

God's Perseverance With His Saints (Part Three)

Unity and Love

Martin G. Collins

Given 14-Apr-18; Sermon #1428

We traditionally read Jesus' prayer in chapter 17 of the book of John during the Passover service. Jesus spoke these words on the night of His last Passover just prior to His arrest and crucifixion. Please turn over to John 17 with me, please.

In the way of background from my previous two sermons, I would like to just recap a little bit of that. This is actually part three of "God's Perseverance With His Saints" and I had originally organized it so that it would be complete before Passover but the schedule did not turn out the way I thought it would and I had one less sermon than I thought I would. And so I am giving the third one now, but God has ways of working these things out and I think it is maybe even more meaningful and helpful now, here between the Days of Unleavened Bread and Pentecost.

In John 17:1-5, Jesus prayed for Himself. But by far the largest part of Jesus' prayer relates to the disciples. He was much more concerned about them. He was sure of the suffering that they would inevitably have to endure. Nevertheless, they would ultimately have victory, if they just stuck with it and had help from God with God's Holy Spirit. However, the disciples were a variable in and of themselves. Humanly, they were likely to fail.

Jesus had already predicted that they would desert Him and still He prayed for them with confidence that they would be kept by the Father's power and presented for a future sanctified ministry. Now, Jesus' prayer concerning His disciples begins in John 17, verse 6 and He gives the reasons for His confidence in verses 6 through 8. Here, Jesus is praying to His Father, and we are going to read verses 6 through 10.

John 17:6-10 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have

known that all things which You have given Me are from You. For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them."

Next, Jesus asks for the continuation of the Father's protection of the disciples in the future danger that lay ahead of them.

John 17:11-12 "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept, and none of them is lost except the son of perdition [as you know, that is Judas], that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

First, we have a clear distinction between those who are Christ's and those who are of the world. The implication is that the world cannot come to Him for salvation, and certainly does not. Second, He teaches that those who come are those who have been given to Him by the Father. Third, He speaks of His own special ministry to them for which He is set apart, that is, sanctified for that purpose. Fourth, He prays for all who will come to Him later as a result of the disciples' testimony, indicating that these will believe. That is speaking of you and me and everyone from that time forward. And fifth, Jesus asks that they be kept by the Father and thus never be lost.

All of these facts concern you and me as well so these are very important to each and every one of us, and they were so important to Jesus Christ that He spoke these as some of His last words in His last prayer for the disciples.

Jesus' prayer has three parts: a section dealing with Jesus Himself, a section dealing with the disciples, and a final section dealing with those who were to follow them in faith later. In other words, the prayer moves by stages from Jesus Christ to all His present and future disciples.

In Part One of this sermon series ("God's Perseverance With His Saints"), I covered the first quality or characteristic which Jesus asked His Father to give to His disciples, and that was "joy" (in John 17:13). And I also in that first sermon gave the second one, which was "holiness," found in John 17:14-17. Then in Part Two of the sermon series, I presented "truth" in John 17:17, and "work responsibility" in John 17:18.

And now in Part Three of the sermon series, I want to present the last two characteristics that Jesus asked His Father to give to the church, and that is "unity" found in John 17:21-23, and "love" in John 17:26. We hear a lot about love. Sermons are given about love and it just seems that after a while, especially when you have been in the church for quite a while, it is, you know, love, love, love, love, love, love. It is that important, but still we are human and we get tired of certain subjects. But I am going to cover this subject of love in various ways and hopefully a little differently than we have in the past. However, it will be similar, of course.

And now we begin the fifth characteristic of the church: unity. The final portion of Jesus' prayer in John 17, verses 20 through 26 was for future believers who would come to Him through the message of the apostles. And in the church age, all Christians have come to Christ directly or indirectly through the apostles' witness.

Jesus knew His mission would succeed. He would die and be raised, and He would send forth the Spirit, the apostles would preach, people would be converted, and the church would be formed.

John 17:20-23 "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word [that is, the apostles' word], that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they may also be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one. I and them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

Five times here (the number of grace), the English word "one" is used to signify unity. In the way of an introduction to unity here, let us analyze Christian unity in two important ways. First, by portraying the sad lack of unity that has plagued the church throughout its history. And second, by suggesting why Jesus asked that the church would be characterized by unity at this particular point in is High Priestly prayer to His Father.

