

“I Made Known to Them Your Name”

The Fifty-Fourth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 17:20-26; Deuteronomy 29:1-15

When Jesus prays for his disciples, there is one very important point of emphasis—that all of those whom Jesus will redeem, might be one. As Jesus prays, he asks that as he and the Father are one, so too may his people be one, so as to witness the glory of the Father and the Son, and to bear witnesses to the watching world that Jesus has been sent by the Father. If, in the one time in which we learn the contents of Jesus’ prayer for his people, and the thing for which Jesus prays is that we might be one, then we should get some sense of how important it is that we indeed strive to be one, just as Jesus and the Father are one. And yet, we must be careful not to disconnect the goal (unity) from the means by which the goal is attained, sanctification by the truth. This, then, is our focus as we consider the final section of Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer.

In this sermon we wrap up our time discussing the Upper Room Discourse as we conclude the 17th chapter of John’s gospel. The scene is well familiar to us—Jesus wraps-up the teaching portion of the discourse, after celebrating the Passover with his disciples. Knowing that his hour has come and that Jesus must now leave for Gethsemane—where he will be arrested, before standing trial, culminating in his crucifixion and burial the next day—Jesus stops to pray. His prayer makes up the entirety of John 17. Known as the “High Priestly Prayer” (the longest prayer of Jesus recorded in the New Testament), Jesus prays first for himself (vv. 1-5), then for his disciples (vv. 6-19), and then finally for us (in vv. 20-26)—all those who will come to faith in Jesus through the word preached by the disciples, and which is now inscriptured in the pages of our New Testament.

As we saw last time, when we covered verses 6-19 and considered Jesus’ prayer for the disciples, Jesus states in verse 9, *“I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.”* According to Jesus’ prayer, he will give eternal life and faith to all those (but only those) whom the Father has given to him. In this petition, Jesus is referring to those specific individuals chosen by the Father for eternal life in eternity past (in the so-called covenant of redemption), and who are then given to Son, who, in turn, will secure for them the blessings of salvation through his suffering and dying upon the cross. That Jesus came to save those specific individuals given him by the Father is the foundation of the Reformed distinctive often identified as “particular redemption.”

In the final section of our Lord’s “High Priestly Prayer” (vv. 20-26) Jesus prays for those yet to come to faith at the time of his prayer—his is praying for all those Christians from the apostolic age until our own. Jesus’ focus upon those yet to come to faith grows directly out of his prayer for the disciples (in vv. 6-19). In verse 15, Jesus petitioned his Father, *“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”* Jesus’ disciples will not live lives free from suffering and persecution—far from it. All but one (John) will die as a martyr. Jesus does not ask that his disciples be spared from the troubles about to befall them just hours away (and of which, they are blissfully ignorant). Instead, Jesus asks that the Father protect the disciples from the evil one (Satan), who seduces one of their own number (Judas) to commit the despicable act of treason leading to Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.

Because his disciples have been given to him by the Father in eternity past, Jesus has given them eternal life and then called them to faith. He can say of them in verse 16, *“they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”* Jesus has come to earth from heaven (and the glory he has enjoyed with the Father

from all eternity), by taking to himself a true human nature, for the purpose of accomplishing the mission of redemption given him by the Father. Jesus is, therefore, not of the world, and once they come to believe in him, no longer are his disciples identified as “of the world.” The disciples have been liberated from the realm of sin and darkness (the world) in which sinful human opinion prevails over the word of God. Jesus’ disciples will remain in the world, but not be of it.

The means by which believers are taken out of the world is described by Jesus in verse 17. “*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*” Although we touched on this point briefly past time, our Lord’s petition (that his disciples be “sanctified”) has a direct bearing upon Jesus’ prayer for those yet to come to faith through the preaching of the disciples. Jesus identifies them in verse 20, “*those who will believe in me through their [the disciple’s] word.*” What does Jesus mean when he prays that the Father “sanctify them,” especially in light of his identification of the truth (the Word of God) as the means through which YHWH will answer Jesus’ prayer?

