

JOHN — WEEK 23

UNITY



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

As Jesus steels himself for crucifixion, He explains the purpose in terms of the Trinity and its glory. He also explains eternal life, it's relation to time, and how He made the Godhead manifest.

Lastly, He explains how the Church should have the unity that the Godhead has.

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1 John 17:1

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You,”

The turning point of all history is at hand. Sin’s domination is about to be defeated. God incarnate is going to the cross.

But notice that this verse says something radically different from what most Christians believe. Notice that it’s not all about us. It’s all about God’s glory.

Specifically, it’s all about the Father’s glory. The phrase, “*that Your Son also may glorify You,*” is yet another purpose construction. The purpose of The Passion is that the Son may glorify the Father.

And note another significant detail here. Jesus isn’t going to glorify Himself, for the purpose of glorifying the Father. No, the Father is going to, “*Glorify Your Son*” (for the purpose of glorifying Himself).

Just think about what this means, or more to the point, what it doesn’t mean. What’s about to transpire isn’t Jesus glorifying Himself. Pontius Pilate isn’t going to glorify Jesus either. The crowds aren’t going to glorify Him, nor the centurion, nor Judas Iscariot. The Father is going to glorify Him.

And Jesus is asking Him to do it.

This verse lends critical context to Romans 8:28.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

If *all things work together* for the good of people like us (who love God), then we must be the purpose of *all things*, right?

No, the purpose of all things is God’s glory. Even Romans 8:28 hints at this when it notes that *those who love God* are specifically *those who are the called according to His purpose*.

John 17:1 teaches that His purpose, even for the crucifixion, is His glory. We make out like bandits in this system, but that doesn’t mean we are the central characters in the system.

There’s an important psychological point here. Admit it or not, we’re not satisfied to merely be saved. We want to be important.

Paul understood this and so made a big point of referring to himself as a slave (δουλος “doulos”) of Christ.

Praise God for the gifts He gives to His slaves.

2 John 17:2–3

“As You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

Verse two is a purpose construction. The Father has given Jesus *authority over all flesh*, for the purpose *that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him*.

Well, at least we're the purpose of something. Praise God for that. Eternal life is a pretty nice gift, no?

But then verse three makes a surprising point. We think of eternal life as going to heaven and living there eternally. Okay, but that's not what that verse says. It says that eternal life is *that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*.

This corrects a serious, though understandable, mistake. We think of eternal life as life everlasting. After all, that's what eternal means in English. That's what the Greek word (“aionios” αἰωνίος) means too.

Eternal life does last eternally, but it's not just longer life; it's a different kind of life.

And knowing God is the difference.

Christians often think of getting into heaven as our ultimate goal. Verse three says that knowing God is our ultimate goal. Actually, verse three is yet another purpose construction in the Greek, but it's more of an appositional use. The subjunctive use of the word “know” is for clarification.

But the application to our lives is pretty much the same as a regular purpose clause. Our goal in life is to know God more. This dovetails nicely with Matthew 7:21–23.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

I like to call Matthew 7:22 the scariest verse in the Bible because the works the “damned surprised” mention seem pretty impressive. If they're not saved, who is?

Humble people who weren't busy showing off, that's who. The truly saved would be focused on their relationship with their Lord. They would think of their prayer life and how they fervently sought the Lord's guidance in their affairs. They would also be painfully aware of their failures.

The damned surprised mention none of this.

Knowing God is everything.

3 John 17:2–5

“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”

This passage feels connected to yesterday’s definition of eternal life as more than just infinitely long life—but a different kind of life. Jesus’s longing to get back to “the way it was” feels like longing to get back to eternity.

He has eternal life, obviously, but there’s a form or phase of that, which He gave up in order to visit us.

Now the work (“ergon” **εργον**) is finished and it’s time for Jesus to get back to His former position—to *the glory which I had with You before the world was*.

This is illuminated by the doctrine that God created time. The scripture references are too numerous to list, but the most obvious is the first words of Genesis 1:1, “*In the beginning*.” If God didn’t create time, He didn’t create “*the heavens and the earth*” in the very beginning.