Why was it so important to Jesus to ask His Father to give the church unity? The divisions that exist today lie both on the surface and within. Battles rage. Highly praised church mergers not only fail to heal these divisions, but also usually lead to further breakups involving those who do not like the new union.

As far as Christ's reasons for praying for unity go, it is simply that He foresaw these differences and so asked that great unity should exist among His own in spite of those differences. Another way of pointing to Christ's interests is to note that all the characteristics of the church concern the Christians relationship to some thing or some person, and that unity is to be the characteristic of the church and the relationships that exist between its members.

In a sense, we could say that joy is the quality of the Christian in relationship to himself. Holiness is the quality in relationship to God. Truth is the quality in his relationship to the Bible, the inspired written Word of God. Work (responsibility) is the quality in his relationship to other people, including those in the world.

In this quality, unity, and the last one, love, which in some sense summarizes them all, we deal with the Christian's relationship to all who are likewise God's children—to the brethren, to our brothers and sisters.

But what kind of unity is this to be? This is an important preliminary question, because if the unity is to be an organizational unity, then our efforts to achieve and express it will be in one direction. While if it is to be a more subjective unity, our efforts will be expanded differently.

The church is not meant to be a great organizational unity because whatever advantages or disadvantages may be involved in massive organizational unity, this in itself obviously does not produce the results Christ prayed for nor does it solve the church's other great problems. Furthermore, it has been tried and found wanting, and we have seen it in our own lives in the last 50 years.

Certainly there is something to be said for some form of outward visible unity, at least in most situations. But it is equally certain that this type of unity is not what we most need nor is it that for which Jesus prayed.

But if the unity for which Jesus prayed is not an organizational unity or a unity achieved by consensus, what kind of unity is it? The answer is that *it is a unity parallel to the unity that exists within the divine nature*, because Jesus speaks of it in these paraphrase terms in verses 21 and 23. Here is my paraphrase:

That all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity.

Turn with me, if you will please, to I Corinthians 12. This means that the church is to have a spiritual unity involving the basic orientation, desires, and will of those participating. Paul points to this true unity in writing to the Corinthians, saying,

I Corinthians 12:4-6 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. There are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

This is not to say that all believers actually enter into this unity as they should. Otherwise, why would Christ pray for it? Oh, God's church is unified. The question is: are you unified with the church? The actual case is that like the other qualities of the church already considered, unity is something *given* to the church, but also something for which the body of true believers must *strive* for. There is a sense in which we already are one in

Christ, but there is also a sense in which we must achieve that unity, we have work to be done. It is the works part of faith.

Now, here we are helped by the various images used of the church throughout the New Testament. And the first important image used to portray the unity of the church of God is one of the most valuable being that of the Family, the Family Christians belong to, the Family of God. Therefore they are spiritual brothers and sisters with one another. The unique characteristic of this image is that it speaks of relationships and therefore of the commitments that the individuals must have to one another. The relationships are based upon what God has done.

Now, salvation is described in the verses that use this image as God begetting spiritual children who are therefore made members of His spiritual Family through His choice and not through their own. We are chosen. God chooses, He calls. People do not *join* His church. John even says this explicitly in the preface to his gospel in John 1:13, when he writes of our having become children of God. Not of natural descent, he says, nor of human decision or a human's will, but born of God.

There is a tendency in the world to talk about all men and women as brothers and sisters. But while this is true in a certain humanitarian sense, it is nevertheless not what the Bible is talking about when it speaks of Christian brotherhood or Christian family. This is something that God has intervened to establish among His own regenerated children. And Christ asked His Father specifically for it.

This fact has two important consequences. First, if the family to which we belong has been established by God, then we have no choice as to who will be in it or whether or not we will be his or her sister or brother. On the contrary, the relationship simply exists and we must be brotherly to the other Christians, whether we want to be or not.

The second consequence is related to this. It is simply that we must be committed to each other in tangible ways. We must be committed to helping each other, for example, because we all need help at times. And this is one clear way in which the special bond between believers can be shown to the watching world. Therefore, we must be ready to give help just as we would

to a needy member of our own human family. The relationship is the same except it is at a higher level in the church, being spiritual.

So the second important image used to portray the unity of the church of God is a fellowship, which the New Testament normally indicates by the Greek word, *koinonia*. Sadly, neither the word fellowship nor the word *koinonia* is very helpful in conveying what we mean. This is because the English word commonly means only a loose collection of friends. We are much more than a loose collection of friends.

Actually, the word *koinonia* has to do with sharing something or having something in common. The common Greek of the New Testament period is called "koine Greek." Now partners as those who hold property in common or share any business are *koinonoi*. They changed the word, they put an "oi" at the end. In spiritual terms, *koinonia*, or fellowship, is had by those who share a common Christian experience of the gospel.

In this respect, the New Testament speaks often of our fellowship with the Father and with the Son, which is sometimes described as a fellowship in the blood and body of Christ and with the Holy Spirit. This obviously involves the totality of our experience of God's grace. So it is not just a common fellowship of acquaintances or just friends. It is far more than that. It is based on the blood and body of Jesus Christ and strengthened and maintained by the Holy Spirit.

But fellowship is not only defined in terms of what we share and together. It also involves what we share out together. This means that it must involve a community in which Christians actually share their thoughts and lives with one another. So you are not in true Christian fellowship unless you are sharing your personal thoughts and lives with other members of God's church.

How is this to be done? Practically, it will probably be done in different ways in different congregations, depending upon local situations and needs. Some churches are small and therefore, we will have an easier time establishing times of sharing with one another. I know when we in the Worldwide Church of God, we were in a congregation of 700 or 800 in the Baltimore church. And we hardly knew any of them. We would go to the

Feast and say, "Oh, where are you from?" "Baltimore." We were in the same congregation and had no idea.

You can see how large congregations like that lose an incredible amount of what the church needs. This is an area in which Christian unity can become a visible and practical thing and its unique and desirable qualities can be made known to the world just by living our lives in the way we should, having a love for one another that is seen not for show, but it is obvious that we actually love and enjoy one another.

Now, the third important image used to stress the unity of the church of God is the body. This image has many important connotations. It shows the nature of the Christian union. One part of the body simply cannot survive if it is separated from the whole. It shows interdependence. It could even suggest a kind of subordination involving a diversity of function because the hand is not the foot, nor the foot the eye, and overall is the Head, which is Christ.

I Corinthians 12:12-14 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many.

However, the one function of the body that is unique to this image is service, because just as the family emphasizes relationships, fellowships emphasize sharing, so does the body emphasize work. The body exists to do something. And since we are talking about unity, we must stress that it exists to enable us to do this work together, not individually but together.

Please turn to back to John 17. We are going to reread verses 23 and 24.

John 17:23-24 "I in them, and You in Me, that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire

that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am,
that they may behold My glory which you have given Me, for You
loved Me before the foundation of the world."

Let us take a moment to pause in looking at the characteristic of the church presented in John 17 to deal with an extraordinary statement. And the statement is the last part of verse 23, "You have loved them as You have loved Me." It means that God's love for us is the same measure and is exercised in the same way as His love for Christ. Wow! That is a tremendous type of love.

This is extraordinary because none of us loves like that. And even though it is true that God can love like that, to claim that He does would be presumptuous and arrogant were it not that He Himself tells us so in these verses.

Actually, our love is quite partial. It is partial in our preference for our friends over against those who are not our friends. It is usually partial in preference to our family over friends. There is even partiality within the family because if we were to ask those who are parents about their love for their children, most would admit that while they try to be impartial and in many cases, almost succeed in being impartial. Nevertheless, they do not humanly love each of the children equally.

Perhaps it is the grace and accommodating ways of one child in comparison to another. It may be the drive, the natural ability of another child. It may be some other characteristic. Something causes us to humanly love the one slightly more than the other or at least be more naturally drawn toward that one. None of us parents wants to admit that that is the case, that we may love one more than another, because we say that we have different types of love for each child. And in a sense that is true and we appreciate each of them greatly and uniquely. But we are human and we are impartial, whether we like it or not, and it happens.

But God, we are told, has no favorites, and thus loves us with the same love that He loves His own Son. God does not love one of His children more than

He loves the others. And we see the nature of this in the love of the Father for Jesus. So we naturally turn to it and ask, "But what is this love like? What is the scope of the Father's love for Jesus?"

