

# THE PRAYER FOR UNITY

by Ray C. Stedman

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The last hours that Jesus had with his disciples before he went to the cross ended in a prayer meeting. The one who prays is Jesus of Nazareth himself, unquestionably the one who understands more about the nature and the possibilities of prayer than anyone who has ever lived. The subject of the prayer is his disciples and those who should believe on him, that is, ourselves. From this prayer of Jesus, uttered in these dangerous moments when opposition was closing in upon him and the shadow of the cross was hanging heavy over him, we can learn a great deal.

We have already seen something of the possibilities, the priorities and the perils of the Christian life reflected in this prayer, but the last six verses are the most unusual of all. Here is what we may view as a great planning session between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to which we are privileged to listen. This is, in other words, a summit meeting, the highest possible summit. It does not focus on a single country or continent of the world, but it has in its scope the entire world. It is not to plan a campaign of a few years or a decade or two, but it encompasses the entire age in which we live, from the first coming of Christ to the second coming. It does not involve a few local churches, or a denomination or two in some kind of united campaign, but it gathers in the whole Body of Christ, every Christian who has ever lived, or ever will live, in all time. In a very real sense these verses are the key to history, the blueprints of God's program for this age. Here is a military campaign being planned which is designed to recapture this rebellious planet for God.

A number of years ago a British Army major taught me the three essentials of military planning: an objective, a strategy, and tactics. And he explained to me the difference between them. The objective is the goal, the hilltop you wish to take or the city that needs to be captured; some specific target toward which all is aimed, that is the objective. The strategy is the general procedure, the overall plan by which it is proposed to take the objective, and the tactics are the specific maneuvers by which the strategy is carried out. Every military campaign must envision all three of these.

Now in this prayer of Jesus which, as I have suggested in a previous message, was not prayed in the quiet sanctuary of a cathedral but was really uttered on a battlefield, you have these three ingredients of a military campaign. You can see this in these six verses, if you look closely:

Twice in these six verses, Jesus states precisely the great objective which was ever before him as he lived his own life on earth, and now that he is leaving he is committing to the disciples. Twice he outlines specifically what God intends to accomplish: The latter part of Verse 21 "...so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me," and again in the latter part of Verse 23, "...so that the world may know that thou hast sent me." There is the great objective. God's whole redemptive plan is aimed at one target: the world.

"God so loved the world," we read in John 3:16, "that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The focus of it all is the world. "God loved the world." It is so easy for Christians to forget this. Forgetting that we were once part of this world, we become so taken up with what he is doing to us as believers that we sometimes forget that he is still aiming beyond us. We seem to feel that God's program stops with us, that his entire purpose in coming into the world and leaving by the cross and the resurrection is to get us to heaven. If that were the case it would be much simpler if we would erect a chopping block in every church, and as soon as someone becomes a Christian chop his head off! We could be sure then that they would get to heaven without any difficulty! But, aside from the involvements this would put us in with the authorities, it is clear from the Scriptures that the Lord does not intend it this way. He leaves us here in order that we may learn how to share in the painful process of drawing a struggling, rebellious creation unto himself. We must become part of the process of reaching the world.

Nor are we Christians here essentially to improve the world. Sometimes we become so concerned about necessary social changes that we give the impression that the church exists in order to make the world a better

place in which to live. But that misses the point entirely, for the whole picture of Scripture, as we saw in our study of the *Olivet Discourse*, is that, no matter what the church does as God's instrument in the world, the ultimate end of the world will be anarchy and chaos. It shall end exactly as Jesus Christ describes it, despite the best efforts of the church, and it was never intended to be different. No, the church is not here to improve the world, least of all to save the world. No, we are here for but one thing. Jesus says it here. "That the world may believe that thou, Father, hast sent me," {cf, John 17:21b RSV}.

The church is left here in order that worldlings may become convinced:

- That Jesus Christ is the authentic voice of God;
- That he is the authoritative utterance of what God intends to do in human affairs;
- That he is the key to world history and reality, the revelation of the invisible God and therefore the only way from man to God.

When the world becomes convinced of this, the rest is up to them. Our task, as believers in Jesus Christ, is not to save the world. Our job is to bring it to an awareness of who he is, and when men and women come to that awareness they will do one of two things:

1. They will either accept him and be saved, or
2. They will reject him and continue in the lost condition in which the whole world continually exists.

