Introduction

What is it that has the biggest impact on people in our communities with respect to the good news of the Gospel of Jesus? Is it the most inspiring praise times in Sunday services? Is it the most uplifting and relevant preaching? Is it the most exciting children’s talk? Is it the most warm and inclusive welcome to visitors to our church on a Sunday morning? Is it the quality of tea and coffee or biscuits after the service? Is it the range of ministries and activities we organise? These examples and many more valuable things we can list are all of great importance in the life of a healthy local church. However, none of them would be listed highly by 80%+ of the wider community because they are rarely ever in church on a Sunday to experience these blessings when they occur. Jesus gives a simple test to the wider community to test the genuineness of our claims to be His followers. In John 13:34-35, Jesus declared: 34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.” If the residents of our community all had a secret ballot paper to pass a verdict on each congregation in our community, what scores do you think would be attained? I suspect there would be a lot of nervous anticipation in churches up and down the land if such a vote was ever carried out. Maybe in some cases an encouraging response, but undoubtedly in others the opposite might be the result. Part of the problem in Scotland today is that there are too many examples of un-Christ-like conduct by individual Christians and within and between too many local congregations. There are the inexcusable and illegal acts of child abusers and thieves stealing from the church collections or the occasional conviction of a vicar for conducting bogus marriages which no-one should find acceptable. However, this is not where the problems tend to lie in a far greater number of congregations. There are the inexcusable situations of Christians ‘not talking’ to other Christians or a whole host of issues surrounding forgiving and being forgiven about past words and actions to which the gospel of grace speaks so clearly. These kinds of issues which have seriously marred the quality of fellowship in too many local congregations damage the credibility of the Christian claims of the people concerned. A local church that avoids the requirement of maintaining high relational standards in its congregation runs the risk of losing its credibility not only in the eyes of the wider community, but also in the eyes of Jesus to whom we must one day given an account.

There is also a wider issue here on the topic of Christian unity, in terms of relationships between congregations, both within and between different denominations or networks of churches. The largest body of Baptists in Scotland in the eighteenth century were the Scotch Baptists. Their model of church was primarily lay-elder (male) led and functioned in a similar way to a typical Brethren Assembly in a later century. Scotch Baptists confused unity with uniformity. Within their connexion of churches across the United Kingdom they insisted that every church should conduct its services and ministries in exactly the same way. If a church wanted to do something differently then they had to write to sister churches with a view to all of them adopting or rejecting the proposal in question. It is possibly remarkable that they accomplished so much with such a bureaucratic system, but this was going beyond what Jesus was praying for in John 17. In the same way in Europe the Roman Catholic Church for many centuries maintained a semblance of uniformity by imprisoning or killing people who expressed their faith differently with respect to beliefs and practices. However, if the New Testament ideal of one organic body representing all the Christian communities is unattainable this side of heaven, surely some concerns ought to be expressed about the growing number of Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant denominations and networks of
churches claiming to be expressing more closely the New Testament blueprint for Church life. In the light of Jesus’ prayer for His future followers is it not reasonable that we ought to seek to break down unhelpful barriers to fellowship with other Evangelical Churches rather than erecting more barricades? I thank the Lord for the genuine progress witnessed in our city over the last ten years through Dundee Evangelical Christian Alliance, for example. However, much more progress remains to be achieved. What did Jesus pray for us in John 17:20-26? “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, 21 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. 22 I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one— 23 I in them and You in Me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.” “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.” “Righteous Father, though the world does not know You, I know You, and they know that You have sent Me. 24 I have made You known to them, and will continue to make You known in order that the love You have for Me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”. Let’s look briefly at the points Jesus raises in His prayer for us.