It’s worth mentioning that the creation itself strongly agrees with this doctrine. There is wide agreement among physicists and astronomers that time had a beginning (whether or not they believe in a creator).

Thus, in claiming to exist *before the world was*, Jesus is claiming to predate time itself. This is why incarnation is often viewed as Jesus stepping into time.

And that phase is coming to a close.

It is worthwhile for every Christian to spend time meditating on the doctrine that God created time and therefore is outside of time. This can be hard work; it’s hard to imagine God viewing the whole span of history from a single vantage point.

But anything less would be a far weaker God—a God unlike the God of the Bible.

This topic doesn’t just matter to one’s understanding of God. It affects one’s view of heaven and the seventh day of creation.

The Reformed doctrine of predestination correlates perfectly the idea that God is outside of time. The phrase, “*from all eternity*” in Chapter three of the Westminster Confession of Faith is a reference to eternity being not just a long time in our time dimension, but somewhere else.

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: — Westminster Confession of Faith 3:1a

If God is outside of time, how can *whatsoever comes to pass* be any other way?

4 John 17:6–8

“I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me.”

What does Jesus mean when He says, *“I have manifested Your name”*? God’s name (“Yahweh” יהוה in Hebrew) is totally well known. What did He “manifest”?

The word translated as “manifested” is *ephanerosō* (εφανερῶσα). It means revealed or made known. “Manifested” is a perfectly fine translation for that.

But then what did Jesus reveal or make known that wasn’t already widely known?

It’s the name “Father.” The concept of God the Father is new. That’s a sea change in how people view God.

A big part of the mission of incarnation is to introduce the Trinity to the world. This is trickier than it sounds because Christ isn’t a “new” God. Despite His being born in Bethlehem, He always existed. The Trinity always existed.

But incarnation, along with Jesus’s teaching, made the structure of the Trinity manifest.

That’s making His name manifest.

Notice that verse 8 only says that they believed that *“You sent Me.”* That’s far short of understanding the Trinity.

And that’s okay. Full understanding of something that complex isn’t going to come quickly—especially before the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. In fact, “full” understanding doesn’t come this side of eternity. Even the name “Trinity” won’t come along for quite a while.

This touches on a very deep and difficult point. We must never forget that our understanding of God is going to be laughably limited from heaven’s point of view. If we start thinking that “Trinity” is some perfect description, we fall into error. It’s a useful concept, especially if it humbles us, but it’s just our feeble attempt to understand the infinite.

Do not miss the significance of the fact that the Bible puts so much emphasis on God’s name. A name is a representation. His name is the representation the Ten Commandments encourages—as opposed to other representations that it specifically prohibits.

Worship Him by name.

5 John 17:9–11

“I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them. Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name.”

What does Jesus mean when he says, “*I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours*”? Why contrast praying *for the world* with praying *for those whom You have given Me*? Wouldn't it make more sense if He just said He doesn't pray for everyone?

Actually, He did say that. The Greek word *kosmos* (κοσμος) means world, but sometimes in the sense of the entirety of humanity. This sense is obvious in passages like Matthew 5:14–16.

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

We are the light of people, not plants and animals. (Note: “men” in verse 16 is *ανθρωπων* “anthropone” from which we get “anthropology”. It means people; the Greek word for a male is *ανδρος* “andros”.)

And, unless animals can believe in Jesus, the word “kosmos” in John 3:16 must mean people.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

But even more important than all that is the purpose construction in verse 11.

Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, [for the purpose] that they may be one as We are.

Not only is this an explicit statement of the unity of the Trinity, it implies the oneness of Christians.

That oneness is the purpose of keeping those Christians.

Christianity needs unity desperately. Our disunity is a catastrophe.

Look at the challenges we face. Evil is advancing on many fronts. Yet we waste time arguing over doctrinal details. How did we get so distracted?

We're not separating the wheat from the chaff. We need to recognize minor issues as minor. The command to love fellow Christians is central to our faith.

Unity is important.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Is it wrong to want to be an important contributor to the church?
2. What can we do to know God better?
3. What is eternity?
4. How does God being the Trinity change worship?
5. How can Christians be more unified?

Items for prayer: