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ANOTHER LOOK AT CHRISTIAN UNITY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Abstract

Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, "that they may be one," the prayer of the departing Lord for the unity of his followers, has become one of the expressions of the ecumenical movement. The unity of believers in view in the Fourth Gospel is a unity based on the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son on the one side and the believers on the other, and which is modelled on the union between the Father and the Son. But the unity also has a corporate component; to love one another as their Lord commands and live as members of one Vine and one Flock. The aim of this article is to investigate the idea of the unity of Christians in John's Gospel whose goal is to inspire believers and motivate them to carry out their missions in the world.

Keywords: Christian, Unity, Vision, John, Gospel

Introduction

One of the expressions of the ecumenical movement is taken from Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, "that they may be one," the prayer of the departing Lord for the unity of his followers. Sincere prayers have been offered up by people involved in local covenants, church union plans, international and national inter-church conversations, and in particular local ecumenical partnership. But for what are we praying? Our interpretation of the prayer too frequently shows more about the interpreter than the text because we just read our own views of church unity into it. Can we be sure we are being faithful to the Biblical tradition? Perhaps we can begin by looking at the text from which our opening words were taken in the context of the teaching of the whole of the Fourth Gospel on the subject of unity. This is a subject on which all too little work has been done. The article recommends first identifying the basis of that unity and then understanding its character. Following that, it is going to

reflect on the unity's objectives before providing lessons in the culmination.

1. The Basis of Unity in the Gospel of John

What, then, is the basis of the unity of believers, according to the Fourth Gospel? The basis is to be found in Jesus as the community's common Lord. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name and leads them in and out to find pasture and who lays down his life for the sheep. He is the door who admits them to the fold of God's people (John 10:1-18). He is the one who must die for the people and to gather the scattered children of God (11:52). And he is the vine, of which they must be part if they are to belong to God's covenant people (15:1-11). Indeed, as J. W.

Pryor has made clear, Jesus is the covenant people.¹ All the promises concerning Israel find their fulfillment in him, all the attributes, titles, and privileges of God's people are transferred to him, and those who wish to belong to God's people must become part of him.² It has long been noted in respect of the vine image (John 15) that it is not a case of Jesus being the stock and his followers the branches, but of Jesus being the whole vine and the followers the branches, implying a possibly stronger concept of incorporation in Christ than is suggested by Paul's 'body' metaphor (Rom 12:4-5, 1 Cor 12:12-31; see Eph 1:23; 4:15-16). Quite how John perceives this incorporation we will discuss later, but here we need only remark that this image makes it crystal clear that Jesus, the community's Lord, is the source and focus of its unity.

The source of the believers' unity is not only in Jesus, their common Lord, but also in God, in particular, in the union of Father and Son. In John 17:21-22 Jesus prays, 'that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' He prays that the believers may share in the union which exists between himself and the Father, so they may be one and so their witness may challenge the world to a believing response. The heavenly unity is both the model and source of the unity of believers. Smalley goes so far as to say that "the unity of the incarnate Son with the Father is the ground, in Johannine terms, of the unity between the believer and the Godhead, as well as of unity between the believer and other Christians."³

The parallelism that John uses here probably means that this is what is in John's mind when he has Jesus say in the next verse, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one." This glory is the glory that is perceived in the incarnate Word in 1:14, 'the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father,' the glory that is revealed in Jesus' signs (see 2:11) and supremely in his death (see 12:23-33). This glory is none other than the fullness of the life of the Godhead manifested in Jesus, which displays itself as power in the signs, as love in Jesus' death (15:13), as majesty in the incarnation of the word and in the eschatological glory (1:14, 17:24), and which can be seen at work in the union of the Father and the Son (14:23, 17:22), and in the work of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete (14:25-26, 15:26, 16:5-15). It is this glory, this 'fullness of divine life,' which forms the basis, the source of, and the energy behind the unity of believers.⁴

2. The Nature of Unity

But what kind of unity is it to which Jesus, the community's Lord, calls believers? Much ink has been spilled on answering this question, much of it by people justifying their own vision of church unity in the present day or of how churches should be organized. But the best interpreter of John is John, so let us look again at the

¹ J. W. Pryor, *John, Evangelist of the Covenant People* (London: SCM, 1992), 56.

² D. M. Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (London: Cambridge, 1995), 129.

³ R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* 3 Vols. (London: Exeter, 1982), 67-89.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to St. John* 2 Vols (London: SCM, 1971), 775.

unity prayed for by the departing Lord in John 17:20-23 in light of the teaching concerning unity contained elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel. If we do, we will find that it is, first and foremost, a unity of love. Raymond Brown says, 'Sooner or later, most authors say it is a union of love.' His point is that this is an inadequate definition. The departing Lord shows a great concern that his followers should love one another (John 13:34-35, 15:12,17, the command is repeated in both cases), and the believers' love is intended to demonstrate the love of the Father for them and the love of the Father for the Son (17:23). Exhortations to brotherly love are a common feature of farewell discourses, especially in late Jewish times, and the writer may well have the fear of a threat to unity in his own situation in mind. The evangelist must therefore have been thinking of a unity of love, though one that had a vertical (Believer-God) aspect, as well as a horizontal (believer- believer) aspect.' But this love is no sloppy emotion or mere sentimentalism, it is the love that moved God to send his Son into the world (3:16), that caused the Son to show the full extent of his love by accepting the death that awaited him (13:2), and which caused him to lay down his life for his friends (15:15 the love that is to bind Jesus' followers in unity.

Secondly, the unity in view in John 17 is a unity of loyalty. If the source of the unity of the community is to be found in Jesus as the community's Lord, then the ongoing nature of that unity must, to some extent at least, consist in loyalty to Jesus as the Lord of the community. This, indeed, is reflected in the text of the Fourth Gospel, most evidently in connection with the vine image of chapter 15. Whatever else may be implied by the concept of 'abiding in the vine' (and much else is!), the least that can be said is that Jesus is seen in this passage as commanding his disciples to remain faithful to him.

The vine branches are primarily joined to the stem and only indirectly to each other. Their togetherness depends absolutely on their dependence on the Lord. This idea also comes to the fore in the shepherd image (John 10), where we have an image of sheep who know their shepherd (vv. 2-4, 14, 27), listen to his voice alone, and follow only him (vv. 4-5, 16, 27). There is a clear picture of the unity of believers as a unity of those who recognize Jesus as the community's Lord (perhaps the major theme of John's gospel is the recognition of Jesus true identity—described as 'believing' in such places as 2:11; 4:39; 6:69; 9:35-38; 11:45; 17:8,20; and as the essential condition for salvation in 1:12 and also described as 'knowing' in 10:14-15 and 17:3), utilizing his signs, his teaching, and supremely through his 'glorification'—that is, his death and resurrection—and who listen to and follow him alone. Both of these images bear testimony to a strong element of loyalty in the unity of believers as envisaged in the Fourth Gospel.

Thirdly, the unity of believers in view in the Fourth Gospel is a unity based on the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son on the one side and the believers on the other, which is modeled on the union between the Father and the Son. Here we emphasize the other side of Brown's phrase: 'Heavenly unity is both the model and source of the unity of believers. The unity of the community is the unity experienced by those united in the closest possible way with the Father and the Son. This concept of 'being in' is a theme of the Farewell Discourse in John's gospel (14:10-11, 20, as well as 17:20-23, 26). It expresses largely the same idea as the language about 'abiding in' in John 15 (see also 6:53-56) and 'coming and making our home' in 14:23. This language is used to describe the relationship between the Son and the Father, a relationship that is

so close that seeing the Son is said to be equivalent to seeing the Father (14:9). The Son works the Father's work (5:17), the Father shows him all he does and entrusts all judgment to the Son (5:20, 22), and the Father and the Son grants the Son life in himself (5:26). The Son obeys the Father, continuing his work (5:19) and passing on his revelation (6:44–51; 8:28; 12:49–50). He only does what pleases the Father (8:29), and believing in the Son is the same as believing in the Father (12:44–45). The Son loves the Father (14:31), and the Father loves the Son (17:23–26). This relationship is one of love, trust, respect, faithfulness, and (on the part of the Son) obedience and loyalty. It is a personal relationship that is so close that the two parties seem to have become almost one person (12:44–45; 14:9; 10:30). The fourth evangelist never loses sight of the distinction between the Son and the Father, between God and the Word, which is probably his reason for prefacing the gospel with his famous prologue (1:1–18). Most especially, he is concerned throughout his work with identifying the incarnate Jesus with the exalted Christ. But we are talking of an extremely close, perhaps even intimate, relationship.

