interesting to note

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[1] Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology (New York: Fleming Revell, 1907), p. 272.

[2] Ernest Pickering, Biblical Separation (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), pp. 169-170.

that the book of Judges is a sad commentary on the rampant disobedience of Israel to heed Joshua's words.

Years later, when the Israelites returned from seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the people again intermarried those dwelling in the land. Ezra comments concerning the abominations that were occurring (Ezra 9:1-2).

> Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, the people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons, so that the holy seed have mixed themselves with the people of those lands; yea the hand of the princes and rulers hath been first in this trespass.

The principle found in the Old Testament must be strongly asserted that any unity that existed was a unity which was compatible with the holiness of God. Organizational unity is never purported and in fact, is always condemned by God.

Pickering observes "the Old Testament is uncompromisingly against inclusivism, mixed worship and efforts to combine the religious practices of Israel with those of other nations."[1]

Summary of Old Testament Instruction on Unity

The Old Testament presents the holiness of God and then exhorts the same of God's children. Because of this, the Old Testament emphasis is upon separation, not union.

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[1] Ernest Pickering, <u>Biblical Separation</u> (Schaumberg: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), p. 172.

The Old Testament is anti-ecumenical. However, if a union is to be formed it must be based upon holiness.

## Theological Instruction on Unity in the New Testament

The New Testament presents a similar view of this subject. In consideration of this, it is revealing to note the emphasis the New Testament established for the basis of unity. The basis of unity is always doctrinal truth. In Romans 16:17 Paul states, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them" (emphasis mine). Unity then, is to be based upon doctrinal purity.

It is interesting to see the apostle Paul instructing Timothy how to handle those who held to a different doctrine. In I Timothy 1:20 Paul tells Timothy to "deliver unto Satan" persons teaching doctrine contrary to that which was taught by the Apostles. In 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, Paul instructs believers "not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

It is apparent from the verses just mentioned that the New Testament teaches unity but within the realms of certain guidelines. Unity must be among believers and furthermore, this unity is founded upon the Scriptures. Any other unity is unbiblical.

The consequences of a unity founded upon false doctrine are mentioned in 2 Timothy 2:16-18:

> But shun profane and vain babblings; for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as does gangrene, of whom are Hymeneus and Philetus, who, concerning the truth, have erred saying that the

resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. (emphasis mine)

## Summary of Unity in the New Testament

The New Testament is consistent with the Old Testament teachings concerning unity. The Scriptures know of unity only founded upon the holiness of God and His Word.

Therefore, only believers with the truth of doctrine can be united. Anything else is foreign to the Scriptures.

## A Theological Consideration of Separation

To some, separation in any degree constitutes sin before a God who desires unity. Pickering puts it this way:

> To put it bluntly, the matter would be described by anti-separatists in this fashion. Our Lord prays that His people might be united. You separatists are dividing them. You, therefore, are sinning against the Lord who desires the unity which you are destroying.[1]

There are many evangelical men who hold to this particular opinion. Some of these include Billy Graham, Donald Grey Barnhouse, and George Eldon Ladd. Dr. Graham states "it seems to me that the entire weight of Scripture lies in the direction of fellowship rather than separation . . . even in the prayer that our Lord offered in John 17 . . ."[2]

Graham is correct when he sees an emphasis placed upon fellowship in the New Testament. But the fellowship must always be a discerning fellowship. The discernment must

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[1] Ernest Pickering, Biblical Separation (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), p. 203.

[2] Billy Graham, "Billy Graham on Separation" Eternity 9 (November 1958):17.

reveal a number of things. First, is this one a genuine believer in the Lord Jesus? If not, then fellowship is impossible. Second, is this person obedient to the biblical directives? If either of these is absent then caution must be used. It is then that separation must be considered, and not fellowship. This separation is a separation of union, of cooperation in ministry, and not of isolation.

McClain suggests that there has been a major shift in some evangelicals' emphasis allowing them to hold such an ecumenical position. He writes "the major change to be brought about by the new 'evangelicalism' according to Christian Life editors, is a shift from contending for the Faith to insistence upon the necessity of the new birth."[1]

What this provides some of the ecumenists with is just about the lowest possible common denominator, which is the new birth. Along this line Graham states "my position as a 'proclaimer of the gospel' is entirely different than if I were the president of a Bible school or the pastor of a church or a professor of theology. In the proclamation of the gospel there is flexibility."[2]

John Whitcomb strongly disagrees with this line of reasoning. He purports:

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[1] Alva J. McClain, "Is Theology Changing in the Conservative Camp?" The Brethren Missionary Herald 19 (February 23, 1957):124.

