

The Church is One

This article on John 17 is edited from the Ligonier Ministries

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is often regarded as one of the best places to begin any study of the church because of its emphasis on the one people of God being knit together in Christ. Ephesians 2:18-22 in particular introduces to us the concept that the church is the Lord's holy temple built upon the apostles and prophets. However, the concept of unity in Christ is not just revealed in Paul's epistles. It is in the entire canon of Scripture.

Let us turn to John 17, which contains some of our Lord's most focused teaching on the church and His desires for it. This instruction is expressed in our Lord's High Priestly Prayer, the longest recorded prayer in the New Testament. Although Jesus articulates many things about His church in this chapter, there is a clear stress on the unity of His people, as He prays that His disciples and all those who come to believe because of their gospel proclamation would be one (vv. 11b, 22–23). Unfortunately, however, it seems that nothing but division exists in the church today. Hundreds of different Protestant denominations can be found throughout the world, including Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Anglicans, and many more.

Such visible disunity drives the ecumenical movement, an attempt to rectify the problem by finding agreement between Christians on matters of doctrine and practice. This goal is not in itself a bad one, as long as those participating in the dialogue agree on the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Yet it is often the case that the most eager and vocal proponents of ecumenism also have, at best, a tenuous affirmation of the creeds. What often results is a lowest-common-denominator religion void of the gospel and a refusal to hear what the Bible says on a whole host of matters in order that none might take offense.

Visible Christian unity is a good thing, and it is something toward which we should all strive. But visible unity is meaningless if it is not based on an invisible unity of Christians in the truth of God, as Jesus tells us (vv. 17–19). We do no one a favor if the gospel is not the tie that binds us together.

Are you concerned for the unity of the church? Although we can never compromise on the essential truths of the gospel, striving toward reconciliation with other believers and the unity of the faith, both invisible and visible, is a commendable goal. Practical ways that our unity in Christ Jesus can be demonstrated include Christian conferences, community prayer meetings or Bible studies with other evangelical believers, and much more.