The first answer to this question is that God's love is infinite. How in the world do you even define infinite? I do not know. God is infinite, therefore, He is infinite in this as in all His other attributes. This means that there are no limits on God's love. We always have limits, even though we sometimes pretend we do not. No one but God could actually provide limitless support, but God does supply it.

This is the point of Christ's statement in His High Priestly prayer. Can we imagine any limits on God's love for His Son Jesus Christ? No limits are to be placed upon the Father's love for the Son or upon the love of the Son for the Father. So then, in precisely the same way, no limits can be placed upon the Father's love for us. It is infinite.

Now, we can go to Him at any time with any need and know that He stands as ready to help us as He did help Jesus Christ in Gethsemane. And He is as close to us as to Jesus, whether or not we know it or feel it practically. There is an argument that could be made that He is closer to Jesus Christ. They have lived together for eternity and that type of thing, and I understand that. But I am talking about it in practical terms at this time.

The second answer is that the love of the Father for Jesus is eternal, which is not the same thing as being infinite. Infinite love is, as we said, a love without limits. An eternal love is a love without end. God's love for Christ will not cease, therefore, His love for us will not cease. It will not cease because of changes in Him, because He does not change.

Malachi 3:6 "I am the Lord, I do not change."

We can base our faith on that very thing.

Turn with me, if you will please, to Romans 8. God's love will not cease because of changes in us, because God has foreseen all change. He has ordained that the overriding and ultimate prevailing change shall be, not our conformity to sin, but rather our conformity to the image of His own Son.

Romans 8:29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

So the consequence of this is that nothing can separate us from God's love, as the passage in Romans goes on to say.

Romans 8:38-39 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The third answer is that the love of God the Father for Christ is perfect. His is a perfect love. Consequently, His love for us is perfect as well. We do not love perfectly, as we well know. That is why marriages break up, friendships dissolve, children so often rebel against parental authority. So it is not always that we cease to love. It is rather that we do not love well. We overindulge. We do not give of ourselves, or we act inconsistently.

Sometimes we spoil a child through erroneous love; we give him or her too much. Sometimes we do not give enough, so the child spends a lifetime trying to find what he should have found at home, but did not get it there. We say we will do something, but then we fail to do it.

This is the nature of our love, but it is not the nature of God's love. He loves perfectly with a wisdom and consistency that has only our best at heart. This is what we strive for, and with the help of God's Holy Spirit over time during our sanctification, God will complete us.

If we believe that God loves us with the same perfection of love that He has shown to Jesus Christ, then we will not be grippers and complainers because our plans do not turn out the way we would like them to turn out. We will not be despondent because of some undesirable circumstances. On the contrary, we will be encouraged by the very thought that God's love is all

those things: infinite, eternal, and perfect. Here in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." And that is you and I.

Does God so love? Is it really the case that God loves us like this? Can we really believe that we are loved with the same infinite, eternal, and perfect love with which God the Father loves Jesus Christ?. Is there evidence that we are really beneficiaries of so great a love?

The answer, of course, is yes. And the proof is of it is not some abstract reasoning in regard to God's nature, but rather the historical manifestation of God's love at Jesus' crucifixion. How do we know that God loves us with such a great love? You are very familiar with it.

John 3:16 "For God so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

We know that God loves with the greatest of all loves because of the supreme gift of His Son to die for us. It seems almost impossible to find a verse in the Bible that speaks of God's love without finding that it also speaks (in the context, if not in the verse itself) of the proof of that love by Christ's death for us.

Three scriptural examples are these:

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

I John 4:10 And this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

How do we know that God loves us? We know because God sent Jesus and the reason God sent Him was so that He could die for us. It is on this basis that God commends His love to us.

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love to us toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

That is our proof.

At this point let us turn to the consequences of such love. We will look at only two of them today.

First, such love gives us great security. Love should always give us a security that is either greater or lesser, depending upon the quality of the love supporting it. For example, husbands need support from their wives and wives need support from their husbands. Children obviously need the support of their parents. But often this security is lacking because the love that should support it is lacking and therefore insecurity results.