[2] Billy Graham, "Billy Graham on Separation" Eternity 9 (November 1958):19.

It is highly significant that truth is the one element
that is being sacrificed today for the sake of 'unity,'
even among those who profess to be true believers.  In
our opinion, Dr. R.B. Kuiper has put his finger on the
crucial point at issue when he states:  'Jesus did not
pray that His disciples might agree on a few doctrines
and agree to disagree on many others.  He did not pray
for a mere minimum of doctrinal agreement, but for a
maximum even full agreement.'[1]

Although it is not the purpose of this thesis to ex-
amine the validity of separation caused by doctrinal differ-
ences, it can at least be said that the desire to maintain
a unity based upon doctrinal purity is not sin.  Fellowship
with Christians is to be sought after, but not at the sac-
rifice of biblical truth.

Finally, the notion that Nelson L. Bell has concern-
ing the value of maintaining unity within the realms of doc-
trinal error is unreasonable.  He states:

The doctrine of separation can lead people to abandon
the opportunity for witness where it is most greatly
needed.  The Bible says that we should separate from
sin, but not from the sinner.  Surely we should not re-
move ourselves from the scene where we are needed
most.[2]

What Mr. Bell is suggesting would lead Christians to
form associations with men of the most liberal of theologi-
cal positions.  This writer thinks that Nelson Bell is con-
fused between associational fellowship and personal evangel-
ism.  Ministry associations must be doctrinally pure, while

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[1]John C. Whitcomb, "Christ's Prayer for Unity" The
Brethren Missionary Herald 26 (March 21, 1964):138.

[2]Nelson L. Bell, "On Separation" Christianity Today
16 (October 8, 1971):26.

one's evangelistic reach must stretch to the lowest realm to reach sinners.

## Summary

It has been noteworthy to examine the grammatical, contextual and theological considerations which couch John 17:21. This has been foundational in that the proper interpretation of the unity found within John 17:21 is constructed upon these three pillars.

Grammatically, the possibilities included a unity which has already been completed. Or, a unity that will be completed some day yet in the future. Or, because of the subjunctive mood, the possibility that it would never appear. The grammatical analysis is helpful in seeing the probable fulfillment of the unity.

Contextually, the unity prayed for in John 17:21 is further defined in two ways. The context shows that this is a prayer that the Lord Jesus prays to the Father. It is assumed that Jesus would never pray amiss, and therefore the Father would answer. This then eliminates the third grammatical possibility. Secondly, since Jesus prays for this unity to exist between the disciples (the first group), and since they are all dead now, this fulfillment must have occurred prior to their deaths. This then points to the first grammatical possibility, that is, that the unity has already been completed, and continues to be fulfilled as people believe on the Lord Jesus.

The final consideration involved a brief study of unity found throughout the Bible. Any ecclesiastical relationships must honor the holiness of God. Finally, it was purported that separation, that is, the desire to maintain doctrinal purity, is not sin.

Each of these three areas is helpful for one to determine the nature of the unity prayed for in John 17:21.

CHAPTER III

THE PREFERRED VIEW:

THE ORGANIC UNITY VIEWPOINT

This is the fourth view propounded to be the nature of unity for which Christ prayed. Adherents of this position include Alva J. McClain,[1] Charles R. Erdman,[2] Martin Lloyd-Jones,[3] John C. Whitcomb,[4] Ernest Pickering,[5] and William Hendriksen.[6]

This viewpoint purports that the unity prayed for became a reality in the organic spiritual union and that all believers in Christ are in that union. Ernest Pickering notes:

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[1]Alva J. McClain, "Is Theology Changing in The Conservative Camp?" The Brethren Missionary Herald 19 (February 23, 1957):124.

[2]Charles R. Erdman, The Gospel of John (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1940), pp. 147-148.

[3]Martin Lloyd-Jones, The Basis of Christian Unity (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1967), p. 41.

[4]John C. Whitcomb, "Christ's Prayer For Unity" The Brethren Missionary Herald 26 (March 21, 1964):138.

[5]Ernest Pickering, Biblical Separation (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), pp. 202-203.

[6]William Hendriksen, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), pp. 363-365.

