

“That They May Be One”: The Challenge to Be Part of an Affirmative Answer to the Prayer of Jesus As Recorded in John Seventeen

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Summary *The article is an exposition of John 17 which provides the most detailed expression of Jesus’ desire for his followers. As he faces the hour of the redemptive event, Jesus prays for not only for himself and his closest disciples, but for all who will become believers through the message of the Apostles. The exposition identifies the subjects of Christ’s prayer, the requests themselves, and the purpose of the requests. The purpose is identified as “that the world may know that the Son is sent from the Father and that the Father loves the disciples as he loves the Son.” Implications are drawn from the prayer for believers living in a post-modern culture.*

One of the most encouraging faith assumptions for those engaged in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ is that our Lord prayed for us as John seventeen affirms and that He prays for us still (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). The challenge to present the message and person of Jesus Christ to a secular Europe and an increasingly antagonistic world would be overwhelming without the knowledge that our task has been “taken up into the inner dialogue of the Godhead” (B. Milne, 236). To affirm that we in 2008 are included in the divine petition recorded in this text provides courage and strength for our calling. However, that very affirmation requires that we listen carefully to Christ’s “prayer of consecration.”

Those acquainted with the four Gospels are immediately confronted with an unspoken question. Why has the Holy Spirit seen fit to give us such a detailed

account of this prayer?¹ Might it be that the Spirit desires that the disciples of Jesus – present as well as past - know what was foremost on the heart of our Lord as he was facing his passion? Jesus had arrived at “the hour to which his whole [life and] ministry has moved, and in that momentous hour he sought his father’s face, for himself as well as his disciples” (Beasley-Murray, 294). This prayer provides us, along with the Apostles, the privilege of hearing Jesus consecrate himself to his redemptive death, and of hearing Him consecrate his disciples to the mission.

I would suggest that there is yet another reason for such a detailed account. Beasley-Murray reminds us that the church has recognized from early times the didactic intention of John’s inclusion of this prayer (Beasley-Murray, 293). Jesus is ever the teacher. The extended lesson of glory through intimacy and sacrificial agape was taught throughout the upper-room discourse (John 13-17). The teaching aids of a towel and basin became tools to “show the full extent of his love” (John 13:1). Questions, challenges, and promises revealed truth in concentrated doses. In this most intimate of prayer between the only begotten and His Abba, Father we are confronted with the crucial reality that the glory of God is forever bound up in relationship, in mutual sharing, and in intimate fellowship.² It is in this holy prayer of Jesus that we are exposed to the awesome truth that effective ministry and mission are possible only in and through unity with the triune God and genuine fellowship with one another.

The structure of the prayer has been examined and discussed by many in recent years.³ The simplest and most widely adopted was proposed by Westcott: vv 1-5 Jesus prays for himself, vv 6-19 Jesus prays for his disciples, and vv 20-26 Jesus prays for the Church. The structure identified by Beasley-Murray follows more closely that of Barrett (Barrett, 416-417) is a four-fold division with slight variation: vv 1-5 prayer for the glory of the Son, vv 6-19 prayer for the disciples who are with Him, vv 20-23 prayer that all believers might be one, and vv 24-26

¹ Although the synoptic gospels and John often affirm the fact that Jesus prayed and at times identifies the theme or purpose of His prayers, there is a scarcity of content in the prayers themselves. The notable exceptions are the prayers of Jesus in Gethsemane and his words uttered from the cross. However, beside John 17 the only extended prayer which the Gospel writers record is the commonly identified “Lord’s Prayer” (Matt. 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-4). However, it might better be called “the Model Prayer” for it is not so much His prayer as a demonstration and teaching concerning the content of our prayers.

² The Father glorifies the Son so that the Son can glorify the Father (17:1; 17:4-5). Jesus is glorified in the disciples and thus the Father is glorified (17:10). What the Father has He gives to Jesus and they share it together (17:9-10). Protection for the disciples is in the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Name which they share 17:11-12). Through faith the believers live in relationship (in the Son and in the Father) with the triune God (17:20-13). John refers to this mutual sharing of glory throughout this Gospel (7:18; 8:54; 11:4; 11:40; 12:28; 13:31; 14:13; 16:4) as well as chapter 17.

