

Sermon File # 720

Scripture Text: John 17:20-26

Sermon Title: *I Believe in the Church Universal and United* (8th in a series on the Apostles' Creed)

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and

Sermon preached at International Baptist Church, Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 12 September 2010

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

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I Believe in the Church Universal and United

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to John 17:20-26, as we continue our sermon series based on the Apostles' Creed, that earliest of all statements that have defined the beliefs of the church down through the centuries. Today we consider the statement about what we believe about the church itself, as we affirm, "I believe...in the holy universal church, the communion of saints."

The most common reading of the Creed says "holy catholic church," which makes some Protestants tenuous when they recite it, thinking this refers exclusively to the Roman Catholic Church, which is not the case. "Catholic" is from the Greek, meaning universal. The Lutheran version says "holy Christian church." But, for sake of clarity and preserving the intent of the Creed, we'll say "universal."

The Scriptures refer to the universal, or what we also call the invisible church, the one that only God can see because it consists of true believers everywhere and at all times, past present and future. The local church, however, consists of true followers of Jesus and those who are what Jesus called "weeds among the wheat" (Matthew 13:24-30). The New Testament Epistles are written to local churches, to address problems caused by immature and even false pretenders to the faith. (See Michael Horton's *We*

Believe: Recovering the Essentials of the Apostles' Creed, pages 184ff for a definitive explanation of these distinctions).

Our text for today is the third section of the High Priestly Prayer, the longest "recorded" prayer of Jesus. This prayer is in three sections. In verses 1-5 Jesus prays for himself. In verses 6-19 Jesus prays for the original disciples. Because we are part of the true Apostolic Succession, this prayer is also for us today as his disciples. But I want us to look together at the final section, verses 20-26, which is specifically for those of us who have come to Christ since Jesus' time on earth. Jesus is praying for his church universal, but also for his people who would necessarily be in local churches.

Follow as I read **John 17:20-26**

What Jesus prayed to the Father immediately before his arrest, trial and crucifixion was of utmost importance to him and to his disciples. The amazing truth is that Jesus prayed for us. And not only so, but he continues to pray for us, as we read in Hebrews 7:25: "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." The words of Jesus in our text capture the prayer he continues to offer for us. How important it is that we regard this prayer of Jesus for us in these last words before his arrest and crucifixion! Because of John's witness, we are able to listen in on this High Priestly Prayer of Jesus for us.

A look at the history and even the present condition of the church worldwide causes us to wonder if and when Jesus' pray for the church will be fully answered. Surely it's not honoring to God that there are thousands of different denominations of churches, and we don't have to look far to see the disgrace fallen upon the church for corruption and immorality among the leadership of churches everywhere, and of every denomination and local expression. When I think of the church, even in my own country (USA) where churches have been at the forefront of evangelism, missions and ministry, I see many and gross contradictions to what the prayer of Jesus expresses as his will and desire for his church. Yet, Jesus continues to pray for his church, and his will is to continue through his church the work that he began (Acts 1:1). The church, the holy, universal church, expressing itself through the local church, is God's plan for fulfilling his mission in the world.

We can affirm the Creed that says we believe in the church universal, the communion of saints, first of all...

Because Jesus prays for our *union* with him

Jesus had just prayed that his disciples would be made holy by the truth (verse 17). True spirituality is not divorced from the objective reality of Jesus and the truths of his word. This spiritual oneness for which Jesus prays is not possible for those who reject the doctrines of biblical faith in Jesus because it is a union...

Of all believers

As D Martin Lloyd-Jones points out in his excellent series of sermons on John 17 (Crossway Books), this High Priestly Prayer of Jesus is a favorite of the leaders of the ecumenical movement that attempts to bring churches into a merger based on the lowest common theological denominator. But in fact the unity Jesus describes in his prayer is possible only by faith in him as the crucified and risen, eternal Son of God, truths that are considered suspect and easily dispensable by many in the ecumenical and post-modern movement.