The Lord's prayer is not for something we should do,
but expressing something He has done. . . The unity
which Christ asks the Father to maintain is a spiritual
unity. It is the unity such as the Holy Trinity sus-
tains (v. 21). It is not an organizational unity.[1]

George Ladd, while holding to the organizational
unity position, alleges that the primary understanding of
Christ's prayer for "oneness" is not visible unity. He
writes:

These words have often been cited in support of organic
church unity that finds oneness in external visible
structures. However, such is not the primary intention
of the passage. The unity of believers is analogous to
the unity of the Son with the Father, and the unity of
believers with both the Father and Son. . . This unity
is far deeper than organizational structure.[2]

This unity had its beginning on the day of Pentecost,
and is then the same unity because of the baptism of the
Holy Spirit. It is noteworthy to hear Charles Erdman:

The prayer was given its initial answer on the day of
Pentecost when by the Holy Spirit believers were 'all
baptized into one body.' So Paul does not pray for
'Church unity' but insists that it already exists. Even
now 'there is one body' composed of all who are united
with Christ, as there is 'one spirit, one hope, one
Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of
all'.[3]

Finally, it is suggested by this writer that the pray-
er recorded in John 17 may be the prayer that Jesus was talk-
ing about in John 14:16-20:

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[1]Ernest Pickering, Biblical Separation (Schaumburg:
Regular Baptist Press, 1979), pp. 202-203.

[2]George Eldon Ladd, A Theology of The New Testament
(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974),
p. 283.

[3]Charles Erdman, The Gospel of John (Philadelphia:
The Westminster Press, 1940), p. 147.

> And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you
> another Comforter, that he may be with you forever, even
> the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive; for
> it beholdeth him not, neither knows him:  you know him;
> for he abides with you, and shall be in you.  I will not
> leave you desolate:  I come unto you.  Yet a little
> while, and the world beholds me no more; but you behold
> me:  because I live, you shall live also.  In that day
> you shall know that <u>I am in my father, and you in me,
> and I in you</u>.  (emphasis mine)

## The Strength of The Viewpoint

To be the proper interpretation, the preferred position must successfully meet three criteria.  This, and only this, will insure the proper understanding of the nature of "oneness."

The organic unity position satisfies the grammatical consideration which showed the probability of "oneness." This unity is then fulfilled, assuming the integrity of Christ's prayer to the Father.  The organic unity position meets the first criteria successfully.  Next, the second criteria, the contextual consideration, must be evaluated.

The organic unity viewpoint successfully passes through the second criteria.  The context reveals that it is the Father who will answer this prayer and the answer to it will include two groups of believers.  Out of the four viewpoints as to the nature of the unity, only this position incorporates this proper contextual understanding.  It must be the Father who is answering this prayer, and not the believers.  It is only this viewpoint that can properly include more than one generation of believers, the baptism of the Holy Spirit which began on the day of Pentecost includes all those in Christ as an organic unity.

The organic unity also passes the third criteria, the theological consideration. That is any unity must be based upon the holiness of God and thus requires the proper position of truth within the unity. The organic unity is again supported due to the fact that this unity is founded upon the Holy Spirit. Note again that in John 14:16-17a "and I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth". (emphasis mine)

Again, it is only the organic unity position which emphasizes the proper unity without any man-made sacrifice of the truth. William Hendriksen states concerning this, "Paul believed very strongly in ecumenicity of the highest type, ecumenicity indeed, but without the sacrifice of the truth."[1]

### The Weakness of This Viewpoint

The organic unity position has no major weakness. It satisfactorily passes the three criteria applied to the four major viewpoints.

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[1]William Hendriksen, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 212.

## CONCLUSION

There is only one viewpoint that satisfies the criterion applied within this thesis. The criterion is nothing more than the application of the proper principles of exegesis which include the grammatical, contextual, and the theological considerations that bear upon the proper understanding of the nature of unity prayed in John 17:21.

The unity of spiritual interest is rejected because of its failure to take into account the context. Its conclusion is far too shallow. The ethical unity is also in error due to an improper contextual analysis which renders the usefulness of Christ's prayer to naught. The organizational unity viewpoint is rejected on three counts. First, the Father is the one who answers, not the church. Second, there can never be the possibility of an organization (visible) that transcends the generations. Third, this unity is based upon the minimizing of the truth. Therefore, the organizational unity view must be rejected.

It is only the organic unity position which successfully understands and incorporates sound exegetical principles. The unity that Christ prayed in John 17:21 may be the prayer He mentions in John 14:16-20; in any event, this unity began on the day of Pentecost and will continue until

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the church age ends.  This is the unity for which Christ prayed, the unity that finds all believers baptized into "one body."  Therefore, any citing of John 17:21 in support of an organizational unity, an ethical unity or a unity of spiritual interest must be rejected due to poor exegesis.

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