³ See Beasley-Murray p. 295, for an extended listing of the significant suggestions and his practical and balanced observations.

prayer that believers might be perfected in the glory of Jesus. (Beasley-Murray, 296) The analysis of the structure is important to carefully identify *for whom* Jesus is praying, *for what* he is praying and the *purpose of each request*.

vv. 1-5

For whom Jesus prays

- For Jesus Himself

vv. 1-5

For what Jesus prays

- That Jesus will be glorified
- The restoration of the glory which was the possession of Jesus before creation

vv. 1-5

The purpose of the request

- To provide eternal life

vv. 6-19

For whom Jesus prays

- Those to whom eternal life has been given (they have come to know God and Jesus whom The Father has sent)
- Given by the Father from the world
- To whom Jesus has made known God's name
- Who kept God's word
- Who know everything given to Jesus is from the Father
- Who have received the words of Jesus
- Who know in truth that Jesus is from the Father
- Who have believed that God sent Jesus
- Who belong to the father, because they belong to Jesus
- Not those of the world
- Those in whom Jesus has been glorified
- Who are in the world (the disciples who are presently with Jesus)

vv. 6-19

For what Jesus prays

- That the Father "Keep" or "Protect" (τήρησον) them in His Name
- That the disciples be "kept out of the clutches of the 'evil one' who is behind the world's opposition to God manifest in Christ" (Beasley-Murray, 299).
- Consecrate them (ἀγιάσον αὐτούς) in the truth⁴
- By sanctification they are separated from what is profane and set in a consecrated state. (Kittel, 1:111)

vv. 6-19

The purpose of the request the "Why"

- They are the "possession" of Jesus (and the Father's)
- To them (disciples) Jesus has revealed the "name" of God, i.e. God's nature and his character⁵
- They have sought to "live by the word" brought by Jesus
- Jesus is soon to go to the Father and no longer be "in the world"
- The disciples will continue to be in the world
- So that the disciples may have the "joy" of Jesus (that it may be made complete in them)
- The disciples do not belong to the world
- Separation from the world's ways to God in conformity to His character, truth, and purpose and in dedication to the service of Christ

⁴ Beasley-Murray follows Barrett (507) and others "Keep them *in adherence* to what Jesus has revealed to them of the character of God" (299). Thus, "keep them in loyalty to Thee."

⁵ Both the name and glory of God were presented to Moses in Exodus 34:4-7. Through the life and ministry of Jesus the "name" and the "glory" are clearly personalized by John, presenting Jesus as the "I AM" who is "the compassionate and gracious God, who is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, forgiving sin in all its forms, and soon (in the atoning cross experience) to exercise justice".

vv. 20-23
For whom Jesus prays

- The disciples as identified in vv. 6-19
- Individuals who will come to believe in Christ through the “word” of the disciples identified above.

vv. 20-23
For what Jesus prays

- That all the believers may be one.
- “That they, all believers, may be in us”

vv. 20-23
The purpose of the request

- So that the “world” may believe that the Father sent Jesus
- (the glory which the Father gave to Jesus, Jesus has given to all[?] believers, so that they [all?] may be one, as Jesus and the Father are one) So that the “world” may know that the Father sent Jesus.
- So that the world may know that the Father has loved “them” [?] even as the Father has loved the Son

vv. 24-26
For whom Jesus prays

- “Those also,” whom the Father has given Jesus (these are those who have come to believe through the ministry of the disciples and those about whom Jesus is referring in v. 2; these who have eternal life because they know the Father and the Son through belief)
- V. 25 seems to refer back to those presently with Jesus
- Could be identifying all believers if Barrett is correct in seeing as summarizing the Gospel (Barrett, 429-30)

vv. 24-26
For what Jesus prays

- That the believers may be with Jesus in His final glory
- That Jesus will continue to make known the “name” of the Father i.e. His character, mission, and purpose. (That through His and his Father’s indwelling Spirit, [14:17-20; 15:4-8 and 17:21,23] this would happen.)

vv. 24-26
The purpose of the request

- To see His glory (the glory which the Father will re-instate in His presence, the glory which Jesus had before the foundation of the world [17:5])
- So that the love with which the Father has loved the Son may be in the believers
- So that Jesus may be in the believers

The analysis above provides a detailed understanding of the objects of Jesus’ requests, the requests themselves, and the purpose of our Lord’s requests. Although the ultimate goal is that the world may “know the Father through knowing the Son whom He has sent,” this prayer is for the consecration of Jesus, his immediate

disciples and those who will believe in Jesus through their word. The requests are not on behalf of the world⁵, but are on behalf of “those who belong to the Father and the Son,” those who have been given “eternal life,” those “in whom Jesus and the Father abide” and those who “have the Father and Son living in them.”

The request which Jesus makes for Himself is for the manifestation of “glory” in Himself that will in turn be a manifestation of the glory of the Father. The glory for which Jesus prays is not a reward for virtue, but instead is the glorification of the Father which “is the salvation of mankind” (Hoskyns, 497). Here will be the ultimate sacrifice by which the glory Moses saw (Exodus 34) will become evident to the world. Here is where grace and justice will meet, where compassionate love will provide the possibility of divine forgiveness so that sin infected human-kind can experience reconciliation with a holy God. Here will be the awesome doxa which is so shocking that it becomes a “stumbling block” to some and “foolishness” to others, but to those who believe will be the power of God for salvation.

