

# What is Jesus Saying in John 17? | BY ROY ADAMS

**DISCUSSED** | *logos*, prayer, glorification, sanctification “in the truth,” reunion

I interpreted my assignment (of John 17) as an invitation to break through the static and the noise, and get at the heart of Jesus’ burden in this strategic prayer.

So setting aside, as best I could, my own presuppositions about the chapter, and without relying on the views of theological or biblical experts, or the positions of dictionaries and commentaries, I tried over several days to listen—just listen—to what the text itself is saying—to read the chapter as if for the first time, asking how the ordinary person would understand Jesus’ words, if they happened upon them in some deserted place, away from commentaries, sermons, or notes of any kind. Reading the chapter in the original language (an exercise which forces a slower pace) also contributed to this listening process.

This as-if-for-the-first-time reading of the text quickly disabused me of a longstanding preconception I had of the chapter—namely, that the subject of unity was its dominant theme. Instead, I came to see that the subject of unity, while very present, *does not* dominate the passage, but that the prayer covers a variety of themes.

John does not record Jesus’ Gethsemane supplication mentioned in the Synoptics. In John, the event in chapter 17 is Jesus’ final prayer before the cross.<sup>1</sup> In this prayer Jesus unburdens Himself before God in a manner unprecedented in the other gospels. And of the burdens that came to the fore, I’ve identified six: *glorification*, *revelation*, *protection*, *sanctification*, *unity*, and *reunion*.

## Glorification

Evidently, then, Jesus’ prayer was offered while He was still at the location of the Passover meal, where John, together with the other disciples, would have heard it. Jesus would have wanted them to witness this unvarnished unburdening of His soul to His Heavenly Father. And now, more than half a century later, and facing the crosswinds of events in the church and in the world around him, John returns to the famous prayer, the Holy Spirit guiding his mind toward its most salient features.

Jesus began His supplication in a way that is alien to us—with a focus on the idea of glorification. “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son (δοξασον σου τον υιον/*doxason sou ton*

*uion*), that your Son may glorify you” (verse 1).

What all did Jesus have in mind here? What’s behind this idea of glorification? What form was it to take?

John places considerable emphasis on the notion of glorification in his gospel. His opening pronouncement is on this theme—chapter 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. *We have seen his glory* (την δοξαν αυτου), *the glory of the one and only Son*, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Even without fully understanding what all John had in mind here, the mere reading of those words transports the mind to a sublime place, filled with excitement and wonder. It was a glory “shining through the veil of his flesh.”<sup>2</sup>

Other passages pick up the theme. By changing water into wine at a wedding celebration in Galilee, John says, Jesus “revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him” (2:11); Lazarus’ resurrection, Jesus Himself observed, was “for *God’s glory*, so that the son of God may be glorified through it” (11:4, NRSV); in vision, John said, Isaiah “saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” (12:41).

“Bringing glory” is what children do to their parents when they perform well in school, excel in sports, or stand out in some other praiseworthy endeavor. We glorify (or bring glory to) God when we do God’s work, when we obey God’s word, when we act in such a way as to enhance the divine values or mission in the world. Jesus echoes this notion in John 17:4.

Addressing His Father, He said, “I’ve brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”

The glorification idea intensifies in John’s gospel as Jesus gets closer and closer to the cross. We see this in Jesus’ response to certain God-fearing Greeks who appeared in the crowd around Him during Passion Week, asking for an audience. Apparently, He saw in their request a broader yearning for the salvation He’d come to bring, a salvation possible only through the cross, now merely days away. As if oblivious to the specific request (and the passage leaves us wondering whether the desired audience ever materialized), images of that impending cosmic moment flashed upon His mind, evoking those somber words we find in John 12:23, words that anticipated the great



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prayer of chapter 17 still to come: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

That glorification would involve (for Jesus) the ghastly experience of the cross. But, as He described it, the seed, if it is to multiply and feed the multitude, must first die. And (mixing metaphors) only as the Son of Man is lifted on a tree, experiencing the death of a planted seed, would He have the power to “draw all people” to Himself, including the multitude represented by those enquiring Greeks in His audience that day (12:32, NRSV). And thus He braced Himself for that dreadful moment: “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, *glorify* your name!” (12:27, 28a). God’s answer was immediate, like rumbling thunder above the din and hubbub of the crowd: “I have *glorified* it, and will *glorify* it again” (12:28b).