1. **What does Jesus pray for?**

The whole prayer is applicable to us because it is God’s Word, but this part in particular is specifically directed to us as followers of Jesus in later generations. It is particularly powerful to know that Jesus is praying for each of us as individuals and each local congregation with three main subjects central to His prayers. It is a big hint to us, as a result, concerning our prayer priorities when our Lord and Saviour has revealed what He is most passionate about, as revealed in His prayers. His first major concern:

(a) **That the Church will be united** (John 17:20-21) 20 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, 21 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. This is not a new biblical emphasis. It was found in the Old Testament as well. Psalm 133:1 declares: How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! Joseph in Genesis 45:24, after revealing his identity as the Vizier (Prime Minister) of Egypt, had to give this warning to his brothers before they set off to travel home to report to their aged father Jacob: Then he sent his brothers away, and as they were leaving he said to them, “Don’t quarrel on the way!” Yet down the centuries there have been power struggles and divisions that have dishonoured God’s name. The disciples of Jesus time and again argued over who was the most important or deserving of honour in their ranks (for example, Mark 9:33-37). In the Early Church Barnabas and Paul had a serious fallout about who to take on their mission team (see Acts 15:36-41). It was not just the men who had problems at times. In Philippians 4:2-3 Paul asks his friend Syzygus to encourage two ladies, former members of one of Paul’s mission teams to overcome their differences for the sake of the Gospel. I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 5 Yes, and I ask you, loyal Syzygus, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. The model Jesus has in mind is an extraordinary one. It is first of all: (i) **A supernatural unity** 24 that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. Lesslie Newbigin, a Church of Scotland missionary and later a Bishop of the Church of South India, when the majority of Christian denominations combined their networks of Churches to form that united witness in that region of India, explained it in this way. ‘It is a unity which not merely reflects but actually participates in the unity of God- the unity of love and obedience which binds the Son to the Father’ (L. Newbigin, The Light has come p.234). What we must always remember is that it is a supernatural work within us by the Holy
Spirit that brings us to faith when we are spiritually transformed within (‘born from above’ or ‘born again’ – see John chapter 3). In the early part of John 1, the author reminds us of this truth: Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God (John 1:12-13). This is an extraordinary work of God in bringing something about that is beyond mere human efforts, though it does not exclude our input into this process. It is made possible, as Jesus explained in John 17:22, through something our Lord passed on to us. I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one. What is it that Jesus is referring to here as it appears unclear in the immediate context? It relates to John 17:4-5: I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began. It is a conviction and passion for the honouring of God’s name in our lives that nothing else is allowed a higher priority. For Jesus it was the journey to and through His crucifixion, death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation at the Father’s right hand in heaven. In essence, that we become increasingly focussed on what matters most to God so that as we share these convictions to a greater degree the more obvious and visible will be our unity in the Gospel for the glory of God. It is not anything we create, or could create, but is a recognition of something that we already share with other members of Christ’s Church. We know it when we experience it, but find it very difficult to describe in words.

(ii) A practical unity Jesus through the way He lived made the invisible God visible to the people around Him. John 1:14 states: The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. To a lesser degree naturally, Jesus is praying that in the lives of His followers other people will catch glimpses, however faint, of what God is like. What do people ‘see’ in our lives day by day? Do they ever see something that causes them to stop and think how amazing our God must be if we are behaving like that? Don’t expect such a thought to be articulated audibly or in ‘Christian language’. How can we make God ‘more visible’ in our community through our conduct? Most of the times it will be apparently little things that make a difference; part of our problem is that we tend to think only of the extraordinary stories and examples and as a result quickly get discouraged because such things are not happening in our lives that way. There is no simple or trite answer to this question. It may be sometimes that we need to focus more on being the person God wants us to be rather than in doing something extra or something new. In the recent past in Vietnam an Evangelical Pastor was granted an accreditation certificate as a Preacher of the Gospel, authorising him to carry out his ministry in the community where he lived. What was unusual about this was that it came from the atheistic and communist Government that had imprisoned him for that ‘crime’ in the past –the longest sentence being sixteen years. Why was he released and given this accreditation award? In prison he had led so many people to Christ that the authorities decided he would do less damage outside the prison, from their point of view, than on the inside! [story told by Indian pastor Benjamin Francis May 2013] Hallelujah! God got so much glory in this situation. The Church of Jesus Christ in that prison brought honour and glory to His name. To a significant degree this impact on the wider community is determined by the way in which we treat one another by our words and by our actions. People recognise when there is genuine love and care demonstrated by a group of people and when it is simply an act. They are repulsed by power seeking, gossiping, and other forms of negative behaviour that is so common in other settings. The question is this: where true God-centred unity rather than an imposed artificial conformity is found God commands the blessing. Do we want it enough to live in the way He wants us to live?

(b) That the World may be persuaded (John 17:21-23) May they also be in us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they
may be one as We are one— 23 I in them and You in Me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me. Jesus has already said that he is not praying for the world, only for His present and future followers (John 17:9). Is this a contradiction? No! Jesus was well aware that too many people persistently love themselves above anything else, love their sins too much to give them up, in fact anything but God would be their number one passion, no matter how much love and grace He showers upon them. Jesus, here was determined that any excuses were stripped away from His followers who were playing this worldly game. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me (John 17:21). Jesus greatest desire was that human beings would see clearly who God is and what He stands for through the lives of His people on earth—whether they chose to follow God’s ways themselves or not. He did not wish obstacles to stand in the way of professions of faith, as a result of the sinful words and actions of some of His followers. Don’t minimise the scale of the problem. It is not primarily about the extreme examples of priests engaging in child abuse which is covered up for years—though this is a tragic problem of sobering proportions; rather it is the routine failure of Christians to live up to the standards we profess in daily life. None of us can be perfect, and in fairness this is not expected, but it is amazing how many people who never darken the doors of a church from one year to the next know how a Christian ought to behave! I believe it is no accident that I have had more positive comments about our witness as a Church from the wider community in the last year than in all the previous years put together, at a time when we have been seeking to build working relationships with Christians in other congregations. American pastor Roger Fredriksen recalled a deeply moving service in a church he had previously pastored. It was a service of reconciliation with another congregation in that community. Twenty years earlier they had had some serious differences which had caused harm to the cause of Christ. Many people wept as the service came to its conclusion with the singing of ‘Great is Thy Faithfulness’ as the past was acknowledged, dealt with and buried. The topic of conversation on the local streets the next day was the good news of what had happened in the church the previous day. Why? because the preached Word had regained practical credibility in the lives of the people who sought to proclaim it. Their action of modelling unity in the Gospel was a visible witness. Christian Churches in Scotland have a reputation for criticising and dividing, finding excuse after excuse why they cannot have fellowship with other believers. The sad examples are far too numerous to mention, but the question for us to face is this: Do other people see you and me as individuals, and us as a congregation, as those most eager to build bridges with other believers or as those looking for excuses why it cannot happen? This is not a secondary issue, but a primary one concerning the credibility of the Gospel. The name and honour of King Jesus is at stake here! God will not bless the witness of those of His followers who fail to take note of His priorities.

(c) That His Mission may be completed (John 17:24-26) 24 “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. 25 "Righteous Father, though the world does not know You, I know You, and they know that You have sent Me. 26 I have made You known to them, and will continue to make You known in order that the love You have for Me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” Jesus pictured Himself in heaven welcoming everyone of His Church home in the fulness of time. In some senses Jesus is feeling incomplete in His glory without the accompaniment of those people for whom He laid down His life on the cross. He is not viewing us as we are with our shortcomings of character and conduct, but as we will be on that day—perfect like Him. This is a reference to the final aspect of what Jesus had in mind when he shouted out It is finished (John 19:30) on the cross. How do we get from where we are to where God wants us to be in our character and conduct? It is through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Prior to His prayer Jesus had explained this truth in words recorded.
in John 16:12-14: I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. 13 But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will glorify Me because it is from Me that He will receive what He will make known to you. At the human level we have our discouragements and disappointments and can on occasions be extremely frustrated that we can see little evidence of God’s kingdom being extended or greater glory being given to Him in a particular context. While always seeking to be mindful that our attitudes, speech and conduct is not hindering the work of the Gospel, ultimately we must be encouraged because of the ultimate and final success of the purposes of God as revealed here in the prayer of Jesus. Do you need to grasp that encouragement today?

2. **What do Christians have in common?**

(a) **We trust the same Saviour** (John 17:20) I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message… Too often in evangelical Christian ranks we focus on the smaller things over which we have differences of opinion rather than the multitude of things over which we are in agreement. This can be within a congregation or between congregations. There are foundational matters over which there can be no compromise – such as the exclusive claims of Jesus to be the Saviour of the world, for example. Or in the current context foundational standards of biblical morality; yet how many times do Christians break fellowship over much smaller matters? Augustine, the Early Church leader (354-430AD), uttered these wise words: ‘In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity’. Had he thought to practice these principles with respect to the vast majority of Christians in North Africa at that time who were in congregations outside the National Church, then Islam may never have gained the foothold it did in the region a couple of centuries later. He was complicit in the terror campaign to force non-conformists at the point of Roman swords to join the state church. His powerful and biblical words condemn so forcefully that dreadful decision – the question for us is this: am I paying lip service to these words of Jesus or would other people judge that by my actions I am demonstrating my commitment to building the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ? This is not an easy question to answer. It is a most serious matter. However, we cannot merely talk the talk and not walk the walk because the honour of our Saviour is at stake in the choices we make.

(b) **We bear the same witness to the world** (John 17:21) 21 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. American Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe recalled a situation in one of the churches he had pastored. It concerned a prayer group in the church where people had gathered to pray for the conversion of members of their immediate families. The particular example was of a woman who had come to pray for the conversion of her husband. He was a very pleasant man who never had any issues with his wife attending church, but never wanted to attend himself. Wiersbe recalled visiting the home and having a number of conversations with him, but saw no prospects of spiritual progress. Later he found out the most effective deterrent that man had experienced. In his workplace were two men from that church who were often engaged with him in various work-related projects. They quite openly discussed problems at church especially with respect to behaviour that fell short of biblical standards. No wonder that man had no desire to be associated with that local congregation. However, much more seriously it was hindering him wanting to have anything to do with our Saviour as well. I fear that the sinful attitudes, words and actions of Christians towards their brothers and sisters in Christ does more harm to our public witness than any other individual factor. It undermines our basic credibility. We need to ask ourselves - do I need to repair a relationship with a brother or sister in Christ – or a larger number of fellow believers in order to rebuild
some gospel credibility? This is not a luxury for Christians with nothing better to do. On the contrary it is a foundational matter that needs to be addressed if our evangelistic work is to be effective in seeing people come to faith in Christ. It needs to be visible in extent if the wider community is to be impacted by it. What would the unity Jesus is praying for look like in our community if His Church was practising it? How far from or how close to it are we at the present time?

(c) **We enjoy the same love** (John 17:23)  
\[ I \text{ in them and } Y\text{ou in Me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me. } \]

Tertullian (160-225AD), another prominent North African Christian leader, more than 150 years after the Christian Church began, wrote these words: Look," they say, "how they love one another" (for they themselves hate one another); "and how they are ready to die for each other" (for they themselves are readier to kill each other). Tertullian's "Apology", Chapter 39.7 (circa 200AD). In context he was delighted that proponents of the major religions in his society recognised the quality of life within the Christian congregations of his day. What a witness it was that they had recognised the Christ-like practical care amongst the believers of that day. Paul in Ephesians 4:15-16 wrote: Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ.  

(d) **We will experience the same glory** (John 17:22, 24)  
\[ I \text{ have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one... “Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world. } \]

Thomas Brooks (1608-1680) the great Puritan pastor and writer once wrote: Labour mightily for a healing spirit...Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, that is unnatural and monstrous’. [I.D.E. Thomas, *A Puritan Treasury*, p. 304] How does the wider community where we live see us modelling this unity? Or if not why not? And what changes do we individually or collectively need to make to honour Jesus’ prayer request? Paul wrote: To the Church God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. 29 To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me (Colossians 1:27-29). I pray that the Lord will enable each of us to live out this gospel principle for the glory of Jesus’ holy name Amen.