In verse 20, Jesus prays for those who will believe and do believe in him through the apostles' message, the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus prays for us, in the long line of succession of believers in the apostolic message. The union Jesus is speaking about becomes reality the moment a person hears the objective truth of the gospel, trusts in Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, commits to follow him as Lord, and is born again. Conversion means the Holy Spirit comes into the believer's life and begins to transform him/her into the likeness of Jesus Christ. The same Holy Spirit draws us into a mystical union with the triune God. God in us, the Holy Spirit, is perfectly one with God beyond us (the Father) and God for us (Jesus Christ). No doubt when Jesus is praying for this union of his believers/followers with him he is still thinking about his being the True Vine and his followers as the branches that abide in him (John 15:1-8).

The exclusivity of the gospel has never been popular, either in the religious or secular realm. Paul speaks of the message of the cross as a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23). The institutional leaders of the Jews, so proud of their religious attainments by their good works, stumbled over the concept of needing to believe in a crucified Savior as the only way of salvation. And the secular Gentiles considered the idea of faith in a single, crucified Savior and God as mere foolishness. To them, like many today, a host of gods can be worshipped, and why should there be just one way? But Jesus makes it clear, in this prayer as elsewhere, that we receive eternal life by believing in him alone.

We can believe in church universal and united because Jesus prays for the union of believers...

Who are in Christ

In these verses 21-23 Jesus is praying for a union with himself and the Father that is described as "breathtaking" (DA Carson). Jesus is speaking of a relationship with him that is of the same nature as his relationship with the Father. In the first five verses of this High Priestly Prayer Jesus speaks of his eternal relationship as God the Son in the glory of the triune Godhead. There has always been God, and he has always existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When the Son came to earth on his redemption mission he emptied himself of heavenly glory and took upon himself the likeness of our sinful flesh

(Philippians 2:6-8; Romans 8:3). Now, after his death and resurrection, Jesus has ascended back to heaven, where he has a glorified body.

Christ's glory now is the glory of the crucified, risen God-Man. The eternal Son has, since his conception in the womb of Mary, a human body of flesh. His flesh was like our flesh during his earthly ministry. Now, he has a resurrected and real body, which now glorified and immortal. The Son continues to have perfect and glorious union with the Father. Christ Jesus is both transcendent and with the Father in glory, but also is immanent, indwelling those of us who are "in him." Jesus prays for our union with him and the Father, which is what Paul the Apostle means by being "in Christ." By God's saving grace we who were lost sinners have been placed in an eternal relationship with Christ. Holy God now forgives and accepts us as perfectly righteous through our faith in Jesus Christ. Paul said, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17) Paul also speaks of Christ's being in us as our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). This is the present glory of the believer that Jesus prays for us in verses 21 and 22 of our text. As God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in union, Jesus prays we will be joined to this holy union. So, Jesus prays, "Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.... May they also be in us.... I have given them the glory that you gave me." When Paul speaks of the believer's body as a temple of the Holy Spirit he shows how utterly incongruous it is for the believer to engage in sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:15-20). Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, the houses of Jesus himself, so we must not violate these temples nor profane the holy presence of Jesus Christ within us.

In this High Priestly Prayer Jesus prays that his disciples would be sanctified/made holy by the truth of the word. He prays not that his disciples be taken out of the world but rather that they be protected from the evil one (verses 15-19). Union with Christ means we are given the Holy Spirit who enables us to live according to the word of God a life of holiness and righteousness, even within this fallen world around us. Jesus prays in verse 21 that the union of his church with him would make the world around us realize Jesus is sent from God. The holiness of God's people is what gives us an authentic and authoritative voice to our witness to the world. And, in verse 26, Jesus also prays we will continue to know him in a deeper way, much as Paul aspires in Philippians 3:10.

In verse 26 Jesus prays he will continue to make the Father known to us, his people, and that we will know the same love of the Father that he has for his Son. This is an amazing thought, that Jesus prays for our union with him, a union that gives us the same love relationship with the Father as Jesus himself enjoys. This intimate union is what Paul longed to experience, in increasing measure, each day of his life (Philippians 3:10). And Paul prayed that the church at Ephesus might grow in its knowledge of the depths of God's love (Ephesians 3:14-19). Jesus prays that we have union with him that leads to a growing knowledge of him and the Father's love.