Buttressed by this assurance, and inching ever closer to the cross, Jesus is all about glory and glorification after Judas, bent on his dark mission, left the supper room that Thursday evening. According to John, “when [Judas] was gone, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man is *glorified* and God is *glorified* in him. If God is *glorified* in him, God will *glorify* the Son in himself, and will *glorify* him at once” (13:31–32).

So as He comes to the opening sentences of His prayer in chapter 17, He picks up this running theme a final time. And the fact that He refers again to the idea of “the hour” having come (verse 1) gives further evidence that He was looking ahead to the cross, and that that glorification had something to do with His impending death and the resurrection to follow (although the resurrection is never explicitly mentioned in the chapter).

A prominent theme “of Johannine high christology,” says Paul N. Anderson, “is the *glorification* of the Son of Man.... Such passages as 1:51; 3:14; 6:62; 8:28; 12:23–36; 13:1, 13a all refer to some aspect of the Son of Man ... ascending, being lifted up or being glorified. This is in keeping with the descent/ascent schemas of the christological hymns (Phil. 2:5–11; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–4). But in John, [says Anderson] glorification is paradoxically

connected with the cross.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Jesus’ most intriguing statement about glorification comes in verse 5, where He asked God to “glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” Here He takes the idea of glorification to a different level. I struggled with how to understand *παρά σεαυτώ* (*para seauto*), translated by the NIV and other modern translations as “in your presence” or “in your own presence.” If the reflexive pronoun *σεαυτώ* means “thyself” or “yourself,” how did we arrive at the idea of “in your presence”? Especially when linked to *para*, a complicated preposition, requiring more than two pages of fine-print explanation in Arndt’s and Gingrich’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*!<sup>4</sup>

It brought to mind a statement I’d read a few weeks earlier—about how historians, coming up against the mysteries of religion, sometimes have to realize that their methodological “instruments are too clumsy to handle the evidence” in front of them.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps biblical interpreters face the same difficulty from time to time. For here one gets the sense that Jesus probably meant something much deeper than the translators are able to manage—that He was probably asking God to glorify Him (Jesus) *with God Himself*, in a way too complex for human words. Suffice it to say that at the very least it was a plea for the reinstatement before the heavenly intelligences of Jesus’ divine honor and prerogatives, voluntarily relinquished for the sake of His incarnation.

Finally, if we’re not reading too much into the text, it would appear that that relinquishment occurred not when Jesus entered Mary’s womb, but “before the world existed” (verse 5, NRSV). A mind-blowing thought, if correct, showing that the provisions of divine grace anticipated the fall, predating the creation of the planet itself.

So the idea of glory, introduced by John at the beginning of his gospel (“the word became flesh...” and “we have seen his glory”) reaches its climax in the major burden with which Jesus begins His prayer. Notwithstanding the darkness involved, it was a note of triumph, filled with pathos and paradox.

## Revelation

Following His emphasis on glorification, Jesus' burden shifts to *revelation*—that is, making God known in the world, and Jesus Christ whom God has sent (verses 3–9, 25, 26). “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world” (verse 6). Lenski notes that “the aorist [εφανερωσα, *ephanerosa*, “I have revealed”] records the accomplished fact,” and ultimately means “more than ‘to teach.’” It has “the sense of ‘to reveal.’”<sup>6</sup> In other words, “Jesus is the emissary of God ... who through his words and deeds brings revelation.”<sup>7</sup>

As John remembered Jesus' prayer in the closing years of the first century, he would have done so in dynamic relation to the contemporary context, a context shaped by a number of contrarian philosophies inimical to the Christian faith. The presence of Gnosticism, for example, with its esoteric approach to the whole concept of knowledge and revelation,<sup>8</sup> with its claim to “secret revelation” was combined with “a dualism of spirit and matter, mind and body,” and all this linked with ideas of “determinism or predestinarianism.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps not all these ideas were fully developed as John wrote his gospel late in the first century. But it seems evident that he was writing with a distinct consciousness of this and other aberrant philosophies. As one reads the Synoptics, the use of expressions like “word” and “knowledge” comes across as ordinary and pedestrian (except perhaps for Matt. 13:11 and Luke 8:10, where Jesus talks about the “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” as having been given to His disciples; or Mark 12:24, where He charges Jewish leaders with “not knowing the Scriptures or the power of God”).

But as one comes to the Gospel of John, the “word,” the *logos*, seems to take on heightened significance. One gets the sense that something in the air, something in the culture, is jogging John's memory in the direction of highlighting a certain kind of knowledge, a special focus on the concept of *logos*, as if conscious of confronting an alien species of these ideas in the culture. Hear how he begins his first epistle, for example:

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us (1 John 1:1, 2).*

The knowledge John recalled Jesus enunciating in His prayer, unlike that promoted by the Gnostics, was based on the revelation of God—not detached or esoteric, but connected to a person, the Person of God and the Man, Jesus Christ—the *logos* who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

As His farewell discourse was coming to an end, Jesus spoke about His impending departure, stressing God's love for those who'd left all to follow Him: “[T]he Father himself loves you,” He said to them, “because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (16:27, 28).

Impressed, the disciples offered their own confession. “Now we can see,” they said, “that you know all things.... This makes us believe that you came from God” (verse 30). *Yes!* Jesus thought, and He could not hold it back: “You believe at last!” (verse 31). Moments later, Jesus would refer to that shining confession in His prayer: “I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me” (verse 8).

The revelation had been successful. And that was critical. Critical because of what Jesus had spelled out with unmistakable gravity near the beginning of His prayer: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (verse 3).

So important is this revelation, this knowledge of God, that Jesus returns to it as He ends the prayer: “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and

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will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (verses 25, 26).

One cannot "listen" to Jesus' prayer without coming to the conclusion that He wanted that revelation (of God and God's Son) to spread to the entire *oikumene*. And if (as is logical to believe) He anticipated that the laborers would always be few (see Matt 9:37; Luke 10:2), then it would be theologically irrational for Him to envision any curtailment of the workforce of His followers by a blanket disqualification of one gender that, in every age, has constituted more than half the church.

### Protection

The picture Matthew draws of Jesus' followers in the world is that of "sheep among wolves" (Matt 10:16). And Paul invoked the same metaphor when he warned the elders of the Ephesus church that after he was gone, "savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock" (Acts 20:29). Jesus does not use that language in His prayer (nor does the gospel of John carry the particular metaphor), but it is clear that the believers' need for protection features prominently in the sentiments of John 17. So that even in the absence of that specific language, one can sense Jesus' burden for the protection of the followers He was leaving behind, followers He repeatedly refers to as sheep in his discourse in John 10.

With more than 25 percent of the verses of the chapter devoted to this theme, notice the intensity and solicitude with which Jesus commences the segment in verse 9: "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. . . . I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, *protect them by the power of your name. . . .*" (verses 9–11).

The verb in verse 11 is the imperative τηρησον (*tereson*), from τηρεω (*tereo*), translated "keep" in the KJV, which is proper. But we understand what Jesus is saying even better when we look at other possible meanings of the term, namely, to "keep watch over, [to] guard."<sup>10</sup> Or, as I'm interpreting it here: "to protect."

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behind in the world comes through as Jesus unburdens Himself on this point: "While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe. . . ." (verse 12). But because of the work still needed to be done after He was gone, Jesus prayed not that God would "take them out of the world but that [He would] protect them from the evil one" (verse 15), who'd dogged His footsteps all His life.

In this plea for protection, one hears echoes of His assurance-laden promise in chapter 10: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand" (10:27–28). What He promised in chapter 10 formed a huge portion of the burden of His prayer in chapter 17. And after more than 2,000 years, one can still hear the pathos, the urgency, in Jesus' voice as He pleads for the security of His followers: "Holy Father, *protect them by the power of your name. . . .*" (verse 11).

Here Jesus draws from His extensive knowledge of Old Testament Scripture, where "the name" stands, among other things, for the person himself or herself. And where God's name, in particular, is a force to reckon with. The psalmist knew this when he wrote, "May the Lord answer you when you are in distress; may *the name of the God of Jacob* protect you" (Ps 20:1). And the Book of Proverbs says that "*the name of the Lord* is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." "Holy Father, *protect them by the power of your name. . . .*"

Listening to the prayer, the disciples would have received enormous comfort in knowing that as they would live and operate in a dangerous world, they could count on the protection of the highest power in the universe.

And as we see our church in grave danger at this present hour, may we plead for that divine protection to shield us.

### Sanctification

The idea of sanctification appears in verses 17–19, occupying a place in the prayer that cannot be ignored: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also



may be sanctified in truth" (NRSV).

The word "sanctify" is *bagiazo*, meaning "to make holy, to consecrate, to purify, to sanctify."<sup>11</sup> Of persons, the word usually means to "consecrate, dedicate, sanctify, i.e., [to] include in the inner circle of what is holy...."<sup>12</sup>

In reference to people, this is not a common word in the gospels—or in the New Testament, for that matter. Its only use in the gospels referring to people is in the passage before us—used twice in verses 17–19. In Ephesians, Paul speaks of Christ loving the church and giving "himself up for her to make her holy [the verb is *bagiazo*], cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" (Eph 5:25, 26). And in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul offers a prayer that "God himself [would] ... sanctify [*bagiazo*] [the recipients of his letter] through and through," and that their "whole spirit, soul and body [might] be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Absent any elaboration in John of the meaning of the experience requested in Jesus' prayer, the assist from other New Testament writings seems wholly in keeping with the sense of Jesus' request in John 17. "Sanctify them in the truth; your *word* is truth" (John 17:17) matches perfectly the Ephesians idea of sanctifying the church "by the washing with water *through the word*" (Eph. 5:25, 26). We get another perspective from the apostle Peter, who admonished believers to "set apart [*bagiazo*] Christ as Lord" in their hearts (1 Pet 3:15). And yet another from the author of Hebrews, who intimates that "Jesus ... suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify (*bagiazo*) the people by his own blood" (Heb 13:12, NRSV).

To move from being sanctified "by his blood" (Hebrews) to being sanctified "in the truth" (John 17) represents an intriguing shift in perspective, which cannot be followed up here. But here again, as John recalls Jesus' prayer, we detect echoes of philosophical ferment in the culture of the late first century. "Sanctify them in the truth," John represents Jesus as saying, and then following up with a definition meant for the listening disciples—and, from John's perspective, meant to stabilize his potentially restive readers: "Thy word is truth."

In a critical development in front of Pilate in John

18:36–38, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to *the truth*."

Then John records Pilate's flippant response: "What is truth?" And without waiting for a response, the distracted governor returns to the anxious Jews gathered outside the judgment place.

But John answers the question—in gospel and epistle. Staying with the gospel, he remembered Jesus saying in His prayer: "[God's] word is truth." It applies to the written word, but even more to the living *logos* "who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14), and who said with all appropriate arrogance: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Much more could be said, but I end this presentation with a couple of insightful observations from John Ashton. He notes that "Jesus' determination to consecrate himself on behalf of his disciples (17:19), unquestionably [is] an allusion to his approaching death...."<sup>13</sup> And as He encourages their own sanctification, He expresses His intention to send them into the world, just as He Himself had been sent. "The implications are momentous," Ashton says. "The role of the community is plainly the same as that of Jesus himself."<sup>14</sup>

## Unity

The subject of unity first surfaces in verse 11 of the chapter, where it is connected to the idea of protection: "I will remain in the world no longer," Jesus said, "but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, *so that they may be one as we are one*." Not protect them so they might be physically safe, as would be the natural inference; but protect them "that they may be one as we are one."

Having uttered those sentiments, Jesus seemed to drop the subject. But as he transitioned from His concern for those original followers to the part of

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the prayer dealing with “those who will believe in me through their message” (verse 20) (that is, believers to the end of time),<sup>15</sup> He returns to the subject of unity with full vigor, mentioning it four times in verses 21–23. His language is concentrated and focused, conveying the weight of the burden He carried on this issue. For His followers in succeeding decades and centuries, He prayed “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (verse 21, NRSV).

Perhaps the fundamental thing to notice here is that the unity Jesus envisioned is patterned after the unity of the deity—“as you, Father, are in me and I in you.” This places Jesus’ expectation on a level far above that conceived in names like, say, “the United States” or “the United Kingdom.” In a way of speaking, these are human-made enterprises and confederations. Jesus, however, described His vision of unity in language meant to disabuse us of the notion of any human origination.

Four times in the short passage this divine orientation is repeated. We led with the mention in verse 21. Further down in the same verse, Jesus indicates that this unity is possible only when His followers are “in us” (ἐν ἡμῖν ὡσιν). The third iteration of the idea comes in verse 22: “... that they may be one as we are one.” Then for good measure, Jesus repeats the idea a fourth time, in verse 23: “I in them, and you in me, that they may become completely one...” (NRSV).

So the model for this unity is Deity itself. The Godhead. This suggests that it is not an artificial or humanly-engendered reality; not something created by committee actions, council resolutions, or church pronouncements; not something that can be administratively manufactured or contrived. Nor is it a condition to be controlled or enforced. Divinely construed and deep, it comes by each of us, and all of us together, submitting to the infilling of God, through Jesus Christ. “*I in them and you in me.*” In this sense, it is a mystery—the mystery of the divine indwelling in God’s followers, individually and corporately.

Lenski is correct in regarding this unity as a “mystical oneness,” resembling “the essential one-

ness of the divine Persons”—“absolutely the highest type of oneness known.”<sup>16</sup> “Our oneness is not merely placed beside the oneness of the divine Persons as though all that exists between them is a likeness.” No, Lenski argues, “the two are vitally connected.... We believers can be one with each other only by each of us and all of us being one with the Father and Jesus.”<sup>17</sup> And although that divine unity “cannot be duplicated” in the human sphere, says Lenski, “yet it can be imitated.”<sup>18</sup>

So how to visualize this unity? What shape was it to take? How was it to be manifested?

On these questions, opinions diverge. “Being spiritual and mystical,” says Lenski, surprisingly, “this unity is of necessity invisible and does not consist in any form of outward organization.”<sup>19</sup> Another scholar, Wayne Grudem, believes “that such unity does not actually require one worldwide church government over all Christians.” “In fact,” he says, “the unity of believers is often demonstrated quite effectively through voluntary cooperation and affiliation among Christian groups....”<sup>20</sup>

But however we spin the idea of unity, Jesus in John 17 seemed to be speaking about a unity visible enough to be noticed, and strong and attractive enough to bring conviction to an observing world. It would be hard to make the case that the world could be persuaded by something it could not see. Jesus said: “... may they also be in us *so that the world may believe that you have sent me*” (verse 21); and “may they be brought to complete unity *to let the world know that you sent me*” (verse 23).

Unity was a critical burden of Jesus’ strategic prayer in the upper room that night, two thousand years ago.

*So what are some of the implications of Jesus’ prayer—for the state of unity in the church at large and in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?*

As some Christian thinkers see it, notwithstanding a host of theological, ecclesiological, and regional issues and tensions over the centuries, the Christian Church, with all its spiritual flaws and shortcomings, stayed generally (though imperfectly) united for centuries, the first major break coming in A.D. 1054 over the *filioque* controversy,

when the Eastern (now Orthodox) church broke away from the Western (Roman Catholic) church.

Then came the Reformation of the sixteenth century, leading to the splintering of the Western church into a multitude of denominations as an unintended consequence. Describing the denominational divisions in his own country, the United States, theologian Martin Marty, citing statistics from the late 1980s, referred to “well over 200 separate contending denominations, most of them Christian, each of them somehow suggesting that they possessed the truth...”<sup>21</sup>

Somewhere in this global denominational maelstrom are Seventh-day Adventists, some twenty million strong, in a sea of 2.8 billion Christians, and in a world population of some 7.5 billion. A miniscule 0.3 percent of the world population we are, and about 0.7 percent of the Christian population.

Yet, with a deep-seated belief that we have been commissioned with a special, end-time message for the entire planet, including brothers and sisters in other Christian communions. It’s a staggering and, from a human standpoint, insurmountable task, notwithstanding clichéd reports about the message spreading by “leaps and bounds.” If Adventists really believe in the imminence of the parousia, and have even a partial understanding of the magnitude and complexity of the mission, then there could be no question about the need to engage every able-bodied person, every willing talent in the task. To understand the magnitude and complexity of the mission, and at the same time try to erect theological or ideological barriers to full participation in the church’s mission, whether on the basis of class, or race, or age, or gender is nothing short of theological malpractice.

So as Jesus prayed, He was looking down the future to dangers facing His followers. With prophetic vision, He would have seen the immediate crisis to face them in the period surrounding His death and immediately following His departure—the crisis in Jerusalem, leading to the initial scattering of believers, mentioned in Acts 8:1. He would have seen the doctrinal and theological tensions, as His followers passed through the period of

theological transition from the Old Testament period to the New—problems involving a multitude of Jewish practices and observances that would need sorting out to determine their continuing validity. There would be problems involving salvation (the role of circumcision and the law); problems involving race (the status of Gentiles); problems involving class (the status of slaves); and problems involving gender (the standing of women), etc.

In regard to gender and other illegitimate causes of tension within the church, the apostle Paul could not be more in keeping with the oneness Jesus called for in His prayer: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27, 28). And as a church, we will be judged by what we allow to divide us.

For most of His earthly ministry, Jesus was surrounded by twelve close-knit followers. But as He spoke that critical prayer in the upper room that evening, only eleven were present to hear it. The departure of Judas on his dark mission represented the first rift in the unity of the group, a development that had to be uppermost in Jesus’ mind as He prayed in the hour that followed. Decades later, John still remembered how it felt. “It was night,” he said (13:30), cryptically describing the kind of darkness apostasy brings.

Consider the enormity of Judas’s act that fateful night in Jerusalem. And compare that with what we allow to divide us today. The role of women in ministry, for example. What we have here, after all, is a group of people simply wanting to join their male counterparts *in the mission of God’s church*, and, in all fairness—and in keeping with common human decency—be fully and equally recognized for it. That’s all. And to allow *that* to divide us is obscene.

Here are five questions to consider:

1. In John 17, Jesus prayed, among other things, for unity among believers. How should we assess whether that prayer was or was not answered? What are the prospects for the future?
2. To what extent should the Ecumenical Movement be seen as an attempt to fulfill Jesus’ prayer for unity? And how do we regard (or

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- justify) the Seventh-day Adventist Church's stance in connection to the Movement?
3. As you consider the matter of unity in John 17, how relevant or irrelevant is the contemporary controversy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the equality of women in ministry?
  4. As a church, are we coming closer together, or is the idea of unity a theological mirage?
  5. In the light of John 17, how do you visualize church unity? And what needs to happen—practically, ecclesiologically, or theologically—to bring it about? Or is unity, by its very nature, purely a work of God?

### A final thought on Jesus' prayer for unity

In 13:35 Jesus pointed to love as the critical identifying marker of His followers: Everyone will know that you are My disciples, He said, “if you *love one another*.” In John 17, He gave another critical identifier. Not one by which to recognize His disciples this time, but one by which to identify *Him* before the world, one that would tell the world who He is. “May they also be in us so *that the world may believe that you have sent me*.” (verse 21).

We probably should not see these two markers as standing in competition. In essence, they're complementary. Yet theologically, within the confines of John's gospel, we may say that one precedes the other. For as important as it is for the world to recognize us as Christ's disciples by our love to one another, that in the end carries no intrinsic significance if people don't know *who Jesus is*, if they have no saving knowledge of the Master. The first identifier (the world recognizing us as disciples) can function on the theoretical level, as an intellectual curiosity even. But the second one (knowing Jesus as Messiah, as the One sent from God, in the biblical sense “knowing”) is personal, experiential, and carries with it eternal consequences.

That, in fact, was one of the most critical assertions of Jesus' prayer: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (verse 3, NRSV).

And if *the unity of believers* is a marker that points this out—that points to Jesus as the One sent from

God, the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Savior of the world—then one might almost say that unity in the gospel of John (and in the prayer of Jesus) supersedes even love itself.

Except that in His second reference to this idea, Jesus skillfully inserts love into the equation. “I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me *and have loved them even as you have loved me*” (verse 23). Capping and extending that theme in the final verse of the chapter, He says: “I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known *in order that the love you have for me may be in them and I myself may be in them*.”

What we see here, on the one hand, is Jesus' prayer that God's love might literally inhabit His followers—love for God and for one another, the very thing that would identify them as Jesus' disciples. On the other hand, the prayer of chapter 17 is that Jesus, with all His love, might be *in His followers*, producing a unity that identifies *Him* to the world as the Messiah, the One sent from God.

If this sounds complex, it isn't meant to be. It means, simply, that the two identifiers, the two markers, have come together; that *unity* and *love* have kissed each other. Love is still “the greatest” (1 Cor. 13:13); but unity, a natural outgrowth of love, does not lag far behind. And in the context of Jesus' prayer, carries a weight seen nowhere else in Scripture.

### Reunion

Throughout his gospel, John has been stressing Jesus' close affinity with His followers. When, speaking plain truth to the multitude, He saw large sectors of the people deserting Him, Jesus turned to the twelve, His closest earthly companions, with the plaintive query: “Do you also wish to go away?” (John 6:67, NRSV). Or, as the New International Version puts it: “You do not want to leave too, do you?” An answer in the affirmative would have devastated Him. What a relief it must have been to hear Peter's response on behalf of the twelve: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68, 69).

In chapter 10, Jesus describes Himself as “the good

shepherd [who] lays down his life for the sheep” he loves (verse 11). And in chapter 13, John says of Jesus that “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (verse 1, NRSV).

Although we cannot speak of Jesus’ farewell discourse as “His final words” in the common sense (as if He would die and remain deceased), it is probably correct to say that Jesus’ words in chapters 13–17 (even beginning as early as chapter 12) carry a distinctive note of finality about them. They represent Christ’s last concerns before the cross—concerns for His followers and for His work in the world going forward.

As John sets up the scene in chapter 13, for example, he indicates that as Jesus faced the upcoming Passover Festival, it was with a sense “that the hour had come,” the hour “for him to depart from this world and go to the Father” (John 13:1, NRSV). “Jesus knew,” John said, “that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God...” (13:3). It was for Him the end of a journey; and in 13:33 He made it clear to the little company gathered in the upper room, that He’d be with them “only a little longer.” Prompting Peter to put the question: “Lord, where are you going?” To which Jesus was pleased to point out that Peter and the others “will follow later” (13:36).

Chapter 14 continues the going-away theme, Jesus intimating that He’s going to God’s house “to prepare a place” for them, but “will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2, 3). The same sentiment continues in chapter 16 where, in verse 5, He says that “now I’m going to him who sent me...,” and in verse 28: “I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” Reluctantly, He was leaving them, so that the Spirit might come (John 16:7); but not even the coming of the Spirit could squelch His insatiable desire to be with them again.

So in chapter 17, as He heads down to the closing lines of His supplication, He prays for what He’d promised in chapter 14: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory...” (17:24).

This is the great reunion Jesus has always longed for. That hope and that promise are not conditional. It’s a date He will keep. What a reunion that will be! ■

## References

1. In the words of Andreas J Köstenberger, the prayer is “strategically placed immediately prior to his arrest, which would trigger in rapid succession the various events surrounding [His] crucifixion.” *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 246.
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3. Paul N Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International), 266.
4. Arndt & Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 609–611.
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6. *Ibid.*, 1128, 1129.
7. Rudolf Bultmann, paraphrased in John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 53.
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9. *Oxford Illustrated History*, 26.
10. Arndt & Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 814.
11. *Ibid.*, 8.
12. *Ibid.*
13. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 491.
14. *Ibid.*, 510.
15. “This reflects Jesus’ vision of spiritual multiplication and reproduction.” Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel*, 248.
16. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1155.
17. *Ibid.*, 1165.
18. *Ibid.*, 1137.
19. *Ibid.*, 1157.
20. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Zondervan; 1994), 877.
21. Martin Marty in *Oxford Illustrated History*, 387.

**As a  
church, we  
will be  
judged by  
what we  
allow to  
divide us.**