

Church Unity Despite The Spirit Of The World

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Although the present coronavirus hoax has not completely shut down the visible Christian church in the US, it certainly has come close in many countries in the world; and of course the visible Christian church has been shut down more than not in communist countries for quite some time now. This present globally orchestrated state of fear may very well be a precursor to the complete silencing of the visible Christian church. At the very least, in part, it is the test run to see what the free world will tolerate under the oppression of socialism, which is basically communism-lite.

First Liberty Institute is the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious liberty for all Americans. According to their website, firstliberty.org, there is all-out war on faith. Opponents use COVID-19 crisis to launch attacks on religious freedom. "If you think there is no possible way religious freedom violations could surge in the middle of a health crisis, think again. A scan of recent headlines shows there are some who want to seize this as an opportunity to strip away the rights and liberties of people of faith, churches, and religious institutions."

Recently in the news there have been numerous stories (we heard some of those from Richard a few minutes ago), about infringement against religious freedom in the United States. One newsworthy illustration is that of what happened to the King James Baptist Church in Mississippi.

Pastor Hamilton and the King James Baptist Church have rigorously followed the CDC guidelines for the COVID-19 crisis since it arrived in Mississippi. Unable to meet in person, King James Baptist Church creatively chose to utilize a drive-in method of holding church services while still strictly adhering to the guidelines of the state and the CDC. Members of the King James Baptist Church drove in their cars and parked in their parking lot in maybe seven or eight cars total. Pastor Hamilton stood at a distance

Church Unity Despite the Spirit of the World by Martin G. Collins
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greater than six feet from his parishioners as they remained in their cars with the windows up. No one left their cars at any time during the service. Rather they listened to Pastor Hamilton as he utilized a bullhorn to preach to them in open air. However, Greenville Mississippi Democrat Mayor Eric Simmons had just issued an order prohibiting drive-in services and banning all in-person church services. The order left Pastor Hamilton and other church leaders in fear that their church members would be fined with \$500 fines [which they were] and criminally prosecuted for merely engaging in drive-in services that fell well within the CDC guidelines. The Mayor's office said in a press release that 'churches are strongly encouraged to hold services via Facebook Live, Zoom, free conference call, and any and all other social media streaming and telephonic platforms.'

But according to Kelly Shackelford, president of the First Liberty Institute, "The order is massively unconstitutional. It targets churches in a way that it targets no other group. They were surrounded by police." One of the police officers came up to Pastor Hamilton and said, "Because of that local order in Greenville, Mississippi, your rights are suspended." Attorney Shackelford said, "Those are the specific words he used, like your Constitutional rights are gone. Rights are not suspended."

Then the US Department of Justice weighed in on the case. In a statement of interest, the federal department sided with the Mississippi church and suggested the city's actions were effectively targeting forms of religious conduct during the coronavirus pandemic. The lawyers involved wrote, "The facts alleged in the complaint strongly suggests that the city's actions target religious conduct in violation of the US Constitution's First Amendment." City police officers had handed out \$500 citations to each person in the cars attending services and Greenville has since said it will not seek to collect the penalties, the Justice Department noted.

The Greenville dispute is one of several around the United States in which religious groups have objected to state or local restrictions on gatherings, saying they infringe on religious rights. In this COVID-19 quarantine most houses of worship have voluntarily complied with shutdown orders with some holding services online. US Attorney General William Barr said in a

Church Unity Despite the Spirit of the World by Martin G. Collins
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statement that the Justice Department will work to uphold the constitutional right to freely practice religion as states and cities seek to contain the spread of the coronavirus by limiting worship services. Attorney General Barr said,

Religion and religious worship continue to be central to the lives of millions of Americans. And this is true more so than ever during this difficult time. The pandemic has changed the ways Americans live their lives. Religious communities have rallied to the critical need to protect the community from the spread of this disease by making services available online and in ways that otherwise comply with social distancing guidelines.

Then the Attorney General said:

The United States Department of Justice will continue to ensure that religious freedom remains protected if any state or local government, in their response to COVID-19, singles out, targets, or discriminates against any house of worship for special restrictions.

And then Mississippi Republican Governor Tate Reeves tweeted,

Thank you to the Trump administration and Attorney General Bill Barr for this strong stand in support of religious liberty. The government cannot shut down churches. Mississippi is not China. This is still America and we will help support this in any way we can.

