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A Vision of Unity—Christian Unity in the Fourth Gospel

Sabbatical leave for ministers has become increasingly common in recent years and has been used for a variety of purposes. Mr Staton, who is minister of Paisley Methodist Mission, has used his recent leave to further his knowledge of the Gospel of John—to his profit and to ours.

'That they may be one', the prayer of the departing Lord for the unity of his followers, has become one of the slogans of the ecumenical movement. It has been the earnest prayer of those involved in inter-church relations on an international and national level, in local covenants, in church union schemes, and in inter-church bodies, and particularly of those involved in local ecumenical partnerships. But what is it we are praying for? Too often we simply read our own ideas of church unity into the prayer, so that our exposition reveals more about the interpreter than about the text. Can we be sure we are being faithful to the Biblical tradition? Perhaps we can make a start by studying 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.[1]

I propose, firstly to enquire as to the source of that unity, and then as to its nature. After that, we will consider the purpose of that unity. We shall end by assessing what contribution the Fourth Gospel's vision of unity can make to the discussion concerning Christian unity today.

I. The Source of Unity

What, then, is the source of the unity of believers, according to the Fourth Gospel? The source is to be found in Jesus as the community's

[1] J. L. D'Aragon, 'La notion johannique de l'unit', *Sciences Ecclésiastiques* 11 (1959), 111–9; J. F. Randall, 'The theme of unity in John 17:20–23', ETL 4 (48) (1972, 373–394; cf. also D. B. Woll, *Johannine Christianity in Conflict* (Chico, 1981)

Ferdinand F. Segovia has promised a major treatment of John 17, entitled *The Prayer of the Word: A Johannine call to unity*, in n. 1 to his article 'The Journeys of the Word of God: A reading of the plot of the Fourth Gospel', *Semeia* 53 (1991), 23–54. Please note that use of the name John in this article does not imply any particular theory of authorship.

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.[2] All the promises concerning Israel find their fulfilment 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.[3] 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; Cf. 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.

But that is not the complete picture. 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. Brown remarks that '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'.[4] The parallelism that John uses here

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[2] J. W. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (London 1992). Note that the image of the vine applied to Israel in Psalm 80 is applied to Jesus, not to the community of believers.

[3] R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to St. John* 2 Vols (London 1971),769; S. S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter 1978), 212; cf. also D. M. Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge 1995), 129.

[4] Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* 3 Vols. (ET, London, 1982), *ad loc.* N.B. the difference between the thought of John and Paul here. In Paul, the Holy Spirit plays a major role in establishing unity among Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4, 11, 13, though nowhere else unless one includes Eph. 4:3–4), whereas in John it is the Father and the Son that perform this function. However, given that in John the Spirit is called 'another Paraclete', implying that Jesus is the original Paraclete (made explicit in the Epistle–1 Jn. 2:1) and that the Spirit's task is to continue the work that Jesus came to do, and that in Paul the demarcation lines between Christ and the Spirit can be somewhat blurred (cf. Rom. 8:9- 11), maybe this difference is more apparent than real.

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 (Cf. 2:11) and supremely in his death (Cf. 12:23–33). This glory is none other than the fulness 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 'fulness of divine life'(Schnackenburg), which forms the basis, the source of, and the energy behind the unity of believers.[5]

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 spilt 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 organised.[6] But the best interpreter of John is John, so let us look again at the unity prayed for by the departing Lord in John 17:20–23 in the light of the teaching concerning unity contained elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel.

If we do, we will find that it is firstly 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. But it may be a good place to start. The departing Lord shows a great concern that his followers should love one another (John 13:34–35, 15:12, 17—N.B. 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.[7] 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

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[5] R. E. Brown, *op. cit.*, 775.

[6] *Ibid.*, 776. For Farewell Discourses see J. F. Randall, *op. cit.*, 376

[7] Cf. D. M. Smith, *op. cit.*,152. 'According to the image, each member branch is directly related to Christ, but not otherwise to the members.'

which caused him to lay down his life for his friends (15:13). This is 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 individual dependence on the Lord.[8] 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). Here there is a clear picture of the unity of believers as a unity of those who recognise 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) by means of his signs, his teaching, and supremely through his 'glorification'—i.e. his death and resurrection, and who listen to and follow him alone. Both 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, and which is modelled on the union between the Father and the Son. Here we emphasise the other side of Brown's phrase quoted above: 'heavenly unity is both the model and source of the unity of believers '(see n. 4). The unity of the community is the unity experienced by those who are each 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 (cf. 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 relation-

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[8] For the relationship of knowledge and belief cf. R. Bultmann, art. *ginosko*, *TDNT* I, esp. pp. 711–3. On knowledge generally see also E. Schütz, art. 'Knowledge', *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter 1976), II, 392–406

[9] Cf. O. Cullmann, *op. cit.* 14ff.

ship which 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 judgement to the Son (5:20, 22), he grants the Son to have 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, of trust, of respect, of faithfulness, and (on the part of the Son) of 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?). But I say 'almost'. 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 to identify the incarnate Jesus with the exalted Christ.[10] But we are talking of an extremely close, perhaps even an intimate, relationship. In fact, of course the evangelist goes farther still 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 pronounces the famous 'I am' sayings.[11] The soldiers draw back when he says 'I am he' (Gk. *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, I think, if this image is seen, like all images in the gospel to be a metaphor which discloses truth through a certain point or certain points of comparison rather than an allegory where every point has to match up.[12] 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 (cf. 1:1; 20:28).

The relationship of believers to the Son finds its clearest expression

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[10] It could be argued that 5:18 is a misunderstanding on the part of the 'Jews', but it is one of John's frequent literary ploys to have characters to speak 'truer than they know' Cf. 11:52; 19:19–21. There is no doubt John believed this statement to be true. In regard to 10:30, there is also no doubt that John intended his readers to understand a claim to a share in divinity, even if it would not be understood in the historical context. Here John is making connections back to the faith of his own community. See previous note.

[11] See the interesting discussion of John's use of metaphor in R. Kysar, 'Johannine Metaphor—Meaning and function: A literary case study of John 10:1–18', *Semeia* 53 (1991), 79–111

[12] See dictionary articles quoted in n. 9. Cf. also Schnackenburg's Commentary, *ad loc.*

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 recognising 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 recognises his 'sheep' (ie. those who will believe in him) and that the 'sheep' recognise him, but talking about the Father and Son 'recognising' each other makes little sense. The gospel gives every indication that both these parties have been aware of each others' identity for eternity! Here a more personal relationship is in view. This accords with the use of *yada'* in the Hebrew Bible and of *ginōskō* in the Septuagint, where knowing God is largely a matter of acknowledging God's acts (Dt. 11:2; Is. 41:20; Hos. 1:3; Mic. 6:5) or that he is God (Dt. 4:39; 8:5; 29:5; Is. 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. Dt. 34:10; Je. 1:5; Am. 3:2). So here in John 10:14–15 knowledge as acknowledgement or recognition of Jesus as the 'Good Shepherd' and the community's Lord, and as a personal relationship between Shepherd and sheep is in view. This may stretch the metaphor a little, but this is nothing unusual where our author is concerned. We have a picture of a flock where the sheep are united in a close personal relationship with the shepherd.[13]

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

[13] C. F. D. Moule, 'The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel', *Nov.T.* 5 (1962), 171–90

between Jesus and his own. Here we encounter a picture of a vine where all the branches hang together by virtue of 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 whole 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' prayer is that the believers may be 'in us' that the world might believe. 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. This almost beggars belief. The horizontal unity of believers consists in their each having a vertical relationship with the Godhead and it is that series of individual relationships that leads the world to believe! How can this be? It is a very difficult 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 be also 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 (17:23, where the Greek literally reads 'that they may be perfected into unity', cf. also 1 John 3:1–10). Further, it would appear that the author believes that those who are closely bound to their Lord have an inner power of attraction—the attraction of someone who really means and 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.[14] But this cannot be all there is to the Johannine concept of unity. In John 17, Jesus prays, 'that 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

