

I

THE PRAYER OF CHRIST

Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.

—Eugene O’Neil

THE MOSAIC CHURCH OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS gathers each week in 78,000 square feet of space that originally housed a Wal-Mart. The large glass front features two entrances and many windows. Just west of us is the nearest neighborhood; to the immediate east, a Kroger grocery store stands adjacent to the building. As people from the community pass by the church on their way to and from the store, it is not uncommon for them to put their hands to the glass, press their faces to the window, and look to see what’s inside.

One Sunday morning, not long after we began meeting in this location, one African American woman did just that. She had been invited to come by two women from our church whom she had met at the Kroger. The women had encouraged her to come worship at Mosaic, learning that she had no other church to attend.

Before entering the building, then, she pressed her face to the glass and looked inside. And what she saw encouraged her to take another step forward.

Later, after this woman had become a member of Mosaic, she described her experience that day. When she saw the diversity of the people, specifically Blacks and Whites worshipping together as one, she understood intuitively that all people were welcome at Mosaic and loved by the God we were all singing and talking about.

Similarly, if we could strip away everything we know about God’s love for all people and transport ourselves back to a time when the world

thought *YHWH* (the LORD) was simply, “the God of the Jews,” perhaps we would better understand how a Gentile peering into an all-Jewish congregation might never have gone inside. In fact, if we had lived in those days, we would have seen, like Paul, that Gentiles living in the first century “were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

Fast-forward to the present day. Does a homogeneous church unnecessarily confuse the message of God’s love for all people in a similar way? Will such a church, therefore, become increasingly cumbersome to the advance and proclamation of the Gospel in this century?

Why Is the Local Church Segregated?

According to research conducted by sociologists Curtiss Paul Deyoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim,¹ 92.5 percent of Catholic and Protestant churches throughout the United States can be classified as “monoracial.” This term describes a church in which 80 percent or more of the individuals who attend are of the same ethnicity or race. The remaining churches (7.5 percent) can be described as multiracial—churches in which there are a non-majority, collective population of at least 20 percent. By this definition, approximately 12 percent of Catholic churches, just less than 5 percent of Evangelical churches, and about 2.5 percent of mainline Protestant churches can be described as multiracial.

So, again, let me ask you a question: *If the kingdom of heaven is not segregated, why on earth is the Church?*

Surely, it must break the heart of God to see so many churches throughout this country segregated ethnically and economically from one another and that little has changed since it was first observed that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the land.² In an increasingly connected yet stubbornly sectarian world, it is time to recognize that there is no greater tool for evangelism than the witness of diverse believers walking, working, and worshipping God together as one in and through the local church. More than that, I believe the very progress of the Gospel throughout the twenty-first century will be largely dependent upon this pursuit.

What though, you may ask, is the basis for such passion and hope? And why am I (and increasing numbers like me) so sure that in reflecting the diversity of heaven, the local church will newly proclaim the Prince of Peace on earth in reformation and power, resulting in the salvation of significant

numbers of seekers and skeptics alike to the glory of God? Is this a realistic goal or only the wishful thinking of mystics and mavericks among us? Indeed, I believe it is not only a realistic goal but it is the very prayer and intent of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for the local church. This, then, should inspire our faith, courage, and sacrificial abandonment to the cause.

What Can Be Learned from John 17?

For centuries, the prayer recorded in John 17 has been widely referred to as the “high priestly prayer” of Jesus Christ. In his book, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, author Leon Morris notes, “In the early fifth century, Clement of Alexandria said that in this prayer, Jesus was a high priest acting on behalf of his people.”³ It is interesting that this is the longest of all the prayers attributed to Jesus and an appropriate conclusion to what’s known as the upper room discourse (John 14–16). With this in mind, some also believe that Jesus intended his words to be overheard by the disciples in order to provide them further hope and comfort. Be that as it may, the prayer marks the passing of the baton to those, both then and now, who are tasked with the responsibility of carrying on the work begun by Christ, namely, of proclaiming eternal life to all men (John 17:2).

In addition, remember that Jesus had just shared a final meal with his disciples. He had just washed their feet, reinterpreted the Passover, and dismissed Judas, who would betray him. Therefore, it is an emotional and significant moment, the night before Jesus would die.

The entire prayer can be divided into three sections. First, Jesus prays to the Father on his own behalf (John 17:1–5). Next, he prays to the Father on behalf of his disciples, that is, the eleven men left in the room with him in that moment (John 17:6–19). And finally, he prays for “those also who believe in Me through their word” (John 17:20–23). It is here that we will pause in a moment not only to consider who Christ had in mind but, more important, what and why specifically he prayed for the ones who would believe.

Christ and His Father (John 17:1–5)

In the first section of the prayer, again we note that Christ prays for himself: “The hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as you gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life” (John 17:1–2).

Here then, Jesus defines his mission and its scope. He had been given “authority over all mankind” and to all those the Father has given him,

he will, in turn, give eternal life (see also Ephesians 1:3–7). As John 17:3 makes clear, eternal life is to “know You [the Father], the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” And knowing God, in this sense, is a matter of faith.

The term rendered “know” is a translation of the common Greek word, *ginosko*, meaning simply, “to know.” *To know*, in the full sense of this term, however, means to learn or acquire knowledge through experience. In other words, Christ does not so much pray that these will come to know God intellectually (the term, *oida*, in the Greek) but rather that they will come to know God more fully in and through their own personal experience. In order to know God experientially, we must come to know his Son, by faith, that is, Jesus Christ who has been “sent” by the Father. The term *sent* is a translation of the Greek word *apostello*, which translated means, “one who has been sent as another’s personal [and] authoritative representative.”⁴

As he begins to pray, then, Jesus makes it clear that he has been sent to represent God on earth and to proclaim (in person, word, and deed) the message of eternal life to all mankind. Indeed, this was his mission, and it is the theme of this prayer. Yes, Christ desires that people everywhere will come to know the Father’s love, embrace him by faith, and receive the gift of eternal life. This remains today the passion of his heart.

Christ and His Disciples (John 17:6–19)

In the second section of the prayer, Christ turns his attention to the eleven men who were there with him that night (Judas having left to betray him [John 13:21–30]). These disciples are, in context, the “men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world” (John 17:6). They had received the message of Christ as having come from the Father and had “believed that Thou has sent Me” (John 17:7–8). In other words, they had received eternal life and were, therefore, among the first fruits of Christ’s mission and its success. Furthermore, they were the ones to whom he would now pass the baton.

So having first prayed for himself, what does Jesus next pray for his disciples? Knowing that he would no longer be with them “in the world” (John 17:11a), he prays that the Father would “keep them in Thy name . . . [so] that they may be one” (John 17:11b). As John 17:12 makes clear, Christ asks the Father to guard these men, that is, to keep them firm in faith so that not one of them would fall away. In addition, he prays that they would be one or, as Paul later expounds, “of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose” (Philippians 2:2). In other

words, from now on it would be up to them to carry on the work and, as Christ's ambassadors, to proclaim eternal life throughout the world (Matthew 28:19, 20; Acts 1:8). According to his prayer, remaining firm in God by faith and walking together as one would be essential for accomplishing the mission.

Jesus also asks his Father to "keep them from the evil [one]," knowing that the world (those who reject the message) would hate them and the Word of God, which they would proclaim (John 17:14–15). Thus he describes the disciples as "not of this world" (John 17:16), that is, in faith and focus different from the rest. So to the Father he prays, "sanctify them in the truth" (John 17:17).

Finally, he commissions them to the task: "As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (John 17:18).

So first (John 17:1–5), Jesus states that he was sent from God to proclaim the message of eternal life throughout the world and to offer salvation for all those who would believe. In next praying for his disciples (John 17:6–19), he commissions them to carry on this mission, and in so doing, he reveals his belief: the success of their efforts will depend on the Father "keeping them in Thy name," and on their "be[ing] one" (John 17:11). It should go without saying that these men did, in fact, live out their commission. They remained true to the Father in faith and advanced the cause as one. With this in mind, Christ reserves his final words for those whose lives these men would affect throughout history.

Christ and His Church (John 17:20–26)

In the final section of this prayer, Christ reveals that this same oneness of mind, love, spirit, and purpose will be equally vital for all those coming after the disciples—those who will, likewise, embrace the message and the mission: "I do not ask or pray on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20).

The question is, *Just who does he have in mind?* You know, no matter how many times I consider the answer, I am always amazed.

On the night before Jesus died, he prayed specifically for me, and he prayed specifically for you. Indeed, he prayed not only for his apostles, but for all those, like us, who have or will someday come to know him through their word. For from the oral and written testimonies of the first apostles, the Gospel message has gone forth. On and on it has been extended for two thousand years down to the present day, with the result that you and I now believe. Yes, from the Father to the Son, to the eleven men in the room with him that night, to and through the countless hands

of untold saints throughout the centuries, the message and the mission of the Gospel has come down to you and me. Indeed, the race is now ours to run; the baton has been passed to us.

Such understanding, however, leads to a second and equally profound question: *Just what did Jesus Christ pray for us on the night before he died?*

Remarkably, he prayed just one thing and one thing only. Three times in three verses, he prayed that we would be one.

[I pray] that they may all *be one*, even as You, Father, Are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may know that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me, I have given to them; that they may *be one*, just as we are one. I in them, and You in Me, that they may *be perfected in unity*, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me. (John 17:21–23, emphasis mine)

Now as both scholars and students of the Word know, any time something is repeated in the text, it is done so for emphasis. Stressing the importance of his words, then, Christ prayed first that we would “*be one*” (John 17:21, emphasis mine in these quotes), then a second time that we would “*be one*” (John 17:22), and, finally, that we would be “*perfected in unity*” (John 17:23). Let’s break this down for a moment.

First, Christ prays that “they may all be one.” As mentioned earlier, he is speaking of all those who would come after the disciples who would believe in him through their word. Quite simply, this refers to any and all who would later embrace him by faith and receive eternal life, regardless of who they were, from where they had come, or in what century they lived. All those who believe, then, have been called to be one and, as we are fond of saying at Mosaic, *all means all!*

In addition, the word *perfected* is translated from the Greek word *teteleiomenoi* (the perfect-passive subjunctive of the word *teleo*), which, in this context, means “to become mature or, completely one.” According to the *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, “use of the perfect [tense] indicates a permanent state as the goal and final result.”⁵ In other words, Christ intends for us (believers) to become mature in our faith, completely united as one and one with the Father (John 17:21).

But Why Be One?

Yet there is something even more profound to be revealed in the exegesis of this passage. Indeed we must ask, *Why does Christ pray so fervently for future followers to be completely united as one?*

Let's look at the passage again, but this time focused on a different aspect of the prayer:

[I pray] that they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may know that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me, I have given to them; that they may be one, just as we are one. I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, [so] that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and [so that the world may know that Thou] didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me. (John 17:21–23, addition mine)

In this second pass, it is significant to realize that Christ prayed we would be one for two very specific reasons or “so that” two things will occur.

The words *so that* in verses 21 and 23 are translated from the Greek word, *hina*. This word, a preposition, is used linguistically to introduce what Greek scholars refer to as an “*hina* clause.” When used, the word points to the intended result or purpose of something and, in a broader sense, is used to introduce a “purpose clause.” According to H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, writing in *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, “The function of a ‘purpose clause’ is to express the aim of the action denoted by the main verb. This aim may be of a deliberate design . . . or merely of contemplated results.”⁶

In other words, an *hina* clause introduces an “if–then” propositional truth. In essence, the proposition can be stated as follows: If X occurs (though there's no guarantee *that* X will occur), *if* X does occur, then Y is the guaranteed result.

With this in mind, we can paraphrase John 17:21–23 to read:

I also want to pray for those who, in time, will come to believe in Me through the witness of My disciples . . . I pray that those who come after them will be completely united as one. There is no guarantee that they will be one; but if they will, then two things will certainly result. First, men and women throughout the world will recognize that I am the promised Messiah. In addition, Father, men and women throughout the world will recognize that You love them. Consequently, they will respond to Your love and receive eternal life through faith in Me.

In other words, Christ prayed specifically that future generations of believers would be one *so that* the world would know God's love and believe. In this way and by this means, Christ stated that his mission would be accomplished through others and, ultimately, his Father glorified. What Jesus intends for us (the local church), then, is clear: we have been called to be one for the sake of the Gospel. It may not be easy,

but it is biblical, and it is right. Therefore, we are to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which [we] have been called” (Ephesians 4:1). Indeed, when men and women of diverse backgrounds walk together as one in Christ, they uniquely reflect the Father’s love *on earth as it is in heaven*. More than that, their oneness of mind, love, spirit, and purpose proclaim the Gospel in a most powerful and compelling way. For as his own union with the Father uniquely empowered Christ to proclaim God’s love for the world, our union with fellow believers uniquely empowers us to do the same. Yes, in pursuing the “*perfection of unity*,” we will see the world saved.

Unity as Confirmation: Jesus Is the Christ

Literally hundreds of prophecies are recorded in the Old Testament concerning the coming of an “anointed one,” or *Messiah*. Beginning with Genesis 3:15 and subsequent to the fall of man, they speak of a Messiah, a *Savior*, who would one day be sent from God to destroy the serpent, abolish evil, and redeem mankind. In so doing, the Savior will restore man to a place of prominence in the divine order and, more than that, to a personal relationship with his Creator.⁷ In addition, the prophecies point to a coming Savior who would not only deliver the Jewish people from destruction but grant to people from every nation, tribe, and tongue the gift of eternal life as well.⁸

The question, however, has always been, *Who is the Savior and how will we know?*

According to Christ, the answer to these questions will be plainly manifest in and through the unity of believers: “If they [we] will be one,” he prayed, then “the world [will] know that You sent Me.” Yes, if we unite as one in mind, love, spirit, and purpose, the world will experientially understand that he is truly the Savior of the world. For only the Messiah, the *Prince of Peace*, can redeem mankind—men and women from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue—and unite them as one before the Father, thereby establishing peace on earth, goodwill toward men.

In this sense, his use of the word *sent*, a translation of the Greek word *apostollos*, is intentional. As we have already seen (John 17:4) and here again (John 17:23), Jesus is referring to himself as the personal, authoritative representative of God in language these men clearly would have understood.

In addition and through the oneness of future followers, Christ foresees that “the world will know that You love them.” Although today we take this for granted, we should remember that at the time of this prayer, the

fact of God's love for all the world was, in general, a radical concept to the Jewish mind. In that day, most Jews believed that *YHWH* was their God, that he loved their nation exclusively. From their perspective, then, "the Egyptians have their gods, the Hittites have their gods, the Phoenicians have their gods, and we, the Jews, have our God." In contrast, it was not God's love but God's wrath that they believed would one day befall the rest of mankind.

So when Christ prays for the world to "know" God's love, he is speaking directly to the fact that salvation is not just for the Jews. And he says that all mankind will experience his love when men and women of diverse backgrounds are willing to walk together as one in Christ. In so doing, believers manifest the reality that, "He Himself is our peace, who made both groups (Jews and Gentiles) into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall" (Ephesians 2:14).

On the night before he died then, Jesus Christ delivered to us the most effective means for reaching the world with the Gospel. He did not ask us to write books, bring evangelists to our cities, or put fish emblems on our cars. Nor did he instruct us to win the world through large churches built by and for a specific segment of society. For that matter, he did not pray that we would be "seeker-sensitive," "postmodern," "emergent," or "purpose-driven." Rather, he called us to be one; then, he said, the world would know God's love and believe.

Yes, in the twenty-first century it will be the unity of diverse believers walking as one in and through the local church that will proclaim the fact of God's love for all people more profoundly than any one sermon, book, or evangelistic crusade. And I believe the coming integration of the local church will lead to the fulfillment of the Great Commission, to people of every nation, tribe, people, and tongue coming to know him as we do.

This, then, is the core of our message. This is the prayer of Christ.

○

Amer Chami

Amer was the first person to respond to Mosaic's witness of Christ-like love for all people. Having arrived from Saudi Arabia just one month before the tragic events of September 11, 2001, his conversion to Christ is all the more miraculous. It is a vivid testimony to the power of unity in advancing the Gospel, even among the most entrenched of Muslim believers.

As a young man, I had two hopes in my mind. One was to visit a church for fifteen minutes and to see how Christians worship and discover what, if any, joy they might have in doing that. The other was to convert as many people to Islam as I could.

I was invited to a meeting with international students and introduced to a man willing to help me with my needs. In order to learn English, we began reading the Bible together and I was soon drawn to the truth of this book. God loves and accepts me for who I am, not for what I do. He is forgiving and calls me his child. The message of Christ is as simple as that.

I soon visited Mosaic and found people who were reflecting these truths. It was at this point, too, I wanted to believe as they did, but I was afraid for my life, my family, and my future. So I prayed, “Dear Jesus, I believe that you are real. If you want me to follow you, please show yourself to me.”

I was still unsure of his existence, and furthermore I thought that even if Jesus was God, he would certainly not reveal himself to me. This would be my excuse not to follow him. I could go on with my life.

One evening during the church service and soon after I had prayed that prayer, a bright light appeared to me—a light, I realized, that only I could see. In my heart, I recognized the light to be Jesus, though I had never before this time heard him described as the light of the world. Jesus appeared to me in answer to my prayer. I can tell you in that moment, I was no longer afraid of following him by faith. I was afraid of not doing so! That night, during Mosaic’s first communion service, I became a follower of Christ.

To say that Jesus is the light of the world is not only a metaphorical proposition; it is an experiential reality for me as well. I know this to be true and pray that Muslims will one day allow themselves to read the Bible so that they, too, will see and follow the light.