In fact, of course, the evangelist goes further in describing the relationship between the Father and the Son. His is arguably the highest Christology in the whole New Testament. The Son is the incarnate Word, he is described as 'equal with God'; he says 'I and the Father are one' and 'before Abraham was, I am', and he pronounces the famous 'I am' sayings. The soldiers draw back when he says 'I am he' (Greek. *ego eimi*) in the garden (18:6). How can this kind of relationship be likened to the relationship of the believer to the Godhead? Only, if this image is seen, like all images in the gospel, as a metaphor that discloses truth through a certain point or certain points of comparison rather than an allegory where every point has to match up. The personal relationship between the Father and the Son is to be replicated in the relationship between believers and the Godhead, but the believers do not share in the divinity shared by the Son and the Father (see 1:1; 20:28).

The relationship of believers to the Son finds its clearest expression in the images of the shepherd and the vine. The significant passage in John 10 is vv. 14–15: 'I know my sheep, and my sheep know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.' We interpreted this above in terms of believers recognizing Jesus as their Lord. But this cannot be the whole meaning of the saying, because of the second part, 'just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.' It may make sense to affirm that Jesus recognizes his sheep (i.e., those who will believe in him) and that the sheep recognize him, but talking about the Father and Son recognizing each other makes little sense. The gospel gives every indication that both parties have been aware of each other's identities for eternity! Here, a more personal relationship is in view. This accords with the use of *yada* (know) in the Hebrew Bible and of *ginōskō* in the Septuagint, where knowing God is largely a matter of acknowledging God's acts (Deut 11:2; Isa 41:20; Hos 1:3; Mic 6:5) or that he is God (Deut 4:39; 8:5; 29:5; Isa 43:10; Ps 46:10), but where the words are also used to indicate a personal relationship between human beings, or between God and men (e.g. Deut 34:10; Jer 1:5; Amos 3:2). So here in John 10:14–15, knowledge is seen as acknowledgment or recognition of Jesus as the 'Good Shepherd' and the community's Lord, and as a personal relationship between shepherd and sheep. This may stretch the metaphor a little, but this is nothing unusual as far as our author is concerned. We have a

picture of a flock where the sheep are united in a close personal relationship with the shepherd.⁵

The other major treatment of the relationship between believers and Jesus is in John 15. Jesus' followers are commanded to 'remain' in Jesus. This is not the first time our author has used this phrase. The first time was in 6:56, where 'remaining in Jesus' depends on eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, which in context means accepting the spiritual nourishment and salvation Jesus has won for us through his death (*hyper*, 'for', in v. 51 is commonly used in connection with sacrifices offered 'for' or on behalf of someone), very probably through the means of participating in the communion meal. This receiving of salvation and spiritual life brings about a reciprocal personal relationship and enables the believer to share the divine life (6:57). In John 15 we see the same phrase: 'Remain in me and I in you'. Again the phrase must carry the sense of a close personal relationship. 'Remaining in the vine' may well be a matter of staying loyal to the community's Lord, but the reciprocal formula must point to something more. Again, the metaphor is stretched, though John could claim that this is inevitable since he is describing things beyond human experience.

The introduction of the theme of love in 15:9–17 confirms that we are here dealing with a close, personal relationship between Jesus and his own. Here we encounter a picture of a vine where all the branches hang together by their close personal relationship with the 'True Vine' (as we said above, Jesus is not the stem, but the whole vine)—an unimaginable image, but hardly less so than Paul's image of a body where all the parts have individual wills and where the branches are said to 'remain in' the vine in a sense very close to that conveyed by Paul's 'in Christ' language. In John 15 we even have the concept of corporate identity (Jesus is the Vine and the vine is an Old Testament representation of Israel), in John 6:56 we see the idea of participation in the death and life of Christ, and here in John 15, we see the kind of personal relationship which finds expression in Gal 2:19–20.

With this in mind, we return to John 17. Jesus prays for the believers to be 'in us' so that the world might believe in them. Being 'in us' is parallel to 'being one' in the previous clause, and it is the being 'in us' that is to bring the world to faith. The horizontal unity of believers consists in each having a vertical relationship with the Godhead, and that series of individual relationships leads the world to believe! How can this be? It is a complicated concept, like many others with which John presents us, but he appears to be saying that those who are closely bonded to their Lord in this fashion will also be closely bonded to each other, presumably out of a desire to obey their Lord's command to love each other (13:34–35; 15:12–17) and because the divine life in them fills them with the divine love (17:26) and brings them to perfection. Further, it would appear that the author believes that those closely bound to their Lord have an inner power—the attraction of someone who means, lives, and believes what they are saying.