The primary sense of “sanctify” (*hagiazō*) is when a person or object is set apart by God for a particular use or purpose. In this case, Jesus is asking YHWH that his own disciples be set apart by the Father for a particular purpose, as spelled out in verse 18. “*As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*” Jesus has been set apart by the Father to perform his messianic mission by virtue of the covenant of redemption made between the Father and the Son in eternity past. When Jesus calls the disciples to faith, they are set apart for God’s purposes, which as they will soon discover (after Pentecost), is to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. The Father has sent Jesus to give eternal life to all those given to him. Jesus will send the disciples to preach the gospel to all those who are yet to receive eternal life and then come to faith. In verse 19, Jesus tells us that he has been set apart for his messianic mission, so too, the disciples will be set part for their unique mission.

If the primary sense of “to sanctify” is to be set apart by God for God’s own purpose, then the secondary sense of the term is ethical purity (holiness). In the case of objects reserved for holy purposes only (for example, the implements used for the worship of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple), these vessels were not to be used for common purposes—like making cement, or doing the laundry. In the case of people who are being sanctified (those called by God to faith in Jesus Christ), once justified and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, God begins the process of molding the individual into the likeness of Jesus. To be justified is to be reckoned “holy.” But all those justified, are also being sanctified—the new nature is progressively strengthened and renewed, while the old habit of sin is progressively weakened, and gradually loses its hold over those sinners whom God sets apart for his own purposes. The process of sanctification is only complete at death, and as the *Heidelberg Catechism* puts it in the answer to Q 114, “but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of such obedience, yet so that with earnest purpose they begin to live not only according to some, but according to all the Commandments of God.”

As Jesus himself makes crystal clear, the means through which this “set-apartness” of Jesus’ disciples takes place is “the truth.” The truth includes the specific words given by the Father to Jesus, who has, in turn, revealed these very words to the disciples (as we find recorded without error throughout our canonical gospels). These words spoken by Jesus, which were given to him by YHWH, have created eternal life, and given rise to faith. The disciples understood that these words are factually true (the events of which Jesus speaks really happened, and that Jesus is really who he claims to be), and that these words also reveal (and therefore, explain) the purpose of Jesus’ messianic mission. Jesus’ miracles serve to convince the disciples that Jesus is one with YHWH, and that he (Jesus) is that coming one foretold throughout the Old Testament. His miracles confirm the truth of Jesus’ words.

When Jesus begins to pray for those yet to come faith throughout the ages subsequent to his own and until his return, our Lord refers to the word as the means through which countless others (in addition to the disciples) will come to faith—the word being the Old Testament, and well as YHWH’s words given through Jesus, which will soon become part of the still-to-be-written New Testament. In verse 20, our Lord petitions the Father, “*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.*” Jesus clearly indicates that the disciples will have a mission to perform, much as Jesus has. If those in the upper room with Jesus are to be “sanctified by the truth” which Jesus now specifically identifies as the Word of God (Scripture), then so too are those countless souls to whom the Word of God will come through the ministry of the disciples—that’s us.

This is why we speak of the Word of God as “a means of grace.” Both Luther and Calvin were adamant about this, as for example, when Luther declared in regard to this particular text, “a Christian should know that nothing on earth is more sacred than God’s Word, for even the Sacrament itself is made blessed, and sanctified by God’s Word, and all of us too, are thereby spiritually born and consecrated Christians.”¹ Likewise Calvin said “God is not to be separated from his word,” that “the Spirit is joined with the word, because without the efficacy of the Spirit, the preaching of the gospel would avail nothing but be unfruitful.”² Sanctification is accomplished through the means of the truth (God’s word).

There are several additional points here to carefully consider. The first is that the disciples will take the words which Jesus has given them and proclaim them to Israel and then to the nations, just as Jesus has done, so that others (for whom Jesus is now praying) will come to faith. Countless individuals who have been chosen by the Father and given to the Son, will believe in Jesus, “through [God’s] word” as proclaimed by the disciples. This establishes the Word of God as the foundation of the church, as the preaching and teaching of Jesus is written down by the disciples (and those in their circle), writings which we now possess in the form of the canonical gospels and in the epistles in the New Testament.

The word establishes the church because Scripture comes with the authority of Jesus, and it is through the word that the Holy Spirit ordinarily works. The church does not give any additional authority to Scripture than it already possesses, as Rome erroneously argues. Rather, the church recognizes the inherent authority of the word, proclaims that word, and then, as the apostles begin to die off, the church ordains ministers and elders to preach that same word, even as the church collects that word into canonical form, in addition to the canon of Scripture the church already possesses—the Old Testament. Jesus’ assertion in John 17:20 clearly indicates that the word establishes the church, and that Christians must be in submission to the word, because it (and not the church) is “the truth.” The truth being the very words which YHWH gave to Jesus, and which Jesus, in turn gives to us through the disciples.

A closely related point is that the preached word (as the truth) is the divinely approved means of evangelism. The disciples are to preach the word, because the word creates disciples and establishes a church. Since the Spirit breathes forth God’s word, and gives it its authority, Scripture (not the teaching office of the church) is the standard by which a Christian determines truth and discerns error. Although there are many oral traditions circulating in the early church, once the words of Jesus, the teachings of the apostles, and the traditions from the apostolic circle are written down, through the superintendence of the Holy Spirit (as Paul describes in 2 Timothy 3:16), Scripture becomes the norm which “norms” all

¹ Plass, What Luther Says, 3.4747.

² Miller, Calvin’s Wisdom, 20, 24-25.

other norms. It is Jesus who teaches us that Scripture is truth, and through its proclamation, people across the ages will come to faith in him. Any form of evangelism worthy of the name, must be grounded in Scripture. And this is why we speak of the preached word as a “means of grace.” God’s people are sanctified (set apart) by the truth, and the truth is found in God’s word.

Jesus’ prayer also indicates that there will be a significant period of time during which people will come to faith in him. The disciples will preach the word, and a vast multitude will come to believe in Jesus. Yet, Jesus never sets a specific time frame for this evangelistic effort to take place (just that the gospel must be preached to the nations prior to his return—Matthew 24:14), nor does Jesus give any indication that the period of time during which people will believe in him will be brief. In the opening chapter of the Book of Acts, just before the Day of Pentecost, and immediately before ascending into heaven, Jesus tells them, “*but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” The disciples will bear witness about Jesus through preaching the words he gave them. They will begin in Jerusalem, and in their own lifetimes, the gospel will go to the end of the earth (likely a reference to the city of Rome).

As a consequence of the word producing countless generations of disciples, Jesus offers yet another petition in verse 21—“*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” This verse is the subject of much bad exegesis, is often distorted by well-intended pious sentiment, and is so often ripped from its context and used in inappropriate ways, we should spend some time clarifying what Jesus does not say, before considering what Jesus actually does say.

In the past few days, I posted a video on my blog in which an Anglican bishop spoke at a Kenneth Copeland conference before introducing a short video greeting from Pope Francis. There’s a joke in there somewhere: the pope, a bishop, and a word-faith heretic walk into a bar . . . The bishop declared triumphantly that the “protest” underlying the Protestant Reformation and Protestantism is now over because Rome and an international Lutheran group have reached a “concordat” on the doctrine of justification. We don’t have time to explain why, but Rome always wins any ecumenical discussion with Protestants when they are willing to compromise with Rome regarding the doctrinal article by which Christ’s church stands or falls (justification).