Please turn over to I John 4. By contrast, we have great security in God's love. For one thing, we have security as we look toward the future, to the day of judgment.

I John 4:17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.

Now, because Jesus Christ is in us by way of the Spirit, we have the same character traits as our Savior has; therefore we resemble Him. So we do not have to be worried about meeting Him someday, because by the time we meet Him, we will have similar and the same character traits.

I John 4:18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

By the time we meet Jesus Christ, we will have been made perfect in love or we could say complete. We will be completed to the point that God wants us to be completed in love. If we are in Christ and Christ is in us, we have security now and in the future because we have the same Spirit and are developing the same character traits.

There is another consequence of the truth that God loves us as He loves His Son. It is that we should love others and that we should love them as best we can: impartially. That is almost an impossible feat humanly, but with God's Holy Spirit, we can certainly work to being impartial toward our brethren, toward our brothers, our spiritual brothers and sisters.

We must not pick whom we will love for Christ's sake. We must not love with a slant. We are not infinite. We will not be able to love everyone with an inexhaustible love. We will not love perfectly, but with God helping us, we can love impartially in the sense that we can love the unpleasant for Jesus' sake.

What I mean by unpleasant is there may be people that we have personality conflicts with or clashes with, or maybe it is somebody who is not very polished in their manners and things like that. Maybe it is somebody who has a caustic personality, maybe does not have a personality clash but can really be blunt sometimes and that type of thing. Whatever the case may be, if they are in God's church, we have an obligation to love one another and to be unified.

Fear is a painful and distressing emotion so people suffer from the fear of poverty, of losses, of grief, of sickness, of death, and of future anguish. From all these distressing anxieties, the love of God, which furnishes an evidence of true virtue, delivers us.

Now because of the identity of the love of God for Christ and the love of God for me, my relationship to the final judgment is the same as His, as yours is as well. Jesus bore our sins in order for our guilt to be judged once for all and be removed from Him and us forever. And then we will not be judged for those sins either.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

So if we are in Christ and Christ is in us, we have security now and in the future because we have the same Spirit and are developing the same character traits.

There is another consequence of the truth that God loves us as He loves His Son. It is that we should love others and that we should love them as best we can, impartially. We must not pick whom we will love for Christ's sake.

Please turn with me back to John 17. Following this background on love, we now get back to Jesus' prayer for His disciples. We have come to the sixth characteristic of the church, and that is love.

John 17:25-26 "O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

What is the greatest characteristic of the church? I do not mean by this, what is the *first* quality of the church or even what is the quality or characteristic that we perhaps most lack? Joy is the first quality mentioned. And the characteristic most lacking is something that has to be answered differently in different periods in history and in different situations.

I mean, what is the greatest characteristic, the one that holds the others together? What is the one that gives meaning to the others? The one without which the church cannot be what God means it to be? And there is only one answer and you have already guessed it. It is love. The greatest quality of the church is love.

Paul talks about this in I Corinthians 13, as you well know. After having spoken about love in that chapter and having come to the end in which he looks at the Christian life under the categories of faith, hope, and love—faith that looks back to Christ's sacrifice, hope that looks forward to Christ's second coming, and love that looks about at the world and other Christians—Paul concludes that while all three are great and abiding virtues, nevertheless, the greatest of these is love.

Now back a few pages to John 13. It is with the same thought in mind that Jesus, having spoken of joy and holiness and truth and work and unity as essential characteristics of the church in His prayer of John 17, nevertheless concludes by an emphasis on love. It is the new commandment of John 13.

John 13:34-35 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

So Jesus says that He has declared the name of God to the disciples in order that, as it says in John 17:26, "the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Now we see the preeminence of love eagerly if we look at it in reference to the other qualities of the church. What happens when you take love away from them? Suppose you take joy and subtract love from it. What do you have? You have self-indulgence, you have an exuberance in life and its pleasures but without the sanctifying joy found in relationship to Jesus Christ.

Subtract love from holiness or sanctification. What do you get? You get self-righteousness, the kind of virtue that characterized the Pharisees of Christ's day. By the standards of that day, the Pharisees lived very holy lives, but they did not love others and were ready to kill Christ when He challenged their standards, and actually did kill Him. They were hypocrites, murderers, and liars.

Take love from truth and you have a bitter belief in custom, the kind of teaching that may be right but that does not convince anyone. Take love from work (or work and responsibility) and you have imperialism. Take love from unity and you soon have tyranny. That is the one side of it.

On the other hand, express love in relation to God and man and what do you find? You find all the other characteristics of the church following. What does love for God the Father lead to? Joy. Because we rejoice in God and in

what He has so overwhelmingly done for us. What does love for Jesus Christ lead to? Holiness. Because we know that we will see Him one day and will be like Him.

I John 3:3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

What does love for the Word of God lead to? It leads to truth because if we love the Word, we will study it and therefore inevitably grow into a fuller appreciation and realization of God's truth. What does love for the world lead to? Work! We have a message to take to the world.

Again, where does love for our Christian brothers and sisters lead to? Unity. Because by love, we discern that we are bound together in that bundle of life that God Himself has created within His church. Is it any wonder that Jesus ends His final discourses and prayer, undoubtedly spoken within the hearing of the disciples, with this emphasis? Hardly!

Rather, we expect it, because it is as though Jesus, in anticipation of the writing of the fourth gospel, could go back to the beginning of this fourth section (where we read, "Having loved His own who were in the world, He showed them the full extent of His love"), and then conclude, "Yes. And here at the very end of My discourse and prayer, I'm going to talk about precisely that, because love is the most important characteristic."

What else can we say about love on the basis of John 17:25-26? First, we can say that it has its source in God. This is the kind of love we are talking about. We are not talking about the kind of love the world invents, aspires to, or imagines, but rather the love of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ, and that we come to know as we come to know God.

It is obvious that Jesus has precisely this thought in mind because verse 25, the prelude to verse 26, talks about knowledge. In it Jesus says in verse 25, "O righteous Father! The world has known not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me." It is after this that Jesus goes on to say in verse 26, "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

In other words, He is saying, "I have made You known to them, that is, I have made You known in Your essential nature and 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."

Please turn to I John 4. What Jesus is saying is, that if we know God, we will know God's nature as being characterized by love. And that if we do not know love, we do not know God. John later clearly makes the same point in his first epistle.

I John 4:7-8 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

And when Jesus says, the world has not known God, it means besides everything else, that *the world does not know God as a God of love*. This was demonstrably true in Jesus' day. No Greek, no Roman, no Egyptian, no Babylonian in Christ's day, nor in any of the centuries before, had ever thought of God's nature as being essentially characterized by love. With Jesus Christ, an entirely new idea entered history because He taught not only that God is loving, but also that He loves with an extraordinary love entirely beyond all human imaginations. And that love had sent Christ to die. And moreover, on that basis, it would now draw a host of redeemed men and women into an extraordinary Family relationship with God.

It may be seen linguistically that a new understanding of love entered history through God's revelation first in the Old Testament and then preeminently through the teaching of Jesus Christ. To begin with, we note that the Greek language in which the New Testament is written and into which the Old Testament was translated about 100 years before Christ's birth, is rich in words for love. Yet, when the translators of the Old Testament and the writers of the New came to talk about the love of God, they found that they could not draw upon any of the common Greek words for love, but instead had to choose a word that previously had been little used and change it, thereby infusing it with an entirely new character.

I think you will find this interesting. French has only one word for love and it is *aimer*. Some of you who have taken French may know what it is. I do not know what tense that is. But French only has one word for love. A Frenchman uses it for whatever he wants to say. He loves his wife, he loves his country, he loves his house, he loves his food. Anything, in fact, which he has the slightest liking of he uses that French word. The English language is a little better. We have love and like.

But ancient Greek had three words, plus the indefinite word that could hardly be used for love at all. The first Greek word was *storge*. It referred to general affection, particularly within the family. The closest English equivalent would be fondness. The Greek would say I am fond of my children and my relatives. The second Greek word you are very familiar with is *philia*, from which we get the English words philanthropy and Philadelphia. It refers to friendship. Jesus used this word in Matthew 10:37 when He said the person who loves father and mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Now, the third Greek word is *eros*, the word for sensual love. From it we get our English word erotic.

