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The seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to John contains the longest recorded prayer of Jesus' earthly life. Its value and importance increase as we remember that these are among the last words from our Lord before His death. The prayer occurs within the context of the last supper and most probably was prayed within the hearing of the apostles. More importantly for our religiously divided world and for this "ecumenical age," the prayer of our Lord in John 17 is "Christ's ecumenical prayer."

National and international news media have given prominent space to the ecumenical movement and its leaders. Eugene Carson Blake, newly elected executive secretary of the World Council of Churches, along with other religious leaders have been widely quoted and repeatedly interviewed about the possibilities and plans for unity within so-called "Christendom." Vatican II council stirred more public discussion in this area with its proceedings given in-depth treatment by the news media.

But today I call you to brush away the modern charge and counter-charge, to clear your mind of this or that "plan" for modern church union—in short—to listen respectfully, reverently, and obediently to "Christ's ecumenical prayer." As one contemporary scholar has rightly observed, "... there is no prayer of Jesus which has been so hindered from being answered by individual Christians and by all Churches than this prayer" (p. 282, William Barclay, Daily Bible Study Guide, John 2).

First, let us look at a general survey of this prayer which comprises the entire seventeenth chapter in John's Gospel. Verses 1-5 are petitions from Jesus dealing with His personal relationship with God, the Father. Verses 6-19 are Christ's petitions on behalf of His apostles, while verses 20-26 contain Christ's prayer for the unity and glory of the whole church.

What we consider in this lesson is not simply the great utterance of a spiritual genius. The same inspired writer who preserves this prayer says of the one who prayed it, "And the Word (meaning Christ, jac) became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Not another great man but rather "the only begotten" from God, the one individual in all history fully possessing God's grace and truth. The person who prays this prayer, according to Simon Peter, one of His closest associates, is "The Christ of God" (Luke 9:20).

The opening phrases of the prayer itself draw us to the authoritative Son of God as we read, "even as thou gavest him authority over all flesh" (John 17:2). These words remind us of what the resurrected Lord Jesus said as He gave the commission to preach His message to all men: "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: ..." (Matthew 28:18, 19).

We do not listen, in this prayer, to a religious Shakespeare or a primitive Milton. We come, in John 17, to the earnest prayer of God's only begotten Son, the one who revealed to us God's truth for our age, and who this very day possesses total sway over all mankind.

This means that the petition for the unity of all believers within Christ's prayer states the will of heaven for Christians today! As we will soon notice, every other petition in this chapter concerns real matters respecting the life of Christ and the lives of His apostles. Without some kind of mental trick no serious student of God's Word can view the unity requested as other than a practical reality that our Lord expects to occur among Christians in every age.

As already suggested, we observe the relationship of Christ and God in the opening verses of John 17. Jesus talks of the mutual glory shared by God, the Son and God, the Father: "These things spake Jesus; and lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that the Son may glorify thee: ... (John 17:1).

Christ's death was to be an instrument through which God's glory would be made known to all men. The ministry of Christ also demonstrated the glory of God. At verse four our Lord prayed, "I glorified thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do" (John 17:4). Above the glory shared by the Father and the Son in the ministry and death of the Son was an eternal glory—a glory that would never fade.

This Jesus reveals when He prays, "And now, Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). Later in His prayer Jesus also said, "Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovest me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24).

The relationship of God and Christ, as revealed in this prayer involved the Father's delegation of authority to the Son. Jesus had spoken earlier of this in the following words, "For as the Father hath life in himself, even so gave he to the Son also to have life in himself: and he gave him authority to execute judgment, because he is a son of man" (John 5:26, 27).

Peter preached in the first gospel sermon following Christ's ascension that God had made Jesus both "Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Above all, as Jesus reveals in His prayer, this authority given Him by God empowered Him to provide man eternal life. Listen as Jesus prays, "... even as thou gavest him authority over all flesh, that to all whom thou hast given him, he should give
eternal life. And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ” (John 17:2, 3).

The early words of Jesus’ prayer show us a relationship between the Father and the Son of mutual glory, delegated authority, and the bestowal of eternal life on obedient man.

The next section of “Christ’s ecumenical prayer,” reveals something of the relationship of Christ and His apostles. It was through Christ that these chosen ones truly learned of God. Jesus prayed, “I manifested thy name unto the men whom thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them to me; and they have kept thy word” (John 17:6).

By so revealing God and teaching His will to these men, Christ brought them to saving or obedient faith. Peter’s confession in Matthew, chapter 16, in effect was the confession of every apostle. “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). It was Peter who also summarized the surrender of this same group of men when he asked Jesus, “Lo, we have left all, and followed thee; what then shall we have?” (Matthew 19:27). Jesus now prays for these men, “Now they know that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are from thee: for the words which thou gavest me I have given unto them; and they received them, and knew of a truth that I came forth from thee, and they believed that thou didst send me” (John 17:7, 8).

Among other requests, our Lord asked God to protect and unify the apostles. “And I am no more in the world, and these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are” (John 17:11). Later He again petitions, “I pray not that thou shouldest keep them from the world, but that thou shouldest take them from the world, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me” (John 17:20, 21).

Of this unity we first learn that it was to be of the same nature as the God-Christ unity. Jesus had earlier stated, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). From the prayer itself we learn that the unity between God, the Father, and God, the Son, was an eternal unity (John 17:5, 24). When Jesus prays, “I accomplished your work,” He also reveals that His unity with God is a unity of purpose.

Paul explains in II Corinthians 5:18,19 that God and Christ work as one in man’s reconciliation. Jesus also made it clear during His personal ministry that He and the Father were one in the truth He revealed to man (John 12:49,50). Jesus talks in His prayer of “the glory which I had with thee before the world was” (John 17:5). One scholar remarks, “After having asked for the general unity of believers (all), Jesus describes it as a unity of the most elevated order; it partakes of
the nature of that of the Father and the Son” (Godet, p. 341).

We also learn from Jesus’ prayer that this unity of all believers occurs in their connection with the Godhead. Listen again to Jesus’ words, “. . . that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me” (John 17:21). Jesus invites us to “abide” in Him in the analogy of the vine and the branches in John 15:1-8.

In his First General Epistle John writes of our fellowship with God which also creates fellowship with Christ and all Christians (I John 1:3). The Christian is represented in the New Testament as being “in Christ” and “in God” (II Corinthians 5:17; Acts 17:28). This spiritual union with God and Christ, Paul explains also brings the Christian into a practical oneness (I Corinthians 12:20).

Jesus’ prayer for the unity of all believers also reveals that this unity produces a witness for Christ that leads the world to believe in Christ. Listen to verse twenty-one again, “. . . that the world may believe that thou didst send me” (John 17:21). Such unity, Christ continues to pray, says “that thou didst send me, and lovedst them, even as thou lovedst me” (John 17:23). Such oneness of all God’s children witnesses to the reconciling quality of Christ’s person and work—a reconciliation of all kinds of men into the one body of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18).

This kind of unity Paul commands when he writes the church at Corinth and “all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours” (I Corinthians 1:2). Paul beseeches us “through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Corinthians 1:10).

This unity is linked with the “glory” Christ gives to all who obey Him. “And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto them;” He prayed, “that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:22).

R. V. G. Tasker has commented, “This unity, like the love which produces it, is supernatural; it is fundamentally the same as the unity that exists between the Father and the Son. This is why the world, when it sees such unity among believers, will be led to recognize the divine mission of Jesus. But the perfection of this unity will only be reached so long as the believers keep in touch with their exalted Lord and contemplate the glory which has been His from eternity” (p. 191, R.V.G. Tasker, Tyndale Commentary, Vol. 4).

In His prayer our Lord sounds heaven’s ecumenical challenge that even today must be answered. Christ herewith deals soundly, realistically, and positively with the unity so much in the news today. J. R. Mott once remarked, “In this prayer He revealed that such unity or oneness is possible and obligatory. Every extension of the visible fellowship of Christians will increase the power of the Church to witness to its Lord” (p. 153, The Present-Day Summons, quoted in Speaker’s Bible, John II, p. 147).

Without reservation and after a careful study of “Christ’s ecumenical prayer I believe that this is the only God-honoring, Christ-exalting, Holy Spirit-respecting “unity” that men can achieve in our time. Such unity will appear when we finally decide to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), when we come to believe in Christ so strongly that we will sincerely repent of our sins, declare our faith openly, and further obey Christ in baptism (Acts 16:30-34; Acts 2:38; Matthew 10:32, 33; Mark 16:16). In this very surrender, dictated solely by God’s Word, we will achieve membership in Christ’s one body, the united church of all the saved, and through continued study of the New Testament will bring into being the one church of Jesus Christ.