Fourthly, this unity is a unity of fellowship. What we have said so far would tend to support the view of Moule and others that the Fourth Gospel is very individualistic.⁶ But this cannot be all there is to the Johannine concept of unity. In John 17, Jesus prays, 'that

⁵ C. F. Moule, "The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel", *Nuv. T.* 5. (1962), 171–90.

⁶ S. Pancaro, "People of God" in *St. John's Gospel*, *NTS* 16 (1970), 114–29.

they may be one... that the world may believe... may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.' How can a thoroughly individualistic religion have this kind of effect on the world? How can a series of believers wrapped up in their individual relationships with the Lord be said in any way to be one? If, however, we review carefully the Johannine teaching on unity, we will see that this is not what he is saying at all. We mistake our author if we read him too quickly, taking in only the broad sweep of what he says and missing the little touches that put all the rest in context and restore balance.

There is, indeed, a 'corporate' strain running throughout John's gospel. The two great images of unity, the flock and the vine, are both corporate images (the sheep of a flock must stick together, and the branches of a vine must stay attached to the vine); indeed, both are established images of God's people, Israel (Ezek 34; Ps 80). This is reinforced in chapter 10 by verse 16, where Jesus says, 'I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.' Here, Jesus is not talking about individuals but about groups of people. Like most commentators, I interpret 'other sheep' to refer to Gentiles, but if one defines that phrase, there is an obvious concern for the people of God as a whole. This comes out again in John 11:49–52. Here Caiaphas 'prophesies' that 'it is better for you that one man dies than that the whole nation perishes' and John comments, 'He prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not only for the nation but also for the scattered children of God.'

In interpreting this passage, S. Pancaro points out that the words translated 'nation' and 'people' have very distinct meanings in the Greek Bible and particularly in John. The former word in Jewish usage is the one often rendered 'Gentile' in English; the latter is used for God's holy people, Israel. John, however, makes an important change here. For John, since the coming of Christ in the flesh, the Jewish people are no longer God's people in any special way. The phrase 'God's people' can now only refer to those who believe in Christ. There will be some Jews among their number (note that Jesus dies so that the whole nation should not perish in v. 50, and Jesus does die for the 'nation' in v. 51, but not only for them, v. 52), but Gentile believers too are included. The 'children of God' in v. 52 is also a traditional title of Israel as God's people but is now transferred to the community of those who believe in Jesus (1:12–13 and 1 John, *passim*). Thus John thought of the whole company of believers as constituting God's covenant people, though bearing in mind what we said above, believers are only included in the people of God if they are incorporated into Christ (believing, remaining in the vine, following the Shepherd, etc.), but those who are so attached to Jesus are as fully God's corporate people as Israel ever were. Pancaro realizes that such language presupposes the thought of a church, though John never uses the term, and certainly the evangelist has in mind here the universal community of believers of his day.⁷

We should also note the terms that Jesus uses in this gospel to describe his followers. There are many. There is the word 'disciple' with which we are familiar from the Synoptic, although in John 9:27–28 this word is used in a way that would include many more than the Twelve (arguably this word means more than the Twelve in the Synoptics also). Jesus' followers are described as those who believe (17:20), as those who know the truth (John

8:32), as children of God (1:12; 11:52), 'as sheep' (John 10:1–18), as servants (12:26; 13:16), as 'branches' of the vine, as friends (John 15:13), and as those the Father gave Jesus out of the world (17:6). These are all very egalitarian titles.

There is no hint of rank and no room for 'jockeying for position'. Here we have a picture of a fellowship of equals, though Moody Smith is right to counsel caution in drawing too many dramatic conclusions about Johannine ecclesiology (or the lack of it) and to point out that the picture we have here may well be the Johannine community as it should be rather than as it was.⁸

In addition, we see Jesus having supper with his chosen friends the night before his death, exhorting them repeatedly to love one another (13:34–35; 15:12–17), enjoining them to remain faithful, and praying for them (17:9 and *passim*). Many of the verbs in chapters 14–16 are in the plural, and Jesus prays specifically for their unity, believing that this unity would convince the world that Jesus came from God (17:23) and lead them to have faith in him (17:21). Presumably, John thought it so unlikely that this group of human beings should be united, that evidence of their unity must convincingly point to a heavenly origin and sustaining power. Thus, though this unity is to be based on a strong vertical relationship with God through Jesus, it shows itself in a bond of fellowship between believers, characterized by love—the kind of love that leads a person to lay down his life for his friends (15:13).