However, when the translators of the Hebrew Bible came to put the Old Testament text into Greek, none of these common words was adequate for conveying the biblical conceptions of the love of God. The translators of the Septuagint might have used *storge*, the word for family affection. But how could they then have conveyed the idea of graciousness that is inherent in God's love?

Again, the translators might have used *eros*, noting that God's love for Israel is portrayed as sensual love in Hosea and in the Song of Solomon. However, this translation would have introduced the idea of an unrighteous love because *eros* was associated as much with prostitution as with a proper love in marriage. So *eros* had almost no moral content that was in the Greek at that time.

In a similar way, *philia* was also inadequate because friendships come and go, but the love of God is eternal. In Jeremiah 31:3, God told Jeremiah, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." What were the translators to do?

The answer was simple. The translators took another word entirely, one without strong associations, and used it in nearly all cases where the love of God is mentioned. By doing this, they created a word that came in time to convey the type of love that they wanted.

At this point, let me interject an illustration to show how this also happened in the New Testament period. When Jesus appeared in Israel announcing His mission, He avoided a number of Messianic titles. The people were expecting the Messiah, but Jesus did not proclaim Himself the Messiah, at least not openly, because to the Jews that would have meant a king strong enough to drive out the Romans. The title Messiah would have meant an earthly king and would have suggested an earthly kingdom. Nor did He call Himself the Son of God.

Now, the Greeks knew all about "sons of god," but that title would have put Him on the same level as Hercules and the other Greek gods. Instead, Jesus called Himself the Son of Man. And this title occurs in Daniel and describes a Messianic figure. But in the intellectual climate of Jesus' time, it was no longer precise and could have meant almost anything. So Jesus used that title more than any other, allowing His teaching and ministry to paint a proper picture of Himself as God's true Messiah and Son, the one who came to die, rise again, and return one day in glory to judge mankind and reward true believers.

So it is the same with the several words for love. Neither *storge*, *philia*, or *eros* conveys the proper biblical ideas. But *agape* does. It was vague, but it could be made to convey the right ideas. Does God love with a righteous, holy love? Yes. That love is *agape*. Is God's love gracious, sovereign, everlasting? Yes, that too. That love is *agape*. By this means, *agape* became the supreme word for speaking about God's Word revealed in its fullness in Jesus Christ.

Please turn with me back to John 17. What else can we say about love on the basis of John 17:25-26? Well, the second point is the revelation itself. We ask, where does the revelation of God's love occur? God had revealed Himself to be a God of love in the pages of the Old Testament. He indicated there that He had set His love upon Israel even though there was nothing in the people to merit it. Later, God is revealed to be a God of love in Christ's

teaching. He called Him Father, indicating that His was a Father's love. Yet the ultimate answer is that God is declared to be a God of love by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."

There is the definition; what Jesus is looking forward to is in the words of John 17:26, that closed His prayer to His Father for His disciples. Because He says,

John 17:26 "I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, . . ."

Jesus declared the name of God. What is He thinking here? What did He mean by "will declare it?"

We can understand the phrase if it had occurred in the past tense because it would then clearly refer to the previous teaching in the gospel. But why the future tense? He must be referring to His own sacrifice because it is as though Jesus is saying, that which I have been speaking of in years past, I am now going to demonstrate in an extraordinary and tangible way through My crucifixion. There has never been, there never will be a greater demonstration of the love of God than the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

There is something else in John 17, verse 26 because Jesus does not merely show where we can find love. He also shows where we can demonstrate love, because He goes on to pray in His prayer to His Father in the end of verse 26.

John 17:26 ". . . that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Love is to be shown in us personally. Why is Jesus concerned about this? Because it is only in His followers that anyone in this age, or any other age

except His own, can see this great love. Jesus was aware that He was about to die and following His death, there would be a resurrection and an ascension into heaven.

Therefore, this One, who was Himself the perfect manifestation of love, the only One in whom this world had ever seen what true love really is, this One would be gone and He would not be here for people to consider. So He says as He closes his prayer, that this love is now to be in us, even as He is in us, and that the world is to see it there. And it must be love in action.

To be practical, how do we do it? How do we love one another? How do we put this great love of God into practice? Well, let me give you three simple practical ways.