I was in a missionary conference in Pasadena a week or so ago where we had a panel one morning of missionaries and mission leaders. One of the questions asked was, "What is the definition of World Evangelism?" A number gave answers, but the answer that impressed me most was this. One man said,

"World Evangelism is the attempt to give every man an opportunity to make an intelligent choice of whether to receive or reject Jesus Christ."

That is excellent, that is exactly what world evangelism is. It is not an attempt to save the world except as that is involved in the acceptance of Christ, nor to condemn the world except as that is involved in the rejection of Jesus Christ. But the whole thrust of God's purpose in human history is simply to bring men to an awareness of who Jesus Christ is, "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me," {John 17:21b RSV}. That is the objective.

Therefore, for the sake of a confused and sinful world which is facing enormously complex problems, Christians must not, dare not, isolate themselves from that world. That is the very thing we are here to reach, that is the goal, the target, that is the objective. We dare not live our Christian lives in air-tight compartments, limited only to Christian friends, in a sort of Christian hot-house, from the womb to the tomb.

Someone has pointed out that, judging from what goes on in the world today, the Christian answer to world crisis is to fill up a ship with Christians and go on a cruise in the Caribbean and listen each morning to a Bible teacher giving prophetic messages!

No, the church exists in order to reach the world. The church is here to be God's instrument by which human life in every area and at every level is penetrated by the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ, that men may see that in Jesus Christ there is the authentic voice of God to men; that in him is the ultimate issue of human destiny, and in him we come face to face with all that is important in human affairs.

I have already suggested that this is a complex and difficult, even painful problem, for we well know, having been on the other side of the fence as well, that every worldling lives in confusion and blindness. He is suspicious and sensitive, especially in religious matters.

He loves to remind us of what he considers a major rule of life, never to discuss politics or religion. He can

retreat under a hard shell of indifference and sophistication and seemingly be unreachable, yet that man is our objective.

Regardless of what attitude or defense, our objective is to reach every man and woman, every boy and girl, giving each an opportunity to make an intelligent choice to accept or refuse Jesus Christ.

Well, what will do it?

If that is the objective, what is the strategy? How does God plan to accomplish this? He has not given us the objective and left the strategy up to us. No, it is here too. Look at the divine strategy, as Jesus declares it in Verse 21:

**"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." {John 17:21 RSV}**

Look again at verse 23:

**"I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me ..." {John 17:23a RSV}**

There it is, "that they may become perfectly one." That is the strategy by which God intends to accomplish his objective.

There are those who tell us that this prayer of Jesus concerning the church, "that they may be one," must now begin to be answered, that it is now time to answer this prayer after twenty centuries of it remaining unfulfilled, that we must now forget all the differences and distinctions that have separated us into various denominations and sectarian groups through the centuries and join together in one great organization or union. But let us first raise the question, "Is this prayer really unanswered today?" Can it be possible for twenty centuries to roll by before God the Father begins to fulfill this last request of Jesus? Is it possible that the World Council of Churches will succeed where God the Father has failed? No, this prayer has been answered ever since the Day of Pentecost. This strategy is not of human making. This business of making all Christians one does not depend upon us, it depends upon the Spirit of God. He came for that purpose. Paul's great chapter on the Holy Spirit in First Corinthians clearly establishes the fact that in his coming he accomplished what Jesus prayed for. This is the divine strategy by which the world may be led to believe. All Christians are one, not in union, as is being suggested today, but in unity. There is a difference. Union is an outward agreement, an alliance, formed by the submerging of differences for sake of merging. There is much of it going on today. Almost every month the papers carry a report of denominational groups that are considering merging together. But this artificial union, this joining together in an organization, is this the answer to Jesus' prayer here, "that they may all be one"? The test, of course, is, "Does it accomplish what Jesus says will be accomplished when the church is one? Does it, in other words, cause worldlings to believe that Jesus is the authentic voice of God?" I must say, in observing the world scene today, that there is little evidence that this is the case. My observation is that when churches or denominations join together (though there may be good in much of this, do not misunderstand me, I certainly am not decrying all that is involved in this), it creates a vast, monolithic power structure which, I find, causes men and women of the world to fear the church as a threat to their own power structures, as a rival force in world politics and world affairs.