These are breathtaking words indeed! I find that the people around us are not particularly interested in more religion. Christianity for many represents dead formality and empty, lifeless tradition. And this is true, not only for nominal Roman Catholics, but for orthodox evangelicals, who know the truths about God, but don't know God himself. These people, however, seem to have a hunger for a satisfying relationship with the living God, which is what Jesus offers and for which he prays in our text.

Union with Jesus Christ is based on real truth, but is about a personal relationship with the living God. Union with Jesus comes by knowing about God and by knowing God personally. The Dutch language has two words for "to know." One means to know information (weten). The other means to know, to be acquainted with, as with people (kennen). English uses one word for both. And tragically, many think that to know about God is the equivalent of knowing God. But Jesus prayed and continues to pray that we might know God in a personal relationship as our loving, caring Father, our Savior Friend, and our faithful Helper Spirit.

And we can believe in the church universal and united...

Because Jesus prays also for our unity with one another

Since its founding in 1830, Belgium has had serious challenges to its unity, primarily because of the language diversity. Even now the formation and functioning of its government tries to accommodate to and compromise with the interests of the French and Flemish factions. Social unity is found in common identity, such as a common language, or a common political identity. But the unity for which Jesus prayed is not based on culture, language or ideology, nor is it a camaraderie type of human or social unity. First of all, it...

Is a gift

Martin Lloyd-Jones was for many years pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, where worshipers gather, not only from all over London, but tourists and other travelers are there every Sunday from all over the world, much like here at IBC. He shared how immediately he connected with a believer whom he had never seen in his life. There was an immediate bond between them, who found it natural to talk about what Christ was doing in their lives. On the other hand, the great preacher noted, visitors can identify themselves as "good Baptists or Methodists," yet it seems they are interested only in the superficial and not the spiritual side of fellowship and the unity Jesus is speaking about here in our text.

One of the blessed aspects of International Baptist Church is the amazing diversity of people God has brought together from literally around the globe. The last count seems to be that on a given Sunday there are on average 40 different nationalities present. I have a suspicion that, because our attendance has grown, and Brussels has become home to many more nationalities, there are now more than 40. And, what a delight it is to visit

during our fellowship time and find this immediate bond with people, from a totally different culture from our own, a bond of our common faith in the Jesus of history, revealed in the trustworthy word of God. IBC Brussels is a non-denominational fellowship of the true, spiritual unity of God's people centered in one Lord, one faith and one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:5-6).

Soon after arriving in Belgium, I was invited to give a presentation to an evening class at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Brussels, on "Baptists in Belgium" (as though my being here for 15 months qualified me as an expert!). In the discussion time, after I had described IBC, the professor asked me if we are non-denominational or inter-denominational. Not having given the distinction much thought, I was forced to "think on my feet," which is not something I always find easy. My answer, which I would continue to defend, is that we are non-denominational. We are biblically evangelical in our doctrine, and "baptistic" in our practice of the ordinances of the church, but we lay aside a lot of our separate denominational distinctions and practices. Hence we are non-denominational, and we welcome into our fellowship and ministry followers of Jesus from a host of denominational backgrounds and identities.

In verse 21 Jesus prays for his church a unity that he alone can give to his people who share a common life—the same Holy Spirit who lives in each one of us. His presence in us gives the fruit of the Spirit, which enables us to relate to one another with love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, humility and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). These are the attributes that allow us to be unified as a body and a family. Contrast this gift of unity with what Paul describes as the acts of the sinful nature that divide people, including "hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy" (Galatians 5:19-21).

All believers have the gift that unifies, which Paul avers: "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9). If there is division and discord in the church it is evidence that there are unbelievers in the congregation or there are those living and acting and speaking and thinking like unbelievers. It isn't because Jesus doesn't give us the Spirit of love and unity. And it isn't because he isn't praying for our unity, as we see in our text.