Jesus prays for glory as the pace of humiliation accelerates. He prays for the manifestation of glory as the ultimate rejection of man provides the event which is the divine way of acceptance by God. All the qualities of divine glory as identified in Exodus 34, save one, have been obediently expressed through the life and activities of Jesus (17:4). And now obedience must go all the way to death so that the wages of sin might be paid. The ultimate sacrifice must be made on earth to be received at the eternal presence of a Just and Holy God. The agony of the cross must precede the wonder of resurrection. Jesus prays that in the hour of humiliation exaltation will explode into the glory which had been His possession before creation.

Implicit in the prayer is the purpose of the request. It is not for selfish display; but rather the ultimate communication of a saving knowledge - so that His disciples may intimately know God and thus have “eternal life.”

Loving communication between the Son and the Father honestly rehearses the intimacy within the God head. Tasks had been assigned and work has been fulfilled. Jesus affirms his disciples as having received and are presently in possession of the truth. They believe that Jesus is the sent one! Words from the Father have been shared by the Son with these perplexed followers, and they have received them.

⁵ Paul S. Minear in his thought provoking “Evangelism, Ecumenism, and John Seventeen” contends that the “world” of which Jesus speaks in His prayer, is not the “unbelieving ones,” but rather those openly hostile to the person and claims of Christ. He contends that believers, especially those present with Jesus in the upper room, when they are truly “one with the Son and the Father,” they will draw the same “hostility” that demanded the crucifixion. He insists that “if the emissaries of Jesus can manifest their oneness with the Father and the Son [in the context of such hostility], they can persuade the world to believe in the authenticity of God sending” (12).

Then the affirmation turned to requests. He pleads for these disciples because they belong to the Father and the Son. The Son has been glorified in them. He has protected them by his loyalty to the name (all that is included in “the name”). He has guarded them and none is lost, except the one so destined. But now, He must leave them and they will be hated because they do not belong to the world.

Jesus makes three requests of the Father for these who are with Him. There is no request that the disciples be removed from trouble, from rejection, or from hatred. Instead, in the context of the tribulation that they will have in this world, Jesus pleads *for protection for them from the evil one*. Jesus is sending them into the world even as the Father sent Him into the world. But they must be protected “from the clutches of the evil one” (Beasley-Murray, 299).

Earlier Jesus asked that the Father, “*keep them in the name that you have given me*”. The term often means “*to keep, hold in reserve, preserve for a purpose or until a suitable time*” (*Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Baker’s Greek New Testament library, Vol. 3, 379). Beasley-Murray, following Barrett (507) and others believes that the request is “keep them in loyalty to the name” (Beasley-Murray, 299). The idea of the request is that the Father keep them faithful to all that “the name” represents, i.e. the qualities and character attributes of God Himself. This is how John through out the Gospel has demonstrated that Jesus “kept them.” They have received the “words” of the Father. They have seen the Father’s revelation in the person of Jesus. Jesus now asks the Father Himself to keep them in that revelation.

The third petition is that the Father “sanctify” them. In the LXX ἁγιάζω is to “consecrate” or “set apart” from what is profane and set in a consecrated state to service of God” (Kittel, 1:111). As Jesus has set Himself apart for this unique mission, He asks that the Father set them apart to the revealed truth that Jesus has given them. Jesus in prayer affirms that these disciples are sent by Him into the world. Now He dedicates and consecrates Himself to his mission. He pleads that the Father will in the same way dedicate and consecrate these of His to their mission to truth.

Jesus expands His prayer to include “those will believe in me through their word” (17:20). The petition includes a statement of eternal truth. It is a restatement of the reality which Jesus taught the disciples in 14:10-20. *He is in the Father and the Father is in Him*. His ministry, his words, his works have been possible only through the mutual indwelling of Father and Son. Never did Jesus speak alone or on His own. Never did He act on his own. He spoke as instructed by the Father so that the words were the Father’s. It was always because this mutual intimacy that John could declare, “We beheld His glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). Out of this glorious mutuality that Jesus petitions the Father, “that they (those who will believe in

Jesus) *all* be one“ (17:21). The request is not for a different kind or type of unity, but it is that the believers share in their unity! Jesus qualifies his requested unity, “as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” The request is that *all who become believers* in Jesus, *all who have entered into eternal life* by knowing Jesus and knowing the Father, that all of *these participate in the intimacy that is shared between Jesus and his Father*. This amazing request has a specific purpose: “***That the world may believe that you sent me.***” The realization of this prayer is to become the divine evangelistic method!

