

“Guidance for How We Might Pray for the Church”

John 17:6-19

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

May 13, 2018

There have been times when I would have thoroughly enjoyed a book if not for the fact that I wondered whether I was invading someone’s privacy. For example, *Sabbatical Journey* presents a record of Henri Nouwen’s diary entries the last year of his life. To have a view into the inner joys and struggles of such a saint of our time is a gift, but should we be reading these words? Would he have wanted this? I didn’t feel guilty enough to stop reading, but I did wonder. I have this same feeling about the book *Come Be My Light* which records the private writings of Mother Teresa. The book speaks to this saint’s struggles and in the process gives permission to those of us who have similar questions and doubts to name them. Yet, should we be reading these private reflections or are we violating Mother Teresa’s privacy?

I have a similar feeling when I read the 17th chapter of John. What we have in this part of the farewell discourse is Jesus’ prayer for himself, his first disciples and the church. It is a record of an intimate conversation between Jesus and God which can tell us a great deal about how we might pray for the church. Yet I feel like I am invading Jesus’ privacy when I listen in to this conversation. Are we supposed to be overhearing this? Even if we are, who is overhearing this conversation in the first place? If Jesus is talking privately with God, how does John know what he says? Is he spying on Jesus, and if he is, why doesn’t he record what God says? These are the fussy questions of someone who overthinks everything, I know... but still, I wonder...

Yet, when it comes to John 17, we can be reasonably sure that it is “O.K.” for us to listen. These words are recorded in Holy Scripture so that we can read them and learn from them. And since Jesus is praying for his disciples in the verses we have read, perhaps we can find some guidance for how we might pray for the church, a rather needful task in this time when the church faces so many challenges.

One thing Jesus prays for is protection. As he prepares to leave this world, Jesus asks God to protect his disciples. It seems like a straightforward request very much like those we lift up to God for people we love – a child going to school, a young person who has just been baptized, a friend traveling for work or pleasure, college students and their chaperones departing for a mission trip this very week. We pray for their safety and wellbeing, for God to protect them from harm. Yet, while all of these prayers are appropriate, when Jesus asks God to protect his disciples, he is praying for something different.

Jesus prays that God will protect his followers from evil, or to be more precise, from the evil one. Jesus cares about the wellbeing of his disciples, but even in regard to his own life, his greatest concern has never been for safety but rather for faithfulness to God. Health, wealth and success are not Jesus' goals. Things like grace and truth, justice and love, peace and righteousness - these are the things he stands for. Remaining faithful to God's calling is more important than anything else. So, when Jesus prays for those he loves, he prays for what matters most - their faithfulness and thus protection from evil, from all the ways that the values of this world might lead them away from God's intent.

The implications for how we might pray for the church are pretty clear. If Jesus' prayer is our guide, it is "O.K." to pray for the safety of our members, for good health and successful ventures in the life of the church, but the primary focus of our prayer is upon faithfulness to our calling, protection from evil, guarding against the many ways in which the values of this world can lead us away from Jesus' values.

It is important to note that the world is not evil in and of itself. God created this world and called it good. Further, it is in this world that incarnation happens, that the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. However, in John's dualistic view, there are good and evil forces, godly and ungodly ways, Jesus' values and values which run contrary to the ways of justice and love. When Jesus says his followers "do not belong to *the world*," what he means is that our ultimate loyalties are not given to evil forces, we do not live by values which run contrary to his.

All of this sounds like a clear and worthy goal. The challenge is too often the church reflects the values of the world rather than Jesus'

values. Some things that go on in our culture are easy to identify as evil and thus try to avoid, such as violence and prejudice, the excesses of entertainment and escapism, the objectification of women and the exploitation of the poor. But other things are not quite so easy to identify such as the Prosperity Gospel or the level of incivility that permeates societal debate and has crept into the church.

There is a story about a church in conference at Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky which I served many years ago. Some matter of business inspired lively debate, which is a very Baptist thing. Our independence of thought creates the space for healthy differences and lively exchanges on various subjects are welcome. However, somewhere in the midst of this debate, someone new to the church crossed a line and began to attack someone else in a personal way. Civility was lost. The debate eventually ended, a decision was made, but the body was wounded by this departure from health.

Following the meeting, a longtime member of the church approached the newcomer and said in a very kind way words to this effect. "I am so glad that you have joined our church and trust that you will have good experiences here. I don't know how things were done in your previous church, but we don't treat each other that way here at Broadway." As I say, it was a kind word, yet a clear indicator that we in the church seek to do better than the world around us. It may be common practice for people to tear each other down in the world but this is not how we do things in the church. We have our differences but when we do, we exercise a measure of respect.

This matter of incivility in discourse is but one of many ways in which we in the church can be tempted to lose our distinctiveness. In all the ways we may be tempted to live by the world's values, Jesus prays for our protection from evil, our convictions to remain true. As we think about what matters most for the church especially in challenging times, we will do well to pray and live in this manner. For there is nothing more important than remaining true to God's calling in our lives.