Nor does this union create oneness. When I was in Formosa a few years ago I was tremendously impressed by the remarkable oneness among the American missionaries in the island there, despite their denominational differences. At the great missionary conferences held once a year at Sun Moon Lake, high in the mountains of Formosa, all the missionaries of the island (I think without exception) gather together for a fellowship time. The denominations represented span the entire spectrum of Christian life today, from the Mennonites (who appear in colorful uniforms), to the more liberal churches and denominations. But the thing that impressed me was that, as they gathered together, there is a wonderful sense of oneness, of unity in the Lord, a glorious, heavenly atmosphere. Now that remarkable unity which exists above and beyond the denominational differences is being threatened, and do you know what is threatening it? The attempt of the World Council of Churches to move in and get everyone to join it. That union is threatening the unity in the island of Formosa, a

unity that has existed apart from any efforts of men or any of the divisions or restrictions of men. Union is one thing; unity is quite another.

Unity, as indicated here, is the sharing of a life. Look at Verse 21 again:

**"That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee," {John 17:21a RSV}**

This is not alliance, nor merger, nor agreement; this is the sharing of life,

**"that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me," {John 17:21a RSV}**

**"I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one," {John 17:23a RSV}**

That is quite different, is it not? Let me put it, if I may, in other words. The divine strategy by which the Lord intends to bring the world to an awareness of Jesus Christ is to create in the midst of the world a family, a family life, a shared life, so that men and women all over the earth, becoming by new birth members of that life, enter into a family circle which is so unmistakable and so filled with joy and warmth that worldlings observing it will envy it and, like homeless orphans with their noses pressed up against the window, will long to join the warmth and the fellowship of the family circle. The remarkable thing is that when the church is like this there is no more potent evangelistic thrust.

This last weekend a number of us were at a men's retreat together. Most of us were from this church here, but not all; there were a number of men from other churches as well joining with us. There was one man who, as the weekend went on, evidenced that he was not yet a Christian. As far as I know he was the only one. He told us that he was embittered against the church. He was suspicious of the Scriptures. He was committed in his life to bad habits which he recognized were not acceptable in Christian circles. He came with all his defenses up, with barriers erected, but it was evident, as the weekend went on, that he could not resist the warmth of the Christian fellowship. He openly admired the relaxed informality of Christian love expressed among the men that were present, and it was not surprising therefore that, before the weekend closed, he too joined the family circle of God. He could not stay away. All his defenses melted in the presence of Christian oneness.

There is the divine strategy -- to make all Christians share one life in one great family and so make the world, starving for meaningful personal relationships, simply drool with desire. That is God's strategy.

But unity is hard to see. The life of Jesus Christ in the Body of Christ is an invisible thing. Something must make it visible. What is that? When we put our finger on that we come to the divine tactics by which God intends to implement his strategy. What is it? Jesus tells us in Verse 22:

**"The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them that they may be one ..."**  
**{John 17:22a RSV}**

This is what makes them one. The world will believe when they see the church is one and this is what makes them one, "the glory which thou hast given me I have given them."

Verse 24:

**"Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am [and that is not a reference to glory "some day"; it is a reference to what Paul says in Ephesians 2, "we are now seated in heavenly places," sharing what he is], to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world."**  
**{John 17:24 RSV}**

Here is a glory, a flaming glory in the church which makes the unity of believers visible. What is it? Jesus is very specific:

**"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 17:26 RSV}**

The glory which is love! In other words, the unity of the church is visible when Christians love one another. Here is the whole secret.

In saying that, we put our finger squarely on the reason for the failure of the church to reach the world in our day. Why are we seeing this remarkable upsurge of blatant, open attacks against Christian faith? Why, in this day of ours, is there widespread apathy to biblical authority, this indifferent unconcern of the world at large to hear the voice of the church? Is it only coincidence that the decades before this were preeminently characterized by church conflict, that during those years the world saw Christians hurling invectives at one another, and splitting theological hairs with ecclesiastical razor blades then splitting over the splits, publishing newspapers and magazines devoted to name calling and heresy-hounding and devoting their energies to fighting one another, rather than to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is it any wonder that the world has turned a deaf ear to the church? Charles Spurgeon spoke of those who habitually go about with a theological revolver in their ecclesiastical trousers. We still have them with us today. This is why Jesus, gathering here with his disciples in the Upper Room, in one final word said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another," {John 13:34 KJV}. That is the key, that you love one another. There is where world evangelization must start! These are the tactics by which the divine strategy is implemented to reach the great objective "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." This is why Jesus said,

**"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."  
{John 13:35 {RSV}}**

More than that, John says,

**"By this shall we know that we love God, because we love the brotherhood." {cf, 1 Jn  
5:2}**

It all begins there.