Jesus had stated this wonder-filled truth by way of promise “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:18-20). In the same discussion with his disciples he stated the same reality by way of analogy, “I am the vine and you are branches.” It was only in this unity that that they could be fruitful (15:5-8). It would be only in this intimate relationship that they could show themselves to be his disciples (15:8).

However in the prayer Jesus moves beyond an individual sharing with Jesus and his Father. The divine circle of intimacy is drawn to include Father and Son, the first disciples, the individual believer, and **all who will believe in Jesus!** As surely as one lays hold to the promise of personal sharing in the life of Jesus, he must also recognize that promise extends to all who believe. In that promise of participation in the Son and the Father there is coupled the promise of sharing with all who believe in Him! That unity has definition and description. It looks like the unity between the Father and the Son. In some supra-natural way the unity between the Father and the Son is promised now to include all who have life through belief in Jesus.

As Jesus continues to pray, yet another truth passes between Son and Father for the disciples to hear. The glory that the Father gave to Jesus, Jesus has shared with believers (17:4-5). This is the “glory” which revealed the truth of the Father. This must be the glory that enabled Jesus to say, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” That same “shared” glory is to enable the believer in humility to say, “See me and you see Jesus.” But in an even a way which is truer to this prayer, the shared glory is to enable the believers *together* to say, “See us in our unity, in our oneness and see the unity of Jesus and His Father. See our unity in Jesus, based upon our personal and individual faith in Jesus and know that God the Father has sent Jesus as the Son, see our unity and know that we are loved even as the Father loves the Son!” (17:24).

It is as individual believers, joined together into the oneness of the Father and Son because of our mutual trust and knowledge of the Father and the Son that we share in the glory of God. This is the glory which reflects the character and attributes Jesus. It is in this intimate relationship with God which demonstrates itself in the life of the believer as the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:23-23). It

is this unity of believers, one in Christ and our Father and in the promised unity with all other believers that shows to a hostile world that we are loved by God and by one another. It is this unity of believers, gloriously joined with each other through their being united with Christ, which invites the world to see the mystery of the Gospel and invites the world to hear the apostolic message of eternal life.

Conclusion

This prayer is clearly a prayer for the consecration of Jesus as he faces the task of providing the supreme “Gospel event.” It is also a prayer for the consecration of the apostles as they are given the task of communicating the “good news” to a world that needs eternal life. But it is also a prayer for the consecration of all who will experience eternal life through hearing and believing the “good news” as they share in the task of communicating the “good news” to their world. This prayer becomes a divine “teaching moment” through which Jesus teaches the apostles and through which John uses to teach succeeding generations that the “glory of God” is seen and experienced in true *koinōnía* (unity and sharing). Indeed, it is only in the participation with the divine, that the “glory of God” is made evident. Throughout the prayer Jesus affirmed his unity with the Father, asked for deeper unity and asked that his followers experience the same unity that he, the Son, had with his Father. Jesus, knowing that the glory of God could only be experienced in fellowship, asked that the unity be not only between individuals and God, but also between individual believers as they shared their fellowship with God.

The purpose of this unity which glorifies God is always the same. *That the world may know God and thus have life.* As this unity is experienced and expressed the truth of God can be seen, *known*, and *believed*. This is the “mystery” about which Paul would later write.

The implications which seem apparent from this study are as follows:

- The unity for which Jesus prayed is *not* between institutions, religious organizations or parties, regional or national groups, or signers of confessional statements or creeds.
- The unity for which Jesus prayed is *between individuals* and their relationship with the triune God and their relationship with one another.
- The unity between believers is to embrace *all* believers.
- Individual believers should affirm the intimacy for which Jesus prayed –
 - between the Father and the Son,
 - between God and the individual believer,

- between God and *all* who trust in the person of Jesus and his glorious sacrifice, and
 - between all believers who share in that oneness through the knowledge of the Son and the Father, which is eternal life.
- This unity for which Jesus prayed is affirmed by Jesus is His method of exposing the validity of the incarnation, the truth of the gospel, and the ongoing expression of the glory of God.

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Sažetak *Ovaj članak je izlaganje 17. poglavlja evanđelja po Ivanu, koje pruža najdetaljniji izraz Isusove želje za njegove sljedbenike. Približavajući se satu otkupljujućeg događaja, Isus ne samo da moli za sebe i njemu najbliže učenike, već za sve koji će postati vjernici kroz poruku apostola. Izlaganje navodi subjekte Kristove molitve, molbe same po sebi i svrhu tih molbi. Svrha je navedena kao "...da svijet upozna da si me ti poslao i da si njih ljubio kao što si ljubio mene." Iz ove molitve izvučene su implikacije za vjernike koji žive u post-modernističkoj kulturi.*