This particular Lutheran group (the World Federation of Lutherans), eventually accepted language about justification which is grounded in the change in the human heart, not in the imputed merits of Christ. Rome wins again. To those word-faith Pentecostals gathered for the conference, the bishop cited Jesus’ words from John 17:21 as the fruit produced by ending the Protestant protest—now that there is ecumenical agreement about the gospel, finally, we can all be one, just as Jesus prayed. The price for such unity is the denial of justification *sola fide*—of which most of the people at the Kenneth Copeland conference had never heard of anyway. Pope Francis then appeared by video, defined the gospel as obeying the law—we should love God and neighbor—and then appealed to the same text from John 17:21, and the unity for which Jesus prayed. Copeland came out and led the entire convention in speaking in tongues as a manifestation of God’s glory—the sure sign that the unity the pope desired was now a reality. There are not words to describe this unholy spectacle.

The ecumenical movement exists based upon a misunderstanding of John 17:21. Jesus is misunderstood to teach that unity trumps truth. There are many well-intended folk who truly believe that when Jesus prays that we all might be one, he is saying that denominations are sinful (because they divide us), and that all denominations should seek to merge into one so as to fulfill Jesus’ prayer. So long as this is done

on the basis of a common foundation of agreed upon truth (like the Reformed confessions), the concept is a good one, although I'm not convinced that Jesus is speaking of an institutional unity here—that denominations should seek to merge, and unite whenever possible. Jesus' people can still be one in the manner of which Jesus is speaking (eschatological), and yet still attend churches of different denominations until we enter into perfect unity in the glory of Jesus and the Father in heaven.

Many of us have encountered certain residents of Orange County who cite this verse as the chief reason why emphasis upon sound doctrine (like the Reformed confessions) or denominationalism, gets in the way of fulfilling Jesus' prayer for the unity of his people. But those who use this verse to decry doctrine and denominations, and then start their own group of churches in response (calling them “non-denominational”) to supposedly avoid evils of denominationalism, are acting rather hypocritically, are they not? Let me be clear here—the Reformers sought to Reform the church, not start a new one, because they considered themselves to be truly “catholic,” but not Roman.

But Jesus raises an even bigger problem for us in his petition to the Father—an apologetics problem. If Jesus prays that all his people may all be one, and it is supposedly self-evident that we are not (if one considers divisions among Christians, as well as the large number of denominations and factions as proof), does that not mean that Jesus' prayer to the Father has gone unanswered? This is an objection we often encounter and it needs to be addressed, especially in light of the fact that since Jesus is one with the Father and does his will, how can his prayer for Christian unity go answered?

So then, what does Jesus mean when he prays *that they may all be one*? The unity of which Jesus speaks begins with a Christian's submission to that truth which the Father reveals to Jesus, and which Jesus, in turn, has revealed to the disciples, who have revealed this truth to believers yet to come.³ The oneness of which Jesus speaks and which he desires, is that all believers be one in purpose, that we truly love one another, and that we are all willing to submit to the authority of the words which are revealed by Jesus, and which “sanctify” us. Such a unity is, as one writer puts it, “analogous to the oneness that Jesus enjoys with the Father.”⁴ This oneness is created by our common allegiance to the truth, and should mirror the unity of love and purpose which is shared by the Father and the Son.

We see this analogy in the balance of Jesus' petition in verse 21, when Jesus appeals to the fact that “*just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” The works which Jesus performs are the Father's works, and the Son does only the will of the Father—the Father is in the Son, and the Son in the Father. The unity of believers of which Jesus speaks echoes what Jesus had said earlier in the metaphor of the vine and its branches in John 15:5. “*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*” When believers are “sanctified by the truth,” and abide in the vine (Jesus), they will be one because they will bear the fruit which Jesus desires and produces.

If not an institutional unity (i.e., that is we give up our denominations and confessions, to become one church), surely Jesus is speaking of a visible unity, a unity which the world observes and which is noticed. Such a witness does not come about through superficial demonstrations of unity (in the kumbaya sense described previously), but through submission to the teaching of Scripture (the

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 568.

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 568.

truth)—appealing to the authority of God’s word as that which unifies God’s people. When Christians submit to the truth of God’s word, through which the Spirit works, and through which we are sanctified, only then there will be genuine love for one another, the manifestation of good works and Christian charity. A genuine unity can only be found in a common commitment to the truth of God’s revelation, even if Christians can and do disagree about the details of the things revealed.