So this may be a temporary respite from attacks on religious freedom in this country. However, sadly, it continues in most socialist and communist countries. Non-Catholic Christians in communist China, and yes, China is still Communist despite the what the fake news media has been promoting, are referred to as being in the "underground church." Regulations passed in February, 2020 as part of a move to align religion with Chinese characteristics (take note of that: to align religion with Chinese characteristics and that is what is trying to be done in most of the countries of the world), has led to extreme crackdowns on Christianity in many provinces across China. Churches have been closed, crosses destroyed, Bibles burned, and Christians arrested. Most likely they will have to meet

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even more secretively and face increased physical persecution. And this has driven most believers underground, both figuratively and often literally. The secret house churches are considered illegal by the Chinese government and the congregation could face serious persecution if they are caught.

Some of the world's Christians are being arrested multiple times and sometimes spend more than a month in jail. Every day in the world the authorities are beating them with batons and threatening their lives so we can speak.

So, we can be very thankful for the blessings that we have to be able to live in the United States and have the protection, at least for the meantime, of those who still have a semblance of Christianity in their blood.

Please turn with me to I Corinthians 12. The religious worldview of religious unity is defined as "a church universal and a world religion that bind people, not with vows and creeds, that is covenants and doctrines, but in a silent soul communion in a community of hearts." Let me read that last phrase because it is so confusing and means absolutely nothing, or everything. "But in a silent soul communion in a community of hearts." So it is speaking of emotions, it is a religion based on emotions. That is how they describe religious unity.

At first glance, in considering Paul's letter to the Corinthians here in I Corinthians 12, one might think he agrees with this worldview.

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.

Now, the worldview reads that totally differently than what the truth of it is. It might seem that mainstream Christianity's attempt at religious diversity is a good thing and will promote unity. However, the worldview of religious diversity ignores true doctrine and belief, and emphasizes how people feel, what they desire, and what gives them liberty to do what they want without guilt. They base their traditions on humanism.

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Let me define humanism. It is very enlightening to read this because this is the worldview of religion. Humanism is defined as:

An outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems.

It is all about the human being. Everything comes from the human being. Everything originates from the human being and all of the laws originate from the human beings and all of the solutions to problems originate from the human beings. That is what humanism represents. So the diversity on which they based their religion is the same humanism, not the same Jesus Christ, who is Spirit, Lord, and God under the sovereignty of the Father.

True Christians have gathered as a community since the earliest days of the church and even in those times, plagues and pandemics challenged the church and its unity, yet the church flourishes and the gates of Hades cannot prevail against it.

Please turn with me to John 17. With all this introduction, this sermon is actually on unity and how to maintain unity in a crisis such as what we are going through.

The divisions that exist today—outside and inside the church—are too obvious and numerous to comment on. They lie both on the surface and within. Contentions erupt, highly praised church members not only fail to heal these divisions, but also usually lead to further breakups involving those who do not like the new union. So far as Christ's reasons for praying for unity in His church go, it is simply that He foresaw these differences and so asks for the great unity that should exist among His own despite them.

John 17:20-23 "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one as You, Father, are in Me, and I and You; that they also may 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

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as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one [That is the fifth time in this passage that the word one is used—the number of grace.], and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

Another way of pointing to Christ's interest is to note all the characteristics of the church concerning the Christian relationship to something or someone, and that unity is to be the characteristic of the church in the relationships that exist between its members. Just in comparison in a general sense, joy is the characteristic of the Christian in relationship to himself, and holiness is the characteristic of the church in relationship to God, and truth is the characteristic of the church in its relationship to the Bible, and purposes the characteristic of the church in his relationship to the world.

In this characteristic of unity, and the last being love which in some sense summarizes them all, we deal with the Christian's relationship to all who are likewise God's children.

But what kind of unity is it to be? This is an important preliminary question because if the unity is an organizational unity, then our efforts to achieve and express it will be in one direction. While if it is a more personal unity, our efforts will be expended differently. One thing for sure, the church is not normally a great organizational unity for whatever its 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 problems. So it has been tried and found wanting.

Now in the early days of the church, there was a lot of energy and growth but little organizational unity. Yes, the twelve apostles agreed and they communicated with one another, but as far as the church as a whole, there was not one overall organization that was incorporated, so to speak. 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 Christ prayed.

Another type of unity that we do not need is total conformity. That is, an approach to the church that would make everyone alike. Here we probably

Church Unity Despite the Spirit of the World by Martin G. Collins
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come closest to the era of disunity because, if the church for the most part strives for an organizational unity, this is not what Jesus is looking for in His prayer in John 17. On the contrary, there should be the greatest variety among Christians, variety of personality, interests, resources, and even approaches to doing God's work. This should make the church interesting and not dull.

Now, the mainstream Christian church has become feminized and so everything is from a slanted perspective. That is not balanced either. But if the unity for which Jesus prayed is not an organizational unity or a unity achieved by conformity, 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 terms.

John 17:21 "That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You."

John 17:23 "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one."

This means that the church is to have a spiritual unity involving the basic common doctrine, faith, hope, love, and will of those participating in it. This is not to say that all believers actually enter into this unity as they should. We are all human, we have human nature, and we struggle with it and we work at it. Otherwise, why would Christ have prayed for it? The reality is that like the other characteristics of the church, unity is something given to the church, but also something for which the body of true believers should strive. You and I must work at it to have unity.

Now, 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. Here we are helped by the various images used in the church throughout the New Testament. And one of the most valuable being that of a family. We belong to the Family of God and therefore we are rightly brothers and sisters to one another. The unique characteristic of this image is that it speaks of relationships and therefore of the commitments that we must have to one another. The relationships are based upon what God has done.

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 our own. John even says this explicitly in the preface to his gospel when he writes of our having become children of God in John 1.

John 1:12-13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

So 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.

I Peter 2:17 Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God.
Honor the king.

This is something that God has intervened to established among His own converted children and 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 brother or sister. On the contrary, the relationship simply exists and we must be brotherly to other Christians whether or not we want to, whether they have offended us or not.

Second, we must be committed to each other in tangible ways. We must be committed to helping each other because we all need help at times and this is one clear way in which the special bond among believers can be shown to the watching world. And this is one of the reasons why attending Sabbath services is so crucial. Yet now [because of COVID-19 restrictions] we have to work around that and try other ways to be able to communicate in fellowship with one another, at least temporarily at this time. We do need help as Christians and we need it *from* Christians. Also we must be ready to give help just as we would to a needy member of our own family.

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The second important image used to portray the unity of the church 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 the full meaning. This is because the English word commonly means only "a loose collection of friends." And the Greek word has become something of a theological cliché. Actually, the word has to do with sharing something or having something in common. The common Greek of the New Testament period is called *koin* Greek. Partners, as those who hold property in common or share in a business, are *koinoni*. And that is in the business sense.

In spiritual terms *koinonia* or fellowship is had by those who share common Christian experience of the Word of God. In this respect the New Testament speaks often of our fellowship with the Father in I John 1:3, and with the Son in I Corinthians 1:9, which is sometimes described as a fellowship in the blood and body of Christ there in I Corinthians 10:16, and also with the Holy Spirit. This obviously involves the totality of our experience of God's grace in living His way of life. It does not mean just living it on the Sabbath. It means the totality of the whole week—seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

How is this to be done practically? It will probably be done in different ways in different congregations or groups, depending upon local situations and needs, and certainly we are faced with that type of situation with this coronavirus crisis. At this time it is very hard to accomplish because we are isolated from one another. Members of God's church should talk with church friends and loved ones over the phone via video chat about encouraging things regarding God's way of life and about concerns for the wellbeing of the other person. Do not dwell on the spirit of the world, but think and speak according to the mind of Christ in you.

The third important image used to stress the unity of the church, of course, is the body. Clearly, this image has many important implications. It speaks of the nature of the unity; one part of the body simply cannot survive if it is separate from the whole. It concerns interdependence. It even suggests a kind of subordination involving a variety of function. For the hand is not the foot, nor the foot the eye, and over all the Head which is Christ. Paul speaks of this here in I Corinthians 12.

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 were all baptized into one body [that is, one spiritual 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.

I Corinthians 12:23-27 And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; and if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

However, the one function of the body that is unique to this image is service. Because just as the family emphasizes relationships and 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 in a unified way.

The question we come upon now is simply: What is our part in this area? If we want to be unified with God's church, we must have God's Spirit working in us. We were all given the one Spirit.