3. The Reason of unity

Thirdly, then, what is the purpose of this unity of believers? It is twofold. To begin with, the purpose of unity among believers is the joy of the believers themselves (15:11). This sounds very selfish and is in keeping with the extreme individualism some find in the gospel. But if we look more closely at the context, we will find that something completely different is being said. The joy of the believers is a joy that arises from remaining in the vine, from allowing Jesus' words to remain in them, from remaining in his love, and from obeying his commands, especially the command to love. It is a joy that comes from the believer giving his life over completely to his Lord, serving him faithfully, and being bound to him and to his fellow believers in the closest possible bands of love. This joy is not selfish; it is self-giving.

However, a unity of believers whose purpose was to give joy to the members of the community could be said to be insular. John avoids this danger by stressing that the other purpose of the unity of Christ's followers is the mission to the world. Indeed, this is the major end-one view in John 17: that the world may believe... that the world may know (these terms are largely identical in meaning). This is surprising, given the generally negative picture of the world in John's Gospel (3:19; 15:18–25; 17:9), but it is coherent with another strain in the Fourth Gospel, which emphasizes God's love for the world (3:16; Jesus is the 'Saviour of the world', 4:42; and the Light of the world, 8:12; and by his death, he will draw 'all men' to himself, 12:32). The truth is that, in John's thought, some of those present in the 'world', as well as some at present described as 'Jews', will come to believe (see above on 11:52), so the community must continue to love those groups of people and reach out to them in the mission so that the ones who will listen to the Father and come to Jesus may do so. In doing so, they cease to be 'Jews' (in John's sense, they become "true Israelites") or 'people of

⁷ Smith, 156.

⁸ Vincent P. Furnish, *The Lord's Command in the New Testament* (London: Cambridge Press, 1973), 143–8.

the world', and they become 'children of God' (1:12; 11:52). But that does not excuse believers from constantly loving the world that persecutes and hates them, and reaching out to it in the proclamation (4:35–38; 15:16; 17:21–23).⁹ This mission involves not only speech, but also ethical behaviour. 'Bearing fruit' must mean that, and not just missionary preaching in 15:8 especially with the emphasis on love and keeping the commandments in the context.

The commandment above all for John, of course, is the commandment to love. Maybe both concepts are in view here. Maybe also John expects powerful works to be part of this mission (see 14:12), given the phrase 'This is to my Father's glory' (15:7). One is reminded how the signs of Jesus were said to reveal his glory and how in the Farewell Discourse he says, 'I tell you the truth: anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father. What the 'greater things' may be is disputed, but there is surely no doubt that powerful signs are in view in 'the things I have been doing'. Note that in the context of 14:12 and 15:8, Jesus promises to answer prayers made in his name. However, in this gospel, the glory of Jesus is shown, and God is glorified also through Jesus' death, the supreme example of love.

4. Conclusion

We cannot avoid the challenging task of hermeneutics by rejecting the idea that the text is historically conditioned or by giving up on the possibility of discovering something in it that is relevant to the present. The texts and our situation's scopes must continue to be merged. Others might be able to draw a lesson from this study for today, but it wouldn't be one they would want to hear or see preached since it would conflict with their understanding of what God is saying at the moment. To them, I would like to convey the idea that all messages have the right to be heard, particularly all voices of Scripture. Each piece of Scripture is there for a purpose. Each has its own special emphasis and message, and each is there, among other things, to prevent the emphases of the other documents from being taken to extremes. Perhaps recently, the voice of John has not been given sufficient attention, and now is the time for that particular strain of Christian teaching to be emphasized. Not that John is to be heard to the exclusion of Paul, Peter, Luke, and the others, but alongside them in equal balance.

Lessons for Christian unity Today

1. As Christians, we must put at the top of our agenda what the Fourth Gospel puts at the top of its agenda—the recognition of the glory of Christ. Christ is the Lord of the universal church in every age, not just the Johannine community, and the whole *raison d'être* of the Christian Church is to proclaim him as such. He is the source of the church's unity, and he is the uniting force, in conjunction with the Father and the Spirit. So any search for Christian unity must start with a true appreciation of Jesus. Any approach that places the essence of unity in the solidarity of human endeavor is not only not faithful to John's teaching on unity (see Brown's commentary on 17:20–23), but also unlikely to work. Any approach to unity that starts by getting people together without first focusing on the common Lord who binds us together is

putting the cart before the horse. What is needed is a focus on Jesus as the Son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Incarnate Word (expression, wisdom) of God, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world, the Bread who gives spiritual life, the Light which shows God's truth to an unbelieving world, the Shepherd of his faithful flock, the Resurrection and the life of all who believe in him, and the Vine in which all his followers are branches. And it is not just 'head' recognition that is needed, but 'heart' recognition—a real heartfelt experience that leads to a commitment of life to obeying the one recognized as the Lord.

