

Introduction

Several years ago, a survey was taken to find out why people don't go to church. Two reasons more than any others were given. One is that the church is full of hypocrites. I know what to say in response to that: **"Great, come and join us. You'll fit right in."** The other reason is that Christians are always fighting. I don't know what to say in response to that. It does illustrate, however, what Jesus discusses in John 17:20-24, the final apologetic, and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Oneness of Christians

I begin, in verse 24, with one of the most significant insights about the Trinity that we'll ever learn. Jesus declared, **"For You (God the Father) loved Me (God the Son)."** We can infer from this verse and others that each person of the Trinity (God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) loves the other two with an infinite and perfect love.

This utterly satisfying Trinitarian love has a consequence that Jesus reveals in verses 21 and 22. It's that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are **"one."** Infinite and perfect love leads to a total union of the divine persons. There is absolute and complete concord and not even a smidgeon of discord between them.

Those two dynamics, love and the oneness it creates, comprise what we call community. Let me ask a fascinating question. What did God do **"before the foundation of the world"** to quote verse 24? That verse in conjunction with verses 21 and 22 tells us. He experienced community. He had a life before He created anything that exists, one that consisted of the community we see in our text. As Dallas Willard describes it, the Trinity is **"a self-sufficing community of unspeakably magnificent personal beings of boundless love, knowledge, and power."** God's nature, in other words, is inherently communal.

And because human beings are in His image, so is ours. That is one of the most instructive truths about us. We're inherently communal

creatures. The fact is that we desperately need vibrant and authentic relationships with others.

Some years ago, a group of researchers conducted the most thorough research project on human relationships ever done - called the Alameda County Study. Led by a Harvard social scientist, it tracked the lives of 7,000 people over a period of nine years. The researchers found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than people with strong relational connections. They also found that people who had bad health habits (smoking, eating unhealthy foods, obesity, and so on) but strong relational ties lived significantly longer than people who had excellent habits but were isolated. It's better for us, in other words, to eat Little Debbie's with good friends than to eat broccoli alone.

Those results show that our nature is inherently communal. We need to have relationships that are meaningful and deep. We thrive when we do and languish when we don't. The fact is that we exist to commune. Aristotle said it well, **"But whoever is unable to live in society, or who has no need of it because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god."** We need community.

And in verses 21-22, Jesus identified the kind we need the most. Notice the words in verse 21, **"even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You,"** and in verse 22, **"just as We are one."** The kind of community that we need most is that which is like the community of God.

And we can have it. Chapter 17 is the Lord's Prayer, the high priestly prayer of Jesus. Notice in verse 20 who He prayed would have the same experience of community that Father God and He have. It was **"those also who believe in Me."** It's clear. Christians and only Christians can have the kind of love and oneness that the Father, Son, Holy Spirit have. Theologian Richard Neuhaus explained it this way: **"God is one, and all who are God's are one. The church is a communal articulation of that truth."** He was right. Christians and only Christians can have the kind of communal oneness the Trinity has.

Yes, we can have it and Philip Melancthon, the "brains" behind

Martin Luther in the Protestant Reformation, taught us how. He wrote a basic guideline that articulates in practical terms how we achieve the communal oneness Jesus wants us to have and we need to have. It has three parts, each of which I'm going to explain.

In Essentials, Unity

The first part of the guideline is, "**In essentials, unity.**" Essentials are the foundational truths of Scripture. They're what we call "**orthodoxy**" or "**the fundamentals of the faith.**" Those fundamentals are totally non-negotiable and beyond compromise. We can't budge, give even an inch, when it comes to them.

One of the dominant values of our current culture is diversity. But when it comes to essentials, we insist on unity. We insist that others believe in and live consistently with them. And we will respond appropriately when they don't. We will contend with them. Or not join them. Or separate from them. Or discipline them. Or remove them our midst. And so on, as kingdom goodness demands.

An elder of a church was convinced through the teachings of a nationally acclaimed faith healer that God isn't triune. The faith healer teaches and this elder came to believe that God is one being with at least ten persons not three. Well, the church's board called this elder before it. It pointed out his error and asked him to recant, but he wouldn't. So, it removed him as elder, which prompted him to leave the church.

Did that church board violate Jesus' call in verses 21 and 22 to be one? No, it didn't. That God is one being with three persons is an essential. We cannot, therefore, negotiate or compromise it. As Melancthon said it, "**In essentials, unity.**"

In Non-essentials, Liberty

Melancthon's guideline has a second part, "**In non-essentials, liberty.**" You know what non-essentials are. Should public workers be allowed to collectively bargain and strike? Should children be allowed to

have cell phones? Should we use sports to evangelize non-Christians? Should 14 year-olds be allowed to date? Should we sing choruses or hymns in worship services? I'd make two points about those issues.

First, the Bible doesn't address them. It doesn't tell us explicitly or implicitly what we should believe and do about them. That means they aren't essentials. They're non-essentials. What we believe and do regarding them is a matter of preference, opinion, or taste.

I'd make a second point about those kinds of issues. Christians are going to think differently about them. Should children be allowed to text friends? How many of you say "Yes?" How many of you say "No?" In the last election, some of you voted for House Bill 5 and some against it. Christians can be so different when it comes to non-essentials.

But that's okay isn't it. In essentials, we insist on unity. In non-essentials, we allow diversity or "**liberty.**" Non-essentials aren't matters of absolute truth. So, we have the freedom to believe and do what we think best and should allow others that same freedom. Listen to a poem called "The Nit-Picker's Creed": "**Believe as I believe, no more, no less – That I am right (and no one else) confess – Feel as I feel, think only as I think – Eat what I eat and drink only what I drink – Look as I look, do always as I do – And then, and only then, I will fellowship with you.**" That's a wrong approach to life. It teaches us, by way of contrast, what we should do. Insist on unity in essentials, but allow diversity or liberty in non-essentials.

In All Things, Love

There's a third part to Melancthon's guideline, "**in all things charity.**" "**Charity**" is an old English word that means "**love.**" In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love.

Whether it's essentials or non-essentials, people often disagree with us. And we don't like that do we? The problem with most of us is that we take the disagreements personally. We interpret them to be inherent condemnations, get offended or mad because we do, and act accordingly.

We condemn the disagreeers or give them the cold shoulder or say bad things about them or quarrel with them or even physically attack them.

But we shouldn't. In Romans 14, Paul writes about Christians disagreeing with each other and gives us a guiding principle we should follow in that regard, **"walk according to love."**

Theologian Frederick Bruner identified one facet of this multi-faceted love. While studying the Holy Spirit in the Bible, He discovered what he called **"the shyness of the Spirit."** He wrote about that: **"What I mean is not the shyness of timidity but the shyness of deference the shyness of other-centeredness."** It is in other words, the shyness of love. We see the same thing when we look at the Father and Son. They are just as shy as the Holy Spirit is. Each concentrates His attention and actions on the others not Himself. There's a servanthood, submission, and delight among them that is profound.

Well, true Christian community is like that. There is a shyness of love among the persons who make it up. This shyness compels them to make room for and to exalt each other. Each is for the other and all are included in a shared love. The same kind of servanthood, submission, and delight that are in the divine community are in this human community. That has many consequences, one of which is this. Christians wisely defer to each other in non-essentials.

A newspaper article told about two tiny struggling churches in a small community, two blocks apart. The leaders of the churches got together and decided to merge, to become a united body, larger and more effective. They began addressing their differences and were able to work them all out except one – how to recite the Lord's Prayer in worship services. One church insisted it be **"debts"** and **"debtors."** The other insisted it be **"trespasses"** and **"those who trespass against us."** They longer they discussed it, the more adamant, defensive, and resentful each side became until, finally, they called the whole thing off. The newspaper article concluded by saying that one church went back to its trespasses and the other to its debts.

I think you get the point. Love would have deferred in this non-essential. One side would have given in and joyfully let the other side have its way. In all things, love.

The Final Apologetic

That then is what oneness requires of us. In essentials, unity. In non-essential's liberty. In all things love.

That kind of oneness is one of Jesus' most urgent concerns for us and He reveals why it is in verses 21 and 23. Notice what it achieves, **"the world (non-Christians) may believe that You sent Me."** That clause in verses 21 and 23 shows us that the oneness of Christians is what Francis Schaeffer called **"the final apologetic."** Apologetics is about convincing non-Christians that Jesus and His gospel are true. Notice what Jesus was claiming in verses 21 and 23. It isn't so much our teaching or theology or programs or worship services or music that convinces non-Christians that He and His gospel are true. It's more the oneness they see and experience among us.

I'd say it this way. Our quarrels and divisions testify to non-Christians that Jesus and His gospel are false. Our oneness testifies that they are true. Philosopher and atheist Friedrich Nietzsche once said, **"I will believe in the Redeemer when the Christian looks a little more redeemed."** Or in terms of our text, **"Non-Christians will believe in the Redeemer when the Christian community looks a little more redeemed."** That is the point of view of non-Christians and Jesus knew it. That's why He said what He did in verses 21 and 23. Our oneness or lack thereof is our most potent witness to the world for either good or ill.

Conclusion

That's why I believe that Jesus is still praying this same prayer for Christians that He did 2,000 years ago. To personalize it, He's still praying to the Father about us, the people of Bethel Friends, that **"they may all be one, just as we are one."** That is our final apologetic.