[14] S. Pancaro, ' "People of God" in St. John's Gospel', *NTS 16* (1970), 114–29; cf. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, 350.

in only the broad sweep of what he says and missing the little touches that put all the rest in context and restore the 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, the branches of a vine must stay attached to the vine), indeed both are established images of God's people, Israel (Ezk. 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 however 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 die than that the whole nation perish' and John comments 'he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only 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 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 incorporate in 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 realises 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 own day.[15]

We should note also the terms that Jesus uses in this gospel to describe his followers. There are many. There is the word 'disciple'

[15] Cf. D. M. Smith, *op. cit.*, 136f.

with which we are familiar from the synoptics, although in John 9:27–28 this word is used in a way which would include very 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.[16]

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 chs. 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, characterised by love, the kind of love that leads a person to lay down his life for his friends (15:13).

3. The Purpose 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 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 and serving him faithfully,

[16] Cf. V. P. Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (London 1973), 143–8, against C. R. Bowen, 'Love in the Fourth Gospel', *JR* XIII (1933), 39–49, and Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London 1968).

being bound to him and to his fellow believers in the closest possible bands of love. This joy is not selfish, it is totally 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 mission to the world. Indeed, this is the major end in view in John 17—'that the world may believe... that the world may know' (these terms are largely identical in meaning; see above n. 9). 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 emphasises 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 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' cf. Pancaro, *op. cit.*) or 'people of 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 proclamation (4:35–38; 15:16; 17:21, 23).[17] 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 (cf. 14:12), in view of the phrase 'This is to my Father's glory' (15:7, see Schnackenburg's commentary on this verse). 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 of 15:8 Jesus promises to answer prayer 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.

[17] Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London 1977), 118f.

4. Conclusion

This, then, is the Fourth Gospel's vision of Christian unity. But what significance does all this have for our search for Christian unity today? Some may wish to say it has none, as John's teaching is so thoroughly conditioned by the historical circumstances of his community. This would seem to be overly pessimistic. Similar comments could be made about every writing in the Old and New Testaments, but the Christian tradition has always maintained that the revelation of God is to be found in the Scriptures. We cannot duck the difficult task of hermeneutics, either by refusing to accept the historically-conditioned nature of the text, or by giving up all hope of finding something in it of relevance to today. We must continue to seek to merge the horizons of the text and of our situation. Others would be able to find a message for today in this study, but it would not be a message they would wish to hear, or see proclaimed, as it would militate against their perception of what God is saying in these times. To them, I would like to say that all messages have a right to be heard, and especially that all voices of Scripture have a right to be heard. Each writing 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 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 emphasised. Not that John is to be heard to the exclusion of Paul, Peter, Luke, and the others, but alongside them in equal balance.

So, what can we learn from the Fourth Gospel to help us in our search for Christian unity today? The following points suggest themselves.

Firstly, 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 endeavour is not only not faithful to John's teaching on unity (so 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 which is needed, but 'heart' recognition—what I once heard an Orthodox clergyman refer to as the 'vision' of Jesus, a real heartfelt experience, which leads to a commitment of life to obeying the one recognised as Lord.