CH Spurgeon said in his sermon on our text that there can never be true and complete unity for which Jesus prayed unless there is sanctification, for which he prayed in verses 17-19. Unless God's people seek to live a holy, Spirit-filled and God-honoring life there will be always the possibility of discord and division and all the other sins that divide people.

There is a sense in which all believers experience this gift of unity, and we can be and ought to be unified with people with differences in some of the non-essentials of the faith. Some of these non-essentials include particular church/denominational polities and practices what we believe about the

nature and signs about the Second Coming of Christ. Real unity does not mean “cookie cutter” uniformity.

I read about “a man who was out on a walk one day when he saw another man about to throw himself from a bridge into the river. He ran over to save him.

Why are you killing yourself? He asked.

I've nothing to live for.

Do you believe in God?

Yes, I do.

What a coincidence! So do I! Are you a Jew or a Christian?

A Christian.

What a coincidence! So am I! Protestant or Catholic?

Protestant.

What a coincidence! So am I! Anglican or Baptist?

Baptist.

What a coincidence! So am I! Baptist Union or Independent?

Baptist Union!

What a coincidence! So am I! Premillennial or Amillennial?

Premillennial.

What a coincidence! So am I! Partial rapture or full rapture?

Partial rapture.

At this, the first man pushed the suicidal man into the river, shouting, ‘Die, heretic!’”

(author unknown, from *Frogs in Cream*, on web site

www.ozsermonillustrations.com/frames/unity).

In the words of Augustine: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

And we should be able to connect in unity with folks outside our local church and participate with other church bodies in evangelical and ethical causes. But the unity of believers that Jesus is praying for seems to be worked out best and uniquely in the local church. That’s the venue where we are made accountable for being either a unifier or for being divisive.

Unity with one another is both a gift...

And a demand

Jesus prays that his church will be brought to complete unity (verse 23). In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul urged the church to be of the same mind, have the same love, and be of one spirit and purpose.

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” He then goes on to give the supreme example of Jesus who humbled himself to be our Savior (Philippians 2:1-11).

And in Ephesians 4 Paul says, "As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit...."(Verses 1-4).

One of my venerable teachers in seminary, the late George R Beasley-Murray, told our class on the Gospel of John that Jesus is praying in these verses that we make our external relationships conform to that inner relationship we have been given with Jesus. Just as he is in us and we in him, so we are to receive others and to guard and cherish our relationships with them as follow believers in whom Jesus also lives. As we are united in fellowship with Jesus so are we to be united and in fellowship with one another.

The demand for the unity for which Jesus prayed is a demand for reconciliation with those who are offended by or are offensive to us (Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-18). Jesus prayed for our unity as the hour of the cross approached. Jesus was about to suffer the agony of the cross to give us peace with God but also peace with one another. So we are to have and restore relationships with one another at the foot of the cross. We cannot be closely related to Jesus if we are unwilling to be reconciled to one another (Luke 6:37; Matthew 18:21-35). If we draw near to Jesus we will of necessity be brought nearer to one another.

A good diagram for the unity of the church is the shape of a cone. At the base of the cone we are farthest apart and are separated from one another. Picture Jesus at the top of the cone. As we walk up the side of the cone toward Jesus at the top, we necessarily are closer to one another. Let's picture the cross of Jesus also at the top and realize we are never more unified than when we are gathered at the foot of the cross.

James writes about the sins that cause division and then calls on God's people to submit to God and draw near to him. Such nearness to God causes Satan to flee and enables us to be gracious to and unified with others (James 4:1-10). Unity with one another is an absolute essential. We must be united in our biblical faith and teaching. We must be united in our desire to live holy and obedient lives. We must also be united in our love for and fellowship with one another. Jesus is praying this for us.