More importantly, unity formed around the truth of God’s word will withstand the sinful behavior and foibles of Christians. The problem is not that truth and doctrine divide us—it is sin which divides us. Ironically, it is the lack of interest in doctrine which keeps us from being united around a body of truth. Pointing people to superficial unity only makes our sinful behavior and lack of interest in the truth to be the basis for the church’s public witness. Sadly, this actually diverts God’s people from uniting around a common affirmation of the truth of God’s word, and in a willingness to submit to its teaching. The more we seek superficial unity apart from truth, the more our witness to the world is compromised.

In the rest of the prayer, Jesus fleshes out what such unity actually entails. The unity of which Jesus is speaking is eschatological—although we strive for it now, the goal (perfect unity) cannot be achieved until we enter into God’s glory. In verses 22-23, Jesus petitions the Father, *“the glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”* As the Father and Son are one, so too all believers are one, and enter into that same glory which Jesus has enjoyed with the Father. The goal is that we may be brought to such unity so that we reflect in our conduct the unity of the Father and Son. Unity will be present in this age, and non-Christians will witness it, yet it is only fully realized when we enter into the glory of which Jesus speaks.

Perfect unity is an eschatological goal—the church in heaven is even now perfectly one (participating in Christ’s glory), even as the church on earth struggles to reflect that unity which Jesus seeks and to which he will bring us. Such unity is also covenantal—we are all participants in those same covenant blessings which God promises to all those who are in Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, YHWH reminds Israel that they are his people (and united) because YHWH is in their midst. One such example of this presence of YHWH establishing one unified people is found in the covenant renewal ceremony on the plains of Moab, as we read in Deuteronomy 29:1-15, our Old Testament lesson.

Elsewhere, Paul speaks of this eschatological sense of unity, glory, and holiness. In Ephesians 5:25-27, he declares, *“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle.”* This work of purification is already under way, but is not complete in this life, only in the next—when all of the elect are gathered together as Christ’s bride in heaven. The unity of which Jesus speaks in John 17:21 is like that of the holiness of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 5—it is the goal, and just as Jesus prays, so too Paul indicates that sanctification by the truth is the means through which holiness of the church will be attained. Our sanctification is tied to the word (the truth), and manifests itself in an observable unity and holiness, yet is not realized until we are in heavenly glory.

Jesus’ eschatological focus is clearly seen in verse 24, when he offers another petition. *“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”* Jesus asks that YHWH will indeed save all those given him by the Father before time began—specifically that all of those whom God has chosen (for whom Jesus is about to suffer and die) will be one in heaven (*“where I am”*). When we are where Jesus is (in heaven), then we will witness that glory which belongs to the Father and the Son. And only

then we will finally and perfectly be one. Although we get a foretaste of this glory when Jesus suffers and dies upon a cross (dying to remove the guilt of our sin) and is then raised from the dead, we will see the fulness of God's glory when Jesus takes us to heaven (and we join the church triumphant in its perfect unity and holiness), or we will see it when Jesus returns on the last day—whichever comes first.

In verses 25-26, Jesus ends his prayer, pleading “*O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*” At the close of his prayer, Jesus focuses on perfect unity as a goal when Jesus speaks of how he knows YHWH, how he has made YHWH known, and how he **will continue** to make YHWH known, so that *the love with which you have loved me may be in them*. There is no doubt that Jesus' prayer “that we all may be one,” will be answered. It should be our goal, and part of our sanctification in this life is to be one before the watching world, so that the world will know that YHWH sent Jesus.

But it is only in the presence of Jesus and the Father that this love and unity is perfected. This will come to pass because Jesus has accomplished his work of redemption and can tell His Father “*I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.*” This is the unity of which Jesus speaks and for which we must strive, because we have been set apart by God and are being sanctified by the truth. The truth will not only set us free, it will make us one, and will bring us to perfect unity in the presence of Jesus.