There is a very helpful article in the current issue of *Eternity Magazine* by Dr. Harold England, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley. I hope all of you will read it. Among other fine things he says in this respect are these words:

Do you suppose this [absence of love] is a clue to our lack of effectiveness in making Christ known in our world? The supply of love within the family of God has run low and, as a consequence, the church has presented its face to the world as just another of those impersonal institutions of our day, this one majoring in morality and public worship rather than in merchandise or finance, instead of presenting itself as a family where the members know one another, accept one another, pray with one another, laugh and weep with one another, and all because they genuinely love one another.

Now this love is not to be mere sentiment. It is not some pious religious gush. Sentiment has been described as "that warm feeling about the heart that you can't scratch." It is not that; it is not something used to disguise a dagger of dislike. The Scripture says, "let love be unfeigned" {cf, Rom 12:9}; that is, let it be genuine.

There are three essential qualities to genuine Christian love.

The first one is mutual contact. It is simply hogwash to speak of loving another Christian to whom you will not speak. There must be contact, the willingness to talk, no aloofness, no withdrawal from each other. Now there are specific and clearly described circumstances involving discipline where Christians are to withdraw temporarily from one another, but those are very specific and only under unusual circumstances. But we are to love each other simply because we are Christians, and we are not to be selective about it. It isn't "our kind" of Christian, our specific group that we are to love, the ones that we feel something in common with. That kind of love is what the world employs. Jesus said, "If you salute only your brethren, what do ye more than others?" {Matt 5:47 RSV}. No, we are to love all simply because they are Christians, whether they are stupid, or wrong, or irritating or stubborn. Contact is first.

Second, genuine, unfeigned love involves mutual concern, and by that I do not mean some superficial greeting, some passing, "How are you getting along these days?" but a willingness to listen to the answer. Every contact is to be marked by a readiness to help, to share, to listen, to pray, a willingness to bear one another's burdens in the Lord and so fulfill the law of Christ.

And third, all true Christian love is marked by a mutual sense of contribution. That means a recognition that we need each other, that we are not condescending when we give ourselves to another Christian; we need each other. You have what another one needs and he has what you need, and we minister to one another alike, even though they be older Christians with younger Christians. I confess that some of the most helpful lessons I have ever learned have come to me from new babes in Christ with whom I have fellowshiped. They have taught me much. We need one another.

Do you know, the most remarkable and significant fact is that every great awakening, large or small, throughout the whole course of Christian history, has invariably begun by a breaking down of barriers between Christians first of all. When long-standing feuds have been resolved, apologies have been made, and pardons have been sought, confessions have been uttered and a breaking down of dislikes and disagreements, separations and withdrawals occurs among Christian people, it is invariably followed by the world around sitting up and beginning to take notice of the Christian message. Now that is love: contact, concern, contribution.

Let me add one thing more, because this love, as we recognize so clearly from the Scriptures, is not something we work up. It is something that is given to us. It is in us by the very virtue of the fact that Jesus Christ is in us, but it does require our consent. The Lord is ready to love another through us anytime we are ready to let ourselves be the channel of that love. That is the whole position of Scripture. When we are ready to consent to love, he is quite ready to love. The thing that makes this whole thing practical, and keeps us from sabotaging the work of the Holy Spirit in his thrusting urge to reach the blinded, confused world outside, is that we give willing, glad consent to love any Christian, any time, for Jesus' sake.

I have resolved that there is at least one heart in the world which is ready to love every person, without exception, in whom I sense a love for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, regardless of his denominational label, or lack of it, and despite any theological differences of viewpoint. I am ready, God in me and helping me, to give myself in love to any Christian, anywhere, whom I may chance to meet and in whom I sense a fellowship of love for Jesus Christ. That is the basis for Christian unity.

Are you willing to join in that?

Are you ready now to say, in order to reach the world around about us, "Lord, teach me to give up my prejudices, these separations, this withdrawal, these sub-Christian attitudes toward my fellow brethren in Christ, and make me willing to love them and to show it, for Christ's sake?"

## **Prayer**

Father, thou art the God of love. When we look at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ we see that love poured out for us. What remarkable love that is, love that will not let us go, love that pursues us despite our rebuffs, love that never gives up, relentless in its pursuit until we yield, broken, melted by thy love. Lord, this is the nature and character of the love that is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us. It is this remarkable thing that the world waits to see in Christian people. It is the absence of this, Father, that makes them turn away from our doors, uninterested, disappointed. Lord, teach us then to love one another. Whatever this may mean in terms of our personal circumstances, teach us, Father, to love one another. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

Scripture: John 17:20-26  
Message No: 12  
Catalog No: 67  
Date: May 24, 1964

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