In the final verse of Jesus' prayer, he has a purpose clause, indicating that the reason he has revealed the Father to us his children is that we might be filled with the Father's love (verse 26). Without the grace of God's love, the preeminent fruit of the Spirit, unity is impossible. The late James M Boice pictures the church without the grace of love. He says if you subtract love from any of the blessings for which Jesus prays in this prayer we are left with strife and division. "Subtract love from holiness. What do you find then? You find self-righteousness, the kind of virtue that characterized the Pharisees of Christ's day," which was a hateful, Christ killing hypocrisy. "Take love from truth," says Boice, and you have bitter orthodoxy, the kind of teaching which is

right but which does not win anyone. Take love from mission, and you have imperialism...colonialism in ecclesiastical garb." Continues Boice, "Take love from unity, and you soon have tyranny. This develops in a hierarchical church where there is no compassion for people nor a desire to involve them in the decision-making process."

But then Boice gives us the other picture of a church where love is present, which will invariably be a church such as Jesus prayed for. Love for the Lord Jesus, he says, leads to holiness. Love for the Word of God leads to "a fuller appreciation and realization of God's truth." Love for the world leads to mission because "we have a message to take to the world." And love for our Christian brothers and sisters leads to unity, "Because by love we discern that we are bound together in that bundle of life which God himself has created within the Christian community" (JM Boice, page 464, *The Gospel of John*, volume 4).

Our love for one another that is essential for a united church is often tested by difficult people. But we must remember that the Lord loves us unconditionally even when we're unlovable, and requires us also to love those who may test our patience and challenge ability to relate to them in love and with forgiveness and acceptance.

This little doggerel, which I think I read in a Wiersbe sermon, is all too true:

"To dwell above with saints we love, O that will be glory;
But to live below with those we know, well that's a different story!"

We can believe in the church universal and united...

Because Jesus prays for our being *united* in mission

Watch any sports team, and you will soon note that the winning team was the one most united in its effort. Without coordinated unity there can be no success in almost any realm of life, be it sports or business or government. But the mystical unity for which Jesus prayed is much more vital to the cause of his kingdom and is possible only by his grace and Spirit.

In verse 21 Jesus prays that the church may be one in order that the world might believe in him ("that you have sent me"). Certainly a divided church is a stumbling block to the unbelieving world around us. The world looks at a divided church and thinks, "Those evangelical believers can't get along as well as we do here in the EU!"

Thomas Manton observed, "Divisions in the church breed atheism in the world" (quoted by Kent Hughes).

By contrast, a loving and united church has credibility in the world. People sit up and take notice. As Tertullian noted in the Second Century, people were

looking at the church and saying, “Behold how they love one another!” And we might add, the world takes note how much we love them unconditionally.

For this reason we decry the intentions of that congregation in Florida, USA, who have threatened to carry out, against the pleas of church and government leaders everywhere, to refrain from this incendiary deed that is absolutely contrary to the spirit of Christ.

Jesus prays for our complete unity in order that the lost world would know about Jesus and would see the love of God for the church and in the church. By hearing the gospel they would know about God’s love. By seeing his love for and in the church the gospel would have credibility. Jesus prays for IBC Brussels to be a place where his love is experienced and expressed, and lost people are drawn to that caring involvement in meeting their needs.

With the credibility that comes with being united in love we are ready to be united in mission...

In his work

A unified church is going to be a church on mission because being unified means we are united in prayer and purpose. Being united in Jesus means we are all able to hear his marching orders and join him in his work of redeeming a lost world.

We have work to do as God’s people. We must find and do our particular mission in the Great Commission, which is the command to make disciples. You and I are called to join the Father in recruiting worshipers who will gather around the throne of God. We all have people in our social circles and spheres of influence that we can and must uniquely influence for Christ. And we must believe God is at work in our church, and be bold to invite our friends into our worship services and outreach ministries where they will hear the word and the plan of salvation. We must encourage them to worship and let them “overhear” the gospel and the word as they observe believers worshiping in spirit and in truth.

God is using ministries to reach people and he will raise up more ministries that will be effective as God’s people seek him and seek to join him in his work of seeking his kingdom and will on earth as it is in heaven. He will bring in those for whom Christ died, and we are privileged to join him in his mission. God continues also to give his people a heart for the world, and we face great opportunities in world missions. The work of God cannot be done by pastors alone. It takes all of us working together. As Paul said, we are God’s fellow workers (1 Corinthians 3:9).