First, we need to love one another by listening to one another. We live in an age in which people do not listen to each other. We talk to one another and others are constantly talking to us. But this is a hard world in which no one really listens. So one of the things we need to do, if we are truly characterized by the love of God, is to listen. God listens to us. Jesus Christ listens to us. And we must do the same. We must listen to one another.

Second, is that we should share. That is, we should let others share and we ourselves should share. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a family relationship so we do not sit like computers and analyze what we are told and then come back with answers carefully based upon political correctness. We do not get involved in the talking points of politics. We do not argue or debate the speculations on prophecy. We do not brush off the suffering of others offering oversimplified solutions. We come back as people who are on the same level as the ones to whom we are talking, and we humbly say, "I've gone through a similar thing and it was not easy, but God intervened in such and such a way for me and He will for you as well."

Our problem is often that we do not like to share ourselves. And the reason we do not like to share ourselves is because we are ashamed of ourselves because we are far from perfect. We sin and we fail often and we are afraid that if we really did tell what is down inside, the other person would turn away and be disgusted and we might lose the relationship.

How do we get to the point of being able to really, truly share? There is only one way, and that is to know deep in our hearts that before God we are fully known as we are with all our blemishes, sins, and shames. And that nevertheless, Jesus Christ has loved us, died for us, and that we are now fully accepted in the Beloved. If you can know that you are known and still loved, then you can share your true self and love others.

The third practical way is that we must serve. We must listen, we must share, we must serve. If anything has been taught in this section of John's gospel, it is that we must serve. And this section of Christ's teaching began with a reference to service as the outworking of Christ's love.

John 13:1 . . . having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

Christ served them to the end of His physical life.

The 13th chapter of John's gospel contains a demonstration of what this love means in Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet. Jesus instructed in verses 14 through 16 about service.

John 13:14-16 "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [This is an act of humble service.] For I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him."

So He gave us a heartfelt example of humble service that we are to follow. Later, Jesus goes on to teach what this love means and what the Holy Spirit will do in enabling us to love.

In this prayer, He lists the special qualities that should characterize the church in every age: joy, holiness, truth, work, unity, and love. And the last three of these involve service, and quite rightly, because God's church is not in the world to be served. She is in the world to serve in order that the love of God in Christ might be increasingly known through our witnessing by manifesting specific loving acts in our lives. It is how we live our lives. Do

we live our lives as loving lives or do we live our lives as the world lives it, with self love?

We can easily see how each of these special qualities and characteristics of the church are vitally important. The first characteristic is joy, and this is important because if we do not have joy, we cannot represent and witness properly to anyone about the good news of the coming Kingdom of God. The church is to look to God in faith and find joy.

The second characteristic we must have is holiness. In other words, sanctification. In fact, it is this that Jesus most emphasizes in John 17:11-26. He says in verse 19, "And for their sakes, I sanctify Myself that they also may be sanctified by the truth."

In what sense was Jesus sanctified? As we saw earlier, He was sanctified in the sense of being set apart totally for the work God had given Him to do. And the parallel in our case is to be set apart totally for the work we have been given to do.

The third characteristic is truth. The church is to look to the Scriptures and find truth. We are concerned both with our message and with our wholehearted commitment to the truth as a way of life. Jesus was committed to the truth of God and He is the truth. And so, we must be also.

The fourth characteristic is work, or responsibility and work. God's church is to look outward at the world and see the effects of God's work in us—our witness—our righteous lives in contrast to the perverse lifestyles of the world. We must be distinctly different and it must be noticeable.

The fifth characteristic is unity. We must be like Jesus Christ in our unity. In fact, this is the way Jesus introduces the subject in John 17:21 of His prayer for His disciples. In verse 21 He says, "That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."

Notice the reason Christ gives for unity: that the world may believe. The world is fractured in a million ways. It is the logical outcome of the work of Satan, one of whose most revealing names is the disruptor (Greek, diabolos).

If we are to truly witness God's way of life to the world, we must show a genuine unity that is in itself desirable and attractive and that at the same time, points to the unity within the divine nature, which is its source.

And the sixth and final characteristic is love. We must love people as Jesus Christ loved, and still loves people. It was out of love for them that He died. Consequently, we must love the world too, not the world's system or the culture or sin, of course, but rather those who are in it.

This love is now to be in us, even as He is in us, and that the world is to see it there. It must be love in action.