Jesus asks God to protect his followers from evil; he also prays for unity. Jesus says to God, "may they be one as we are one." In a way,

this is one specific illustration of how the church is tempted by evil to give in to the ways of the world. The way of the world is not the way of unity; it is the way of division and hostility. People find others with whom to identify as friends, with whom to form a group, but over time there is a tendency to separate ourselves from others, to make sure that *we* are not like *them*, and eventually we are tempted to allow this need to separate to push us to create division.

Baptists seem to have a special gift herein. One of the earliest Baptist feuds was over music. The controversy was started by Benjamin Keach, pastor of the Horsley Down Baptist Church in Southwork, England who published a hymnbook in 1691 entitled *Spiritual Melody* which contained hymn texts that people had written (as opposed to musical settings of psalms). In the year the hymnal was published, Keach wrote a defense of hymn singing entitled “The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship” which provided a response to “A Discourse Against Singing” written by a Mr. Isaac Marlow. Yet the controversy raged, and in 1693, 23 members of the Horsley Down Baptist Church were so offended that they left the church and joined the Bagnio Baptist Church led by Robert Steed. In the end, Keach agreed to lead hymn singing only after the sermon, so that the early non-hymn-singers could leave without having their consciences violated (*Review and Expositor*, vol. LXX, No. 1, Winter, 1983; Thomas R. McKibbens, Jr.).

It is an old example and seemingly a silly one, but churches experience division to this day over things great and small, over matters sacred and secular, over worship styles and ethical stances, whether or not to build buildings or start ministries or call staff. Some of the debates are substantive and healthy and sometimes people going separate ways can be good. But most of the time division tears churches and people apart and drains the witness of the church of any influence it would have had. “They will know we are Christians by our love,” the old song says, and so they will. What they know when we fuss and feud and divide is that we are no different than anyone else in the world.

So, Jesus prays for unity, that we may be one, as he and God are one. This does not mean we always agree. Unity is not conformity. It simply means we have enough in common to want to be together and

stay together. Any church which experiences this kind of unity will be attractive to people in our culture. No one wants to join a family feud. We have enough feuds in our own families. People want to be part of a church where differences are welcomed and celebrated yet there is a genuine sense of harmony. There are precious few church families like this. Thus, as we think about the future and reflect on the prayer of Jesus, we do well to pray for a sense of unity here, to work with all our being to be one with one another as God and Jesus are one.

Jesus asks God to protect his followers from evil and to give them a sense of unity in this world of much division. Then, he sends his disciples back into the world with a purpose, to bear witness to the truth they have known in him. Jesus knows what his followers are up against. Once they get a taste of something more than the ways of this world, they will never be at home in the world. Once they have seen a better way of life, they will never be satisfied with less. Those who are satisfied will resist their witness. Yet Jesus cannot remove his disciples from this world any more than he could have avoided entering it. They must remain in the world but not of it, ever seeking to redeem it. So, he prays that God will strengthen them for this task, sanctify them in truth.

The message for us is that our calling is to live in the world but not be of it, to give witness to the truths we have known in Christ for the benefit of others. Though it is tempting to pull away from the world once we have known something better, we cannot in good faith remain cloistered away, enjoying our different way of life and sense of unity. We have a calling to return to the world and not simply hold on to our values of justice and love but to transform the values of the world.

In his book *A Testament of Devotion* Quaker thinker Thomas Kelly put it this way (p. 47).

Paradoxically, this total Instruction proceeds in two opposing directions at once. We are torn loose from earthly attachments and ambitions – *contemptus mundi*. And we are quickened to a divine but painful concern for the world – *amor mundi*. (God) plucks the world out of our

hearts, loosening the chains of attachment. And (God) hurls world into our hearts, where we and (God) carry it together in infinitely tender love.

It is a wonderful summary of our relationship to the world. We pull away from everything in this world which cheapens life. We seek refuge and encouragement in the peacefulness of the beloved community. Then, we return to the world with a renewed sense of purpose of loving the world as we have been loved.

First Baptist Raleigh has a long history of sharing love with the world. We have addressed basic human needs for clothing, food and shelter. We have pursued racial reconciliation and built bridges with people of other faiths. We have played a key role in starting community organizations like Urban Ministries. We have engaged in partnership mission work around the world, supported the work of others through our financial gifts and prayers, and often led the way in imagining new ways to do missions. As long as we shape a future worthy of our past, we will honor the calling of Jesus and reveal the efficacy of his prayer that we be sanctified in truth as we are sent into the world.

So, how will we pray for the church, this church and the church universal? I am assuming that we will pray and that we will focus on specific issues we are aware of, but as we do, may we keep the concerns of Jesus in mind – that God may protect us from going astray and embracing the world's values, that we may have a genuine sense of unity and that we may remember our calling to give witness to the world of the love we have known in Christ.