HA Ironside, the great preaching pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, USA, in bygone years told about a missionary friend serving in a difficult place. This missionary had formed a partnership with several other missionaries from different Christian denominations and evangelical para-church mission agencies. This missionary, who was from a denomination not

known for its cooperation with other groups, told Dr. Ironside that “down here where I serve every Christian looks good! (Page 765, *The Gospel of John*). He didn’t have the luxury of being exclusive or isolated, and neither do we. We certainly need each other in this church.

When we join with God in his great work, heaven only knows the impact our church can have on countless lives. IBC is strategically located to reach into the entire world with the gospel. Numerous people come through Brussels and IBC and then fan out into the world. Eternity alone will reveal the impact this church and you may have had on lives and the Kingdom. The place to begin is to ask what you can do in your sphere of influence and as a part of Christ’s body here at IBC. God will lead you to be involved with him on mission, here or maybe somewhere in a distant place.

Jesus prayed that we might be united in mission to do his work, which is...

Done according to his will

According to this prayer of Jesus, his work is to create a people in union with him and one another, and he invites us to join him in his work, which can be done only in unity with him. Churches can do “church work” things apart from this unity, but we cannot do the real work of the church apart from doing it his way, which is in complete unity and as Jesus himself would do his work in this place. And we know Jesus would do his work among us as a loving Servant. That’s the only way we can be united in mission in rightly doing his work. Paul reflected this prayer of Jesus when he appealed to the Philippians to be united in the spirit of humble service, which characterized Jesus’ life and mission (Philippians 2:1-11). The mission of Jesus is greater than any one of us as individuals, and our attitude must be one of serving others for the sake of the greater kingdom concerns. This thrusts us into the role of a servant as Jesus was and is our servant. And the kingdom advances, not by self-assertion, but rather by self-denial.

FB Meyer, was a great pastor and Bible expositor, but never enjoyed the fame and success of his contemporary fellow-London pastor CH Spurgeon. During one period of his pastorate, Meyer noted that his congregation’s attendance was decreasing. One of his parishioners noted to Meyer that their decrease was due to the new pastor in town, the young Spurgeon at New Park Street (later to become the famed Metropolitan Tabernacle). Rather than feeling jealous and becoming defensive against the young “Prince of Preachers,” Spurgeon, Meyer exhorted his people to join with him in going to see this work of God through Spurgeon. As writer Os Hillman notes, this attitude by the godly Meyer is “hard to imagine in today’s competitive (US church) world” (Os Hillman, *Today God Is First*). We cannot be united with Jesus and one another if we try to do our mission with a competitive or jealous spirit, which is contrary to the spirit of Jesus.

We are to be united in mission in doing Jesus’ work his way, according to his will. And note with me, we will share his glory...

By his will

Jesus prays for those God has chosen to be with him in glory (verse 24). What an incredible truth! Jesus wants us to be with him to share the glory of heaven with him. And his ongoing work for us, who have already been recruited for the Kingdom, is to be involved in recruiting the remaining ones chosen by the Father.

The NIV translation of Jesus' desire ("I want") for us to share his glory is a little weak. The word in verse 24 is better translated, "I *will* those you have given me to be with me" (See AT Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. V, p. 281).

What glorious assurance for the believer! Jesus wills us to be with him. The Sovereign Lord, the Lamb on the throne, the risen Lord and Master, the Eternal Son of God wills our being with him in heaven and upon the to-be-fully-redeemed and renewed earth. Because he obeyed the Father in providing for our salvation, the will of Jesus shall not be denied! This is why he endured the cross and scorned the shame of the cross. It was, according to Hebrews 12:2, for the joy that was set before him, including the joy of having us share his glory in heaven forever. Jesus wills for us to share his glory. And he prays that our lives right now will be preparing for a greater share in his glory.