Secondly, though maybe too much may have been made of John's individualism by some,[18] 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 a number of different reasons to talk in 'corporate' terms and was suspicious of individualistic language. Whilst being sensitive to that feeling, however, it is vital that precisely in such a situation John's voice should 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 on the basis of 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 it is only as each branch is firmly attached to the Vine, believing firmly in the truth, following faithfully in the way, and filled personally with the divine life that the fruit can be borne. There may well be trouble (there was in the Johannine community), but this will have to be faced in the power of the Holy Spirit. Note that this is no charter for those who choose to rebel against the church authorities. The Johannine Jesus brooks no opposition (8:42–46; 15:6) and neither did the Beloved Disciple or his representative in the letters. Contrary to the protestation of J. D. G. Dunn that 'there is no real concept of ministry, let alone office in the Johannine literature',[19] there is in fact a very clear concept of ministry—that of an all-authoritative

[18] *Idem.*, 119, following E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London 1961.)

[19] Cf. M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London 1989), 34–39, *contra* Dunn, *op. cit.*, 358f. and E. Käsemann, 'Ketzer und Zeuge: zum johanneischen Verfasserproblem' (1951), in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, Vol. 1 (Göttingen, 1960). The office of the revered teacher could not, of course, be filled by anyone else after the Beloved Disciple's death, so only the local ministries survived, and the Johannine communities soon ceased to exist as a distinctive entity soon after their teacher's death (cf. Hengel, *op. cit.*).

teacher, whose authority may not have been formal or institutional, but was no less real for all that, and a number of more formal ministries—the 'elders' of house churches, of whom Gaius and Diotrephes were examples.[20] John calls the Church, not to anarchy, but to a united fellowship where all have direct access to their Lord, and where all are bound to him in a strong personal relationship, and are thus bound to each other in loving fellowship under those leaders the Lord appoints, and in harmony with the church universal.[21]

Thirdly, 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 Jn 4:6; 2 Jn 7; Jn 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.

Fourthly, we need to bear in mind John's teaching that the purpose of unity is mission. Too often discussion about Christian unity is about relationships between 'insiders' who belong to different branches of the Church, or about the closer working relationships or even 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 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' (e.g. India) where the greatest ecumenical strides have been made. The International Nepal Fellowship, which carries on Christian missionary work in a country where the government has traditionally frowned on attempts at Christian proselytizing and has made life very difficult for Christian converts, is a shining example of how a wide range of churches can work together for Christ. 'Mission England' and the Decade of Evangelism/Evangelisation are further examples of how possible it is to achieve a wide measure of agreement and working

21. See above, n. 2.

together when mission is the goal. John issues a challenge, to awaken the people, not just church leaders, to their Lord's command to go out in mission to share his revelation with the world, and to offer them his promise of eternal life.

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 the 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; cf. 13:35, 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples'). The world will be attracted by the ethical living of the disciples, especially by their love ('By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another'). That love, and the unity it produces, will bear as eloquent witness as the disciples' words (but note the spoken witness is not to be neglected, 4:35–38), 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 that unity for which Christ prayed.

But the search for that unity must continue. It may well be that it is not church union schemes that John had in mind. Nor is it church union schemes that will bring the world to believe. But what effect, in our modern world does the existence of so many different denominations have on the way people respond to the Christian message? And what effect does it have when a church union scheme publicly fails? Surely this must have a negative impact! It is difficult to argue that organisational unity and church union 'don't matter', even if they do fall into the category of 'eliminating the negative' rather than 'accentuating the positive'. As the song says, both need to be done.

But that is not where the emphasis should lie. 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. Only then will the Church attain to the unity for which Christ prayed. Only then will it bear abundant fruit in an ethical, loving lifestyle. Only then will it reach out to the world so that they too can know and believe. And only then will we see the prayer of Jesus fulfilled, '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.'

Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the concept of the unity of believers in John 17. This unity has its source in the community's common Lord, and especially in the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son. It is a unity of love and loyalty, but it is primarily a unity based on the mutual indwelling of the Godhead and the believers, which is not only the source of unity, but also its essential element. The believers are united by their common relationship with their Lord. The unity also has a corporate element, however. The believers' relationship with Father and Son should result in their loving each other as their Lord commands, and living together as part of one Vine and one Flock. The purpose of this unity is to bring joy to the believers and to motivate them to mission in the world.