2. Though maybe too much may have been made of John's individualism by some, one has to accept that there is a very strong individualistic strain in the Fourth Gospel. Perhaps this is one reason why the voice of John has failed to be heard so much in recent times, as the church in general (and in more than one wing) has been happier for several different reasons to talk in 'corporate' terms and was suspicious of individualistic language. While being sensitive to that feeling, however, it is vital that, precisely in such a situation, John's voice be heard so that there may not be an imbalance between individualism and corporatism on the corporate side. If Christian unity is to be sought, and if the church is to survive and carry on the mission its Lord has given it, then it must not be based on a weak, lowest-common-denominator kind of faith but on a real personal faith, strongly held by each member. Sometimes the church can be scared of strongly held opinions because strongly held religious opinions have caused so much trouble in the past and no doubt will cause so much more in the future. But John shows us that it is only as each branch is firmly attached to the vine, believing firmly in the truth, following faithfully in the way, and being filled personally with the divine life that the fruit can be borne.
3. Christian unity, for John, is a unity of love and fellowship. But for John, these are not merely theoretical or sentimental concepts. He calls believers into a close, loving relationship with Christ and into a similarly close, loving relationship with each other. The kind of fellowship the fourth evangelist is looking for is not a jolly party, nor is it a loose association of largely independent churches for mutual support. Of course, the modern situation of a plurality of churches all with a claim to be mainstream within a locality cannot be said to exist in John's time. Those who split from his churches were no longer counted believers (1 John 4:6; 2 John 7; John 15:6). The fellowship he has in mind is a bond of practical love between individual Christians that is so strong that outsiders are attracted to faith when they see it in action—a bond that is so close it can be compared to the relationship of the Father with the Son. This is, of course, a counsel of perfection, but this is John's way of challenging his readers to hold before them the ultimate and to encourage his readers to keep on striving to reach it, not resting until they do.
4. Christians need to bear in mind John's teaching that the purpose of unity is mission. Too often, discussion about

⁹ D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London 1977), 118.

Christian unity is about relationships between 'insiders' who belong to different branches of the church, or about closer working relationships, or even the amalgamation of church bureaucracies. The Fourth Gospel tells us the focus of our unity should be mission, outreach, 'that the world may believe... 'that the world may believe... that the world may know!' It is no accident that the modern ecumenical movement grew out of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference and that it is in those parts of the world that were regarded as 'the mission field' where the greatest ecumenical strides have been made. But the mission the Fourth Gospel has in mind is not just a matter of talk.

In the ambiguity in Chapter 15 between the interpretation of 'fruit-bearing' as missionary success and as an ethical lifestyle, we can see a typically Johannine suggestion that it is not a matter of 'either-or' but 'both-and'. Indeed, we get the firm impression that an ethical lifestyle is part of the mission. 'This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples' (15:8; see 13:35). The world will be attracted by the ethical living of the disciples, especially by their love. That love and the unity it produces will bear as eloquent witness as the disciples' words, and it will be the evidence that Jesus is the one sent by the Father and will bring them to faith (17:20–23). However, the point cannot be made too strongly that, for John, the whole purpose of unity among the believers is mission, and that a unity that has lost its sense of purpose cannot survive. It is only as the church aims unswervingly toward the goal of mission that it can ever hope to achieve the unity for which Christ prayed.

The search for that unity must continue. It may well be that it is not church union schemes that John had in mind; the emphasis should lie, as it does in the Fourth Gospel, in building up in each local congregation a loving fellowship of believers. This is what will convince the world that Jesus is real, that he can bring them eternal life, and that he is Lord of all if they can see him reigning and making a difference in a local body of Christians who each manifest a real, genuine faith and a true, loving practical concern for each other. The church won't achieve the unity for which Christ prayed. It will only then produce an abundance of fruit ethically and lovingly. Only after that would it spread to the rest of the world, enabling them to know and believe. Only then can the words of Jesus' prayer, 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.'