Scripture such as the parables of Jesus and the teaching of Paul makes clear that there will be degrees of reward in heaven. None of heaven is deserved. It's all of grace. But God will be pleased to give degrees of glory and blessing in heaven based on faithfulness and holiness in this life (Luke 19:11-27; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15). And as Jesus prays for our eternal glory the Father, the Gardener (John 15:1) is at work pruning us to be fruitful branches abiding in Christ, the true vine. Jesus prays for the Father to do his work in us that will prepare us for the greatest glory in heaven, where we will realize it has been worth it all!

Paul encourages us to "not lose heart...For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Jesus' prayer puts a hedge of protection around our faith. His will for us is for our good and for our fruitfulness in this life that brings eternal glory in the next.

Imagine, the glory of God will be shared with us! His glory is his wealth, his holiness and his honor. When we see Jesus face to face we will be glorified, as John says (1 John 3:2). We will then be perfectly holy and righteous. Our capacity for joy and for sharing the glories of heaven will be enlarged beyond what we can possibly imagine.

One of the glories and joys will be perfect union and fellowship with the Father and the Son, filled with the Holy Spirit beyond what anyone could ever experience in this life. Another of the glories of heaven will be perfect unity

with the people of God. Some professing Christians have a lot of changing to do before they can enjoy heaven, since they don't seem to enjoy being with God's people and don't enjoy worship with God's people. Worshiping around the throne will be central to all we do in heaven. Whatever else God assigns us to do in heaven, we know it will be as an act of heartfelt worship to God's glory and it will be done in perfect fellowship with his people.

Conclusion:

Today we can affirm that we believe in the holy universal church, the communion of the saints. We can be confident that Jesus' prayer is being answered, and we can be an answer to Jesus' prayer, the one he prayed in the Upper Room and that he continues to pray to the Father.

By coming to Jesus in faith and repentance you will answer his prayer that you might be in him and that he and the Father might share their life with you, both now and in the glory of heaven. By committing your life to follow Jesus, you will receive his Spirit and be brought into his holy communion of God's people, made holy and being made holy.

What a great evangelistic appeal is this prayer of Jesus! In fact, it's hard to imagine a more compelling evangelistic appeal than this prayer of Jesus (DA Carson, *The Gospel of John*). Today you can be an answer to his prayer and enter into the joy of fellowship with him now and fellowship in heaven forever.

If you have taken your relationship with Christ for granted, today you too, believer, can be an answer to Jesus' prayer. Ask him to forgive you for neglecting such a great salvation (Hebrews 2:3). Ask him to once again restore to you the joy of his salvation (Psalm 51:12). Learn once again to enjoy his presence in you and the love the Father has for you. As we noted in this prayer, the Father loves you with the same love he has for the Son! Ask him to give you grace to walk in step with and in greater union with him than ever before.

I encourage those of you who are part of the church universal to affirm your faith and fulfill your commitment to Christ by becoming a part of this or another local church. Membership means you are entering into a covenant of mutual accountability with one another. As a church, we are accountable to our members to nurture and provide opportunities for worship, fellowship, pastoral care and service/ministry. And members of IBC are accountable to share in mutual love, support, encouragement and submission to the will and, as necessary, the discipline of the church. We are mutually accountable for ministry and the indispensable unity of the church, which must be protected at all costs.

We believe in the holy universal church of the Lord Jesus and the communion of the saints, for which Jesus prays. May the Lord make of us an answer to his prayer!

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What effect does it have upon you to realize Jesus prayed for you (in our text and according to Hebrews 7:25)?
2. How would you answer those who argue that all churches and nominal Christians, regardless of their doctrine and beliefs, should be able to experience the unity Jesus prays for in our text?
3. In what ways have you as a follower of Jesus been given unity with Christ?
4. In what way(s) have you been united with other followers of Jesus?
5. Explain what is meant by Augustine's motto: *"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things charity."*
6. Would you say love is the most important Christian virtue in maintaining unity in the church? Give reasons and examples for your answer.
7. Do you agree with the quote, "Division in the church breeds atheism in the world"? Explain your answer and, if possible, give an example from your experience of knowledge.
8. As you pray, ask God to enable you to be part of the answer to his prayer for the unity of his church.

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