I Corinthians 12:3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

So we can also deduct from that, that anyone who has the Holy Spirit will not call God's people accursed either or negatively comment about them in things like that in a way that condemns or a way that puts people down.

Now Jesus is Lord, and to be a servant of Christ we must revere Him as Lord. Only someone truly under the influence of spiritual inspiration can

acknowledge Him in that way. We must be intensely aware of God's great Family and body of Christ to which we already belong, and we can thank God for it. What must we do? We must be living sacrifices to God.

Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. [We should go over, above, and beyond even that.] And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

And part of that will of God is to serve one another, even to death if necessary. If you are willing and able to serve for the right reason, you will find that God will offer a way for you to serve and you will be thankful for the opportunities He provides.

Matthew 20:27-28 "And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

So this service was not just symbolic. It involved low-status tasks like washing feet and led to His death. The world's concept of a servant was turned on its head because of Jesus. The Master voluntarily made Himself a servant to His own disciples in that way and set the example of a true servant-leader. In the church initiated by Jesus, leaders must follow quite different patterns from those normally found in the world.

Now, they are not to act toward church members as religious fathers or masters, but as servants, and we ministers are not policemen, we are shepherds. The church reflects this concept by using words such as deacons, ministers, or pastors for its leaders and the adoption of the image of servant for believers also mirrors this pattern of reversal of values. By worldly standards, servanthood is something humiliating, but in standards of God's Kingdom the description "servant of the Lord Jesus Christ" becomes a title of honor. Notice what Colossians 4:7 says, "Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant of the Lord." There is no greater title that he would have preferred, I am sure.

So, no matter what our circumstances, we must serve God and one another at every opportunity, whether in prayer or encouragement or assistance. Just by bending our ear to their concerns and problems. The church of God, the body of Christ, 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 the testimonies and specific loving acts of God's people.

Also, unity is had by those who share a common Christian experience of the Word of God.

II Corinthians 2:17 For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

Every area of life is claimed by God and counterclaimed by forces of evil and there is no neutral ground. Every human event shows an allegiance to God or rebellion against Him. People are always at the crossroads in humanity. It is only by the light of Christ's gospel, by the truth of the Word of God, that we receive the knowledge of the glory of God.

II Corinthians 4:1-6 Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing [that is, to the unconverted, to the nonbelievers, the unbelievers], whose minds, the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves, your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So the Bible is a record of a series of great moral and spiritual dilemmas and choices made by people who are morally responsible. Also, the crucial action consists of an individual's or nation's response to external situations. Outside circumstances do not coerce people to choose as they do. These circumstances only provide the occasion for human choice. Many choices are put in front of all of us and we must choose life rather than death.

For all its variety the Bible is a unified book and the terms by which we call it, as well as the Bible's comments on itself, call attention to the Bible as a single book and as a sacred book that makes a claim on our beliefs and lives in a way that no other book does. A unified system of beliefs throughout provides further unity to this Book, as does the overriding story that it tells. The Word of God leads to truth, and is truth, and therefore if we truly love the Word, we will study it and inevitably grow into a fuller appreciation and realization of God's truth.

Proverbs 30:5 Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him.

Many of us are home because we are told that we *have* to stay at home. It gives us a greater opportunity to get into the Word of God and to use it more and to apply it more in our lives.

All true believers are one body in Christ and the church is not one because of unification by common origin of the different groups, but because we were formed on common principles, statutes, and laws through one Spirit. For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body.

Now the biblical representations of this unity of believers in Christ is summarized in this way: He is the Head, we are the body. He is the Foundation and we are the building. He is the Vine and we are the branches. He is the Bridegroom and we are the bride. He is the Shepherd and we are the sheep. He is the Way and we are the followers. We are the temple, He is inhabitant. He is the Firstborn and we are the brothers. He is the Heir and we are the co-heirs. He is the Life and we are the living.

There is no room for the world's worldview of religion anywhere in any of this. It is entirely contrary. I was always amazed and miffed that there were so many people in the church over the years who would listen to the Sunday preachers on Sunday and would say how much they thought they were getting out of it and how good they felt. That is the world and that is the worldview, not Christianity, not true Christianity.

These things are clearly one. The unity of the church, the intimacy of this union is indicated in our Savior's intercessory prayer in John 17, in which He asked that the members of this body may be one as He and the Father are one. Next in Jesus' prayer in John 17, He makes an extraordinary statement in the last part of the verse 23.

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

You have loved them *even as* You have loved Me. It means that God's love for us is in the same measure and is exercised in the same way as His love for Jesus Christ! Some try to avoid this meaning because it is so incredible and some have treated the sentence casually as though it were saying, You have loved them *because* You love Me. Others have seen it in terms of the spiritual union of believers with Christ as though we are loved as Christ only because we are *in* Christ. These statements are true, but they miss the full power of the sentence because they do not take the keyword at full value.

That English word "as" is from the Greek *kathoes*, which means "just as" or "to the same degree that." So we are told that God loves those who are Christ's to the same degree and in the same way that He loves Christ! This is extraordinary because none of us loves like that. And even though it is true that God can love like that, for us 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 in distinction to those who are not our friends. It is usually partial in preference for our family over our 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 love each of their children equally, not from a nature standpoint. Not until we have God's love in us and use it entirely will we ever reach that point.

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 degree of the Father's love for Jesus Christ? The first answer to the question is that God's love is what we might call infinite. God is infinite. Therefore He is infinite in this as in all His other attributes. Psalm 147:5 says, "Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite. Jeremiah 31:3 says, "The Lord has appeared of old to me, saying, "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you." This means that there are no limits on God's love. We always have limits, even though we sometimes pretend we do not, and we do have limits and only God can actually provide limitless support and God does supply it.

This is the point of Christ's statement in His High Priestly prayer: "You have loved them to the same degree that You have loved Me," Christ says. No limits can be placed upon the Father's love for the Son or upon the love of the Son for the Father. So then, in the same way, no limits can be placed upon the Father's love for us. We can go to Him through Jesus Christ at any time and with any need and know that He stands ready to help us.

Second, the love of the Father for Jesus Christ is eternal, which is, we must note, not the same thing as being infinite. An infinite love is, as we said, a love without limits. And eternal love is a love without end. Also eternal is a quality of love. Eternal life is not necessarily a length of time, but it is a quality of life, eternal life is. It is impossible for us to imagine the Father's ceasing to love Jesus Christ, His Beloved, and far better to imagine the dissolution of the universe we know than to imagine such an impossible possibility. 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 and neither does the Son.

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

It will not cease because it changes in us because God has foreseen all change. Certainly He has ordained that the overriding and ultimate prevailing change shall not be our conformity to sin, but rather our conformity to the image of His Son.

Romans 8:29 [Paul writes] 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.

The consequences of this is that nothing, not even sin, 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.

Now we move on to the third characteristic of the love of God the Father for Jesus Christ, which is perfection. His is a perfect love, consequently His love for us is perfection as well. We do not love perfectly, as we well know, and that is why marriages break up, friendships dissolve, children so often rebel against parental authority. It is not always that we cease to love. But it is rather that we do not love well. We overindulge, or we do not give of ourselves, or we act inconsistently. Sometimes we spoil a child through 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 there. Again, 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 the wisdom and consistency that has only our best at heart. If we believe that God loves us with the same perfection of love He has shown to Jesus Christ, then we will not be complainers because plans do not turn out the way we would like them to. We will not be despondent because of some undesirable circumstances like the quarantine that were going through at this time. Have you complained about anything during this time? I have. I am not proud of it, but there may not have been a day which I have not

complained about something. We all, I am sure, have that problem and we have to work at it. So, it gives us a different opportunity to overcome such a thing. On the contrary, we will be encouraged and rejoice in God's blessings. Let us go back a few verses to verse 28.

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.

So the degree of God's love is infinite, eternal, and perfect.

Is there evidence that we are really beneficiaries of so great a love? The answer and proof of it is not some abstract reasoning regarding God's nature, but rather the historical manifestation of God's love and Calvary. We know that God loves us with such a great love, because He gives us the answer in John 3:16, which you are so very familiar with, as is the mainstream Christian world.

John 3:16 "For God so loved 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. And it is almost impossible to find a verse in the Bible that speaks of God's love without finding it also speaks in the context, if not in the very verse itself, of the proof of that love by Christ's death for us. For example,

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.

So we know God loves us because God sent Jesus, and the reason God sent Him is so that He would die for us. And it is on this basis that God even commends His love to us. Back a few chapters to Romans 5.

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

At this point, we must turn to the consequences of such love. So what are they? First and most important, such love gives us great security. Love should always give security, a security that is either greater or lesser depending upon the quality of the love supporting it. Husbands need support from their wives and wives need support from their husbands, and children obviously need support from their parents. Often this security is lacking because the love that should support it is lacking and insecurity results.

Please flip 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.

As far as words go, the last phrase could hardly be simpler. It is composed of only seven words in the NIV. All are monosyllables and it reads, "In this world, we are like Him." It obviously refers to life now. It refers to our stance before God in view of the final judgment because that is what is being talked about in the context.

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.

We are supposed to be moving on to perfection, or completion, the completion that God needs from us so that He can take us into His Kingdom of Spirit beings. But it says there that fear involves torment. "But he who fears has not been made perfect in love." So it is obviously interrupting our development or God's development in us of His love. Do we fear the virus that is going around? Do we fear the authorities? Do we fear the behind the

Church Unity Despite the Spirit of the World by Martin G. Collins
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scenes that are going on? Or do we have our confidence in God, to rely on Him and not worry about those things because God is in charge. He is still on the throne.

The identity of the love of God for Christ and the love of God for us is that our relationship to the final judgment is the same as Jesus Christ's. Will Jesus be judged? Will He be forced to give an account of sins laid upon Him as He hung up on the cross? Of course not. He bore our sins in order that we might be judged once for all and be removed from us forever. And then we will not be judged for those sins are either, if we are converted, having genuinely repented of our sins and overcome them and worked very hard to live God's way of life.

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

That is what we must walk according to. According to the Spirit means according to the mind of Christ in us. This does not just refer to future events, to the events of God's judgment. It is also concerned about life now.

Is there security now because of God's love? Yes, there is, in precisely the same sense that there is security for a child in a parent's love, though the child may grow up and move far from home. The love of God is that upon which we can rely on physically and emotionally and in every other way as well, knowing that it will not budge. And even though the wall and everything else in heaven and earth were shaken, still God's Word is unmoved.

There is one more 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 as we can impartially. We must not choose whom we will love and whom we will not. And we must not love with an ulterior motive. We must have an impartial love for others. We will not be able to love everyone with inexhaustible love. We will not love perfectly. But with God helping us we can love impartially in the sense that we can love unpleasant people for God's sake. You could expand that from unpleasant to someone that maybe has idiosyncrasies or does things differently than we do.

Turn over with me to John 17 again. God has loved us greatly even as He has loved Christ. But the matter does not stop at that point. It is not meant to. True, the Father has loved us as He loves Christ, but He has loved us so that, as one result, we might love as Christ. And if we do, we will become one among ourselves. Then, by God's grace, also have success with those for whom Christ also died. If we want unity, we *must* have love for one another. And we must have it impartially.

John 17:24-26 "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. 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."

So why is the experience of a Christian so different from that of a non-Christian? We look out there and we see non-Christians that do some good in the world. They are philanthropists. They have an ulterior motive probably, but some are genuine in their wanting to help and do things that may be good at times. It is not because of something impressive in us of course that we have God's love. Still less is it due to some intrinsic good in us. The difference is found only in the will of God who has decreed that the death of a Christian, our death, shall not be a tragedy, but a triumph.

And we could say that the same for our trials. We have trials and people in the world have trials. We have sickness and people in the world have sickness. But we learn spiritual lessons from our sicknesses and from our injuries and things like that, where the world does not. They only learn lessons on a letter of the law level, or on a surface level.

Turn with me to II Corinthians 5. This is declared many places in Scripture as anyone who knows the Bible well is aware of. Paul spoke of his confidence in and willingness for our triumph in the resurrection.

II Corinthians 5:5-8 Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we

Church Unity Despite the Spirit of the World by Martin G. Collins
(<https://www.cgg.org>)

are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

So we are confident in God's guarantee that we will be changed from corruptible to incorruptible at our resurrection. Paul also says our standing with God is a win-win situation.

Philippians 1:19-21 For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ [Paul there is acknowledging that the brethren's prayers do have an impact on his life and how it turns out.], according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

That makes it a win-win for God's people. Paul shared his indecision as to whether he most wanted to remain on earth to serve God at His will, or to be with Christ, which is his true desire.

Philippians 1:22-24 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

He was desiring to live on—not his greatest desire, but his one desire was to live on so that he would be of benefit to the brethren, that he was able to help the people that needed his help. So we must live our lives according to God's will to serve Him on earth and to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of how we feel or how weak we are, regardless of how hard it is, or how unpleasant it makes us feel.

In Romans Paul wrote of nothing being able to separate us from God's love.

Romans 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

We could add there "and neither will this COVID-19 quarantine separate us from Christ's love." So do not let it be a distraction. It has been a distraction for me, I know. I am sure it has been to many of you, if not all of you as well. Do not let it be that. Live with the mind of Christ and think about the things that Christ wants us to do and accomplish.

Romans 8:36-37 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

So Jesus declares His will that all who have been given to Him by the Father be with Him in glory after both His and their passage through this life.

Here then is an important fact. The triumph of a believer in death is often spoken of in Scripture, but in John 17:24, in a sense it receives its only proper foundation and true emphasis. Its foundation is seen in that it is based on the will of God the Father and God the Son because Their wills are one. Its emphasis is seen in that this is the last of Jesus' great supplications to the Father just before His crucifixion. And one thing He asks, one thing He wills is that we might be with Him where He is.

There are many ways in which we will be like Him. We will be like Him in respect to His character because in that day all the sin, ignorance, foolishness that characterizes our lives here, now will be gone. We will be like Him in love and holiness and knowledge and wisdom and truth and mercy and all His other attributes. Also, we will be like Him in respect to His body because we will receive a resurrected body patterned after His own.

This may have been in Paul's mind as he wrote important words on death, recorded in II Corinthians 4 and 5. And there is an awkward chapter break in this passage as there is also occasionally in other points of the New Testament. But if we begin reading with verse 15 of chapter 4 and continue through verse 4 of chapter 5, we will receive Paul's full meaning.

II Corinthians 4:15-18 For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

II Corinthians 5:1-4 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent [that is, our physical body], is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation [that is, our spiritual body] which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by [and I will add, spiritual] life.

It may be that Paul was not in good health and that he was speaking from a sense of real pain. We know he suffered from a thorn in the flesh. But there are also other things that he suffered for. You do not go through what Paul did without many different causes of suffering. In the next chapter, he speaks of the physical trials he had endured in Christ's service: beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless nights, hunger, and worse. And in chapter 11, he gives more details of his suffering.

II Corinthians 11:24-28 From the Jews, five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked [and he was shipwrecked two more times after that]; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often,

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in hunger and thirst, and fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

With all that he went through, and all that he had the opportunity to be concerned about, he still had that love for all the brethren in the churches of God. That is amazing to me—that he could be in that state and that be his greatest concern. May we all come to that point!

Now, these sufferings were not imaginary for Paul. They were real perils. Luke describes many of them explicitly in the book of Acts, and these had certainly left their toll on Paul. So in an exhausted state, he seemed like a nearly broken but not hopeless man when he wrote II Corinthians. But what does he say? Does he complain? Does he regret his suffering? No, rather he looks beyond it, admitting that although our body is in a state of decline and although physical groans are wrung from us through our suffering, yet we still look up knowing that a new body awaits us and in that glorious body we will stand face-to-face before God.

For a final passage, please turn with me to I John 3. If it is true that you will eventually be with Jesus Christ, if you truly are a Christian, then why not spend time with Him now? This you may do through times of your own personal Bible study and prayer. What would we think of a couple who are about to be married, but who do not seem to feel the need to spend time together before the marriage? They say, "Oh, we'll be together a lot after we are married. But we have other things we want to do now." We would think that a marriage like that would hardly be promising and we would be right, because if a couple is going to spend their lives together, they would want to get to know one another better even before the marriage ceremony. In the same way, we, the bride of Christ, should want to get to know Jesus, our Bridegroom, better if we are indeed looking forward to being together with Him one day.

I John 3:1-2 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved,

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now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

If we are going to be like Christ one day, as John tells us so clearly in his first epistle, then why not strive to be like Him now, and why not strive harder than we are trying now. This is John's own conclusion because having said that we will be like Him in glory, he immediately adds,

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

Biblically, pure means clean, innocent, perfect.

Anyone who has this hope in him will try very hard to be like Jesus Christ now, and he will work faithfully in Christ's service.

Isaiah 61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels.