

John 17:20

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 October 1983

Preacher: Donald Macleod

[0 : 00] We shall turn out a gospel according to John chapter 17 and verse 20.

John chapter 17 and verse 20. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which believe on me through their word, that they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

Now there are, as you know, two great levels of truth in the Lord's Prayer in this chapter. At one level there is the Lord's Prayer for himself, asking God the Father to glorify him on the basis of his own finished work, and in that glory to enable him as risen Savior to continue to further the work of salvation in the world itself.

Glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee, and may glorify thee by giving eternal life to those whom God has given to.

It is on that foundation of the Lord's own glorification that all else is made to lie.

[2 : 01] But then, on that foundation, the Lord lays the other level of intercession, that is his prayer on behalf of his own church.

And that prayer embraces several distinct elements. The Lord prays that the church may be kept.

He prays that the church may be sanctified. He prays that the church may be glorified. And all of those concerns are of obvious importance.

There is another fourth concern that I want to highlight this morning. That is the Lord's concern that the church may be one.

His concern for the unity of the people of God. His prayer in those words, that they all may be one.

[3 : 15] May be one as he and his Father are one. May be one in himself and in the Father. Now, it is important to notice the limits within which Christ is praying.

He is praying for the unity of those who believe in himself. For those who believe in me, through their word, the church and the vision of Christ, as a comprehensive body.

And yet there are always limits to that comprehensiveness. The Lord's mission does not include that the Pharisees or the Sadducees could be part of this great unity.

Paul could not see that those who taught false doctrine in Galatia, that they could be part of this unity.

John could not see that those denying the enfleshment of Christ could be part of this unity. that it always limits to the comprehensiveness of the New Testament church.

[4 : 52] And I'm not saying this morning that the body of Christ must include all men without discrimination.

discrimination. Not even all those who claim the Christian name. It is a unity limited to those who are afraid in Christ.

To those who submit to all the authority or the demandingness of the apostolic world. And I am very, very conscious that within the visible, professing church of God today, there are many parties and many individuals who, by the simple criteria, cannot be deemed to be part of the unity of Christ.

I am not, if I may say so, all that confident in my own ability to lay down the boundaries.

I don't have access to men's souls. I cannot see into their hearts. I must take men by what they say, by what they do, by their own public utterances.

[6 : 25] And taking them by that public posture, my concern is to say quite simply that Christ is praying in the most urgent possible terms for the unity of all those who publicly believe in his own name.

it is not a humanity-wide comprehensiveness. It is not even a Christendom-wide comprehensiveness.

But it is a total Christian comprehensiveness embracing all of those who really submit to the apostolic world and who really are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord's concern is that these people may be one. Let's ask ourselves first of all what kind of unity the Lord has in mind.

It is a unity modeled upon and patterned upon the unity in the depths of God himself. that they may be one even as we are one one as in God's own triune being there is unity as the Father art in me and I in thee that they also may be one in us.

[8 : 08] Now in that divine unity there is a great and evident diversity. There is diversity between the very personality of God the Father and the personality of God the Son.

The old theologians spoke of the distinct and personal properties by which each member of the eternal trinity is distinguished from the other.

For example it is absolutely distinctive of God the Father that he begets that is unique in the Godhead to God the Father.

It is absolutely unique to God the Son that he has begotten at both of these points there is diversity there is difference there is discontinuity between the Father and the Son.

And similarly there are diversities in the works in the activities even in the redemptive roles of God the Father and God the Son.

[9 : 36] it is the Son who alone becomes incarnate. It is the Son who alone gets involved physically and historically in human life.

It is the Son alone who becomes the great sin bearer the great sufferer upon the cross of Calvary.

all of these are unique and distinctive to the eternal Son. In the same way there are some operations distinctive of the Holy Spirit.

He is the one who comes as the dwelling redeemer to sanctify and to unite his people. The one who comes as the source of all spiritual gifts as the great dynamic and the great inspirer behind his own church.

And in the same way still there are activities and functions which are distinctive to God the Father. It is the Father who has always highlighted in the New Testament as particularly the one who loves.

[11 : 05] How remarkable that is. The time and again when the emphasis falls on redeeming love. It is the Father's redeeming love that is so forcibly emphasized.

It is the Father who calls. It is the Father who in this chapter sanctifies and the Father glorifies.

The Father has his own distinctive involvement in redemption. And it may be that we are saying to ourselves this man is stretching us, this man is pushing us with all this theology.

All this talk of personal properties, the distinctive idioms of the persons of the Godhead. And this man is talking to us in this terrible jargon of the distinctive roles in redemption of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But my calling is to expound the Word of God. And I believe that these words are your words, and only my words, but your words.

[12 : 23] And I believe that Christ is basing his whole view of our own unity in Bonacord Free Church this morning, is basing his whole vision of it upon monumental and eternal realities that lie right in the depths of I may say so in the recondite depths of the triune being of God himself.

And I'm saying that you can never understand the unity unless you understand the model. And the model is the triune God. And for the moment, this triune God in his diversity.

And that is why those distinctive properties are important. Because they remind us that our unity is a unity of distinguished and of different individualized human beings.

Because that's what we are, each one with his own personality, each one with his own genetic inheritance, with his own environment, and with the result and the precipitate of all those forces which from birth have played upon him internal and external.

them. And I don't want at all to minimize the importance of that diversity. I believe that God wants us in our individuality.

[14 : 09] God wanted Abraham as Abraham. He wanted Moses as Moses. He wanted David as David. He wanted Paul as Paul and Peter as Peter.

that's why these men, in their own writings, they never veil or conceal their own identity.

Their personalities shine through because the truth came and the ministry came, their service came, through their own personalities.

And I want us on the basis of God's word, in all our own unity, to live with this corresponding fact of our own individual and personalized diversity.

We are all different. And God wants each one of us making our own distinctive contribution to the life of this congregation.

[15 : 17] We are different, not only at the level of our own identity and personality, but also in our endowments, in our spiritual gifts, in our capacities, in the roles that we can play.

The glory of the Godhead is in its unity, a dynamic unity, whole, imposing order upon a tremendous aggregate of what I may call differentiated forces in God himself.

the distinctiveness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit fused into one great dynamic whole.

The distinctive roles and activities of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit again fused into one great dynamic whole.

and this congregation this morning is an aggregate of sometimes highly individualized human beings, an aggregate also of widely varying experiences, talents, and aptitudes.

[16 : 50] And God doesn't want us to lose any of that diversity. that rich creative variety traceable into the very depths of God's own creative activity and also the depths of his redemptive activity.

God created us to be different. God redeemed us to be different. God has given us different redemptive experiences and different redemptive gifts.

God wants us to retain all that diversity because God's unity always is unity in diversity.

And it is unity that they may be one and that they may be one on the model of God's own unity.

And of that unity the Lord himself said I and the father are one. And the Lord curiously uses the neuter gender of that numeral.

[18 : 12] The Lord says I and the father are one thing. it's in your book this neuter one. I and the father are one thing.

We are one entity. We are one being. In other words it is a numerical identity. There is no greater unity conceivable than the unity of God.

There is nothing more unified. unified. There is nothing more unified or unitary than the oneness of God. And that oneness is the pattern proposed to ourselves for our unity as Christians this morning.

God's unity is numerical. It is a unity of essence and of nature. God the father and God the son are one being.

of underlying every New Testament exhortation to unity. There is the fact of our unity.

[19 : 24] Now we can't say as Christians that our unity is numerical. We are not one thing or one being as the triune God can say.

but we are one body. We have one head. We are one family. We are one great living organism.

You must bear in mind that this morning I am not at all concerned to exhort you to be one body.

I am not here to exhort you to be one family. I am not here to exhort you to be one living organism. Because the New Testament never and ever contains any exhortations of that kind.

It never exhorts us to be one family or to be one body or to be one organism. It never pleads with us in those terms. It never argues.

[20 : 31] never expositates never begs us to be one in those senses. Instead it asserts it says it lays down it stipulates that is the truth.

That is what we are. We are one family. We are one body. We are one living organism. We are in dust to create it or to build it or to establish covenant.

We are told that it is a truth. In the same way as in any human family it would be absurd for a man to walk in and say be one family.

Because that is what we are. Our fathers and mothers our brothers and sisters are given to us. They are part of the data, part of the search of our existence.

And in the same way the body of Christ in all its glorious diversified unity that body is given to us. We are members of the household of God.

[21 : 49] That is the reality. That is the fact. and the exhortation is to live according to the fact. Not to achieve the fact but to conform to it, to express it, to articulate it in our own personal Christian discipleship.

We are one. And nothing can ever undo it. Now there have been times when Christians have unified one another.

There have been times when they have called each other devils, times when they have called anathemas upon each other, times when they have imprisoned and burned and hanged and lynched one another.

And the great fact is that none of those activities undoes the fact of unity.

It contradicts it. It makes a mockery of it. But it never destroys the reality.

[23 : 15] Is there anything more ugly in humanism than the spectacle of believers persecuting believers?

As if they were not one and yet all the time trapped within the terrible fact of their own unity.

That unity is unmovable and un retractable and unavoidable reality. This body of Christ, this family of God, this great living spiritual organism that exists invariably and indestructible.

And what then are the expectations that we are to build upon the fact if we are not called to establish the fact, then what exhortations are to follow from the fact?

How do we express our unity if we are not called upon to create it? We express it first of all in the most obvious way in Christian love that agape, that love which is God's love for his own son, and which is the model for the love that we ought to feel towards every single member of the family of God.

[25 : 01] and we express surely our unity first of all in that affection, in that love that we have for God's own people, in that tolerance of their weaknesses, in long suffering, in patience when they hurt us, in courtesy, in all our dealings with them, whatever and whenever we find them, that love that is easily provoked, that love that thinks no evil, that love that doesn't question or impugn the motives of our fellow believers, we are to love them, love them within this congregation, love them right across the free church of

Scotland, love them across the whole church of God in this land, and the church of God worldwide, behold how these Christians love one another, simply because of Christians, we are all in the same family, we love, and we love the way God loved his own son, because that's the model, so they express our unity in this universal and this utterly catholic love, it doesn't ask, it's a man of my party, it's a man shed all my prejudices, is he of my sect or denomination, it asks only, is this man a Christian, and if so, then we love, we express it also in our catholicity of intercession, praise says the apostle Paul, for all saints, pray for all the saints, our intercession is utterly catholic, whatever there are

God's people, and God's people are in need, our prayers, our love that blesses itself, in this ministry, of intercession, church, every Lord's day, the church of God in a particular place, must be made conscious of all the saints, on one great level that vision, its eyes raised up to the glory of the triune God, reminded of God, on another level reminded of the worldwide church, we are one, we express that oneness in catholic intercession, for all the believers we know, those in the mission field, those in Eastern Europe, those in the far east, those who live in apostate churches, those who see God's truth only dimly, but for all the saints, and that will not fit into the labels of our convenings, we express our oneness in this catholicity of intercession, we express it too in a catholicity of care, you remember how Paul hears of the poverty of the saints in Jerusalem, and how the church at Corinth expresses its oneness with them, by contributing to the collection for those saints.

Now today, many of God's children in many parts of the world are experiencing appalling deprivation.

people who are in southern Africa, it's true in Ethiopia, it's true in many parts of India, and they're part of the one body.

[29 : 45] If the one member suffers, all the other members suffer, and I can't for the moment even raise a question, how do we do it practically?

But the burden must be there. There are brothers or sisters, there are members of the warm body, their culture different, their shibboleths different, their form of worship different, their church government different, and yet we're to express our practical concern.

We are one in love, one in intercession, one in practical concern. We are one too in thought.

The unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, one certainly in the sense that we hold the same great basic doctrines, but one too in a more important sense, which we must for the moment take from me carefully, the sense that we cannot think alone.

One free church member cannot think apart from other free church members. One member of this congregation can't do his thinking without other members of this congregation.

[31 : 20] We must learn to think together and we must learn in the free church to think with the rest of Christendom, to think in discussion, to think in openness and negotiation, in dialect, in argument, dialectic, in conflict, controversy very often, but not shut off, not bottled up, not isolated, but open to all wings of the Spirit of God blowing through the whole of Christendom.

Men who stand on different hills from those on which we stand, they see things we don't see. Maybe very often they see wrongly, maybe to a large extent they're blind, but we must listen, we must open up, you must open up, your own individuality.

One of the great sadnesses if one works among young people is that so many of them come from certain backgrounds, different parts of the world, and their great longing is to go back into those backgrounds exactly as they came out of them.

And to receive what is to them the most gratifying of all accolades, you'd never know he'd been away.

Now that to me is utterly tragic because it means a heretical and a systematic cutting off of ourselves from the rest of the body of Christ, we are part, not only of Bonacord, we're part of the free church, we're part of a great reform movement in the world today, we're part of Catholic and universal Christendom.

[33 : 29] Let us think with Christendom, let us share its insights, let us allow others to enrich us, let us cling tenaciously to the word of God, let us cling to the truth as we see it, but it is always engaged in this group thinking, in this openness to all the insights and all the instruction that may come to us from other sources.

We express our oneness in love, we express it in intercession, expression, express it in caring, express it in thinking together.

We express it too, if I may use the words of Paul at this point, in this that we are with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel.

unity in evangelistic commitment, in evangelistic earnestness, part of the messages that fragmented churches and divided congregations cannot expect to engage in biblical evangelism, because disunity destroys evangelism.

I would put it as a burden upon you today that in the British Isles our disunity has had calamitous consequences in the field of evangelism.

[35 : 19] In a place of cooperation, there is competition, in a place of encouragement, there is often vilification.

In a place of a concern to bring men to Christ, there is a sectarian concern to proselytize. In England, where the reformed churches are multiplied, where God's blessing has in many ways been very, very rich.

the impact of that whole movement of God's spirit has been significantly reduced by the terrible lack of cohesion, by the fragmentedness, by the lack of coordination.

it is a sin of calamitous and tragic propulsions.

And maybe we should be on our knees before God, not simply asking for evangelistic grace, but saying to God, Lord, unite thy church, that it may be a fit instrument and a fit channel and a fit agency for evangelists.

[36 : 48] But I can turn the whole thing round in this way and say this, that very often disunity is the result of our not evangelizing. The energy that ought to be channeled outwardly and creatively is so often turning in upon the church itself.

You imagine a family of five or six people and they never go out to work. They have no relations with the outside world.

They have no professions. They have no commitments. They have no colors. They live simply within their own four walls. Men and women with intelligence.

Men and women with physical strength. With verbal skill and what will they do with that verbal skill? They will bite and devour one another. And that is what has so often happened with the church of God to the strength.

That ought to have gone towards turning the world upside down. Has gone towards turning the church of God upside down with disunity and meaningless trivial petty controversy.

[38 : 10] With one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. Put your energies forth coherently in outreach and outgoingness and concern for those outside.

Stand, strive together, strive with one mind for the faith of the gospel. We are one. One with many of those we vilified.

Maybe today I am one with Bishop Tutu. Maybe today I am one with Bishop Roberts. That is for God to decide.

Unity is a reality. I must express it we must all express it in love, intercession, in care. We must express it in our own united and unanimous and energetic commitment to biblical evangelism.

We must express it too I think in this. It may not seem to you at first directly relevant but I want to say nevertheless. by sitting together at the foot of the cross to watch the man there sit there.

[39 : 42] All of us all of us sit there. Every one of this congregation all of congregations the whole church of God does it have been my privilege to know it.

Let us all come to the cross. Look, look, who is he? God's son. What's he doing there? He is serving. He's a slave.

Why? Because of the lowliness of his mind. He did not cling to being equal with God.

He did not stand upon his dignity. He did not claim his rights. He was not hypersensitive and hyperassertive. He didn't want his place.

He didn't want people always to know who he was to be saying, that is the Messiah, that is the professor. He didn't want that. The Lord, the word of God, wants the whole church of God there at the foot of Calvary.

[40 : 48] Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. You ask Paul and Philippi, Paul, why is there so much strife and so much vainglory?

Why are Eunice and Sinti, why are they quarreling? And why are those deacons so touching? And why are those elders so sensitive? It's because they have forgotten the mind that was in Christ.

What was that mind? The mind that made himself nothing. He made himself nothing. He made himself of no reputation.

He emptied himself. And the great reason why God's church is divided is not that men are zealous for the truth.

It's not that men are afraid and zeal for the glory of God and sensitive for the glory of God. The reason is a terrible reason of our own egotism, our own self assertiveness, our own total lack of the mentality of Calvary.

[42 : 11] Those who divide churches for their own reasons, those who consistently contract and contract and contract until at last they see hardly a man fit to stand in their pulpit or a believer fit to come to their table or a brother in Christ fit to receive from them the right hand of fellowship.

The problem with these people is not that the earth was jealous and so jealous for God our problem my problem that's where I am my problem is that I do not have the mind of Christ and I have no patience with it.

Love is more than orthodoxy and biblical unity is more important than pernicky conscience is quarreling over the peripheral trivia of dogmatics.

God is one to make it a burden let me as I close say why it must become a burden first of all because God's word is so clear that they all may be one my good people that is not a word at all that comes from the world council of churches or from the monthly record it comes from the word of God and man will answer to God for the way they have totally drenched it distorted it minimized it it is absolutely unambiguous the Lord had four priorities Lord keep them Lord sanctify them Lord glorify them Lord make them one and I dare you

I dare you to remove any of them or to pretend that it's less important than any of the others let God's people be one that is the Lord's prayer that's what he wanted on this night of his betrayal that was his burden that they all may be one furthermore I say this unity is a mark of immaturity remember Paul's biting words to Corinth I could not speak to you as as spiritual but as unto carnal as unto babes in Christ for there are envies and divisions among you are you not carnal and walk like men they thought it was their maturity and their wisdom and their zeal and their perception that that's why they said

[45 : 26] I'm a Paulite I'm a Cate I'm one of the Jesus people knows Christ it's because you're babies because you're babies because you're carnal because you're sensitive like little children and you're going to the half like little children that's why you are so divided and so torn the Presbyterian churches in Scotland are in the same position for the same reason because so often we've been utterly and totally childish and many of all internal divisions stand from exactly the same mentality then again there is this we must be one because of the terrible impression that disunity makes upon the world that they may be one that the world may believe what impression are we making upon the world

I can remember many years ago seeing a headline in a national paper in the midst of one of a free church controversies what a way to run a church and I shall never forget the shame that I felt what a way to run a church I went once to pitch in England some two years ago and I came off my train somewhere in Yorkshire I was met by men from the church and they said to me our church split on Wednesday there they are today two congregations each with a building adjacent to a working man's club in Bradford a club which has never split they don't talk to one another not the pastors not the people they're not only

Christians they are reformed they are reformed to the earth degree they don't talk and the camaraderie and fraternalists of the working man's club next door to both of their buildings puts them to an open shame our divisions have compromised our standing in the community but there's one thing that torments me above all and that is this that all disunity is a frustration of the cross of Calvary Christ died to reconcile us to God to break down the middle wall of partition ah yes yes but that middle wall of partition is a partition between

God and man now you go look at the language of the apostle in the whole context of course there is a barrier between God and man which the cross is demolished but the great middle wall of partition of Ephesians was the barrier between Jew and Gentile between bond and free between man and man and the cross demolished it and yet people tell me that we can't synthesize in one free church the Celts on the Anglo Saxon or the Scots and the English or the Gaelic speaking and the English speaking or even sometimes the young and the old why when Christ delayed to break down all the middle walls of partition to bring synthesis to bring reconciliation to bring sharing to bring to bring to the human existence every breach not only disgraces us in the eyes of the world every breach which violates and frustrates the very purpose for which Christ died you remember that all the great petitions of this mighty prayer were based upon verse 4

I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do I have finished the work Lord on the basis of what I did keep them on the base of what I did sanctify them and glorify them on the basis of my finished work Lord make them one do you realize Christ died so that in the church of God the divisions that come in in Eden in the fall the division between a man and his fellow man Adam and Eve ashamed before one another the division between a man and his environment man and himself that all those divisions should go and why why is the church of God as divided as the world outside it makes no sense it makes no sense it is utterly unintelligible it is utterly indefensible it is an absurdity that in the one body of Christ there should be such rending and such dividing as I close in this morning

[51 : 42] I want just to do two things I want to rejoice with you in the settlement of your new minister his function is not to establish unity among you his function is to encourage you and guide you and stimulate you in the expression of that unity to lead you to that maturity in which you are not divided childishly and carnally but love and care and intercede a unity in which you think together in which you aspire together to evangelize in which and this above all you sit together day by day at the fruit of the cross and look at the one

I can't say the man who made himself nothing but at the God the God who made himself nothing and he will tell you he will tell you as you come to that place and as you look at that one he will tell you brothers and sisters we can't be pretentious here we can't be selfish here we can't be egotistical here we can't have delusions of grandeur here brothers and sisters we can't be anything here here we are nobodies because he made himself a nobody he made himself nothing he emptied himself that's where you live that's where the whole church of God lives at the foot of the cross that's where the free church must live not in its blue books and in its standards exclusively it must live at the foot of the hill called

Calvary and I want you united behind you with your individuality I will mine and he with his united behind him not because he is a somebody or because he is the minister or the bishop but because for him to live is Christ because he is committed to the growth of this congregation committed to its unity and committed to its evangelistic effectiveness you will stand behind him and stand with him in that intent and in that endeavor in moments of discouragement you will comfort him in moments of flagging zeal you will remind him in moments of maybe too greater boldness if there are such moments you may you may restrain him but you must always be with so long as he is on the

Lord's side you are behind him and you are with him you must obey the basic rule of all stable loving relationships never imagine for a moment there is deliberately trying to hurt you some days admonish you and it will hurt but he so loves that he will never hurt for the sake of hurting you must believe that stand behind him stand with him and share his commitment to this congregation I'm a little saddened that in the church as a hall there is an obvious listening of the tithes of congregational loyalty there are too many of us operating on half throttle too many of us disengaged and too many of us keeping our options open saying we don't want to put your roots down please put your roots down otherwise you'll never grow if you're being constantly transplanted you will never grow you need not only to put down those great long tap roots but all those that marvelous multiplicity of tiny fibrous rootages that come from entrenchment from deep commitment from emotional involvement from being in love with this congregation

I don't quite understand how certain of the younger people have chosen today to be elsewhere rather than to be here maybe I could be made to understand but I don't understand you must grow here you must love it here you must live it here you must express your discipleship in and through this congregation standing with and behind the man whom you have called let the congregation be open to every refreshing breath from every part of God's theological universe it can learn much I know but still this is your house this is your people these are your great privileges be thankful to God that today you can say the Lord is my shepherd

[58 : 46] I shall lack for nothing he has taken us to green pasture and to still water he has renewed your souls all made peace that you may know today the glory of the earth pouring for the assurance of his love in your hearts and that you may see clearly God's issue for his church in this city and in this land let us pray oh Lord use thy word we pray thee to humble us to inspire us use thy word to rebuke us to correct us in all that is amiss in all our own vagrantness and all our own wandering bless Lord the ministry in this place with the abundant showers of thy holy spirit that those who live may be revived that those who are dead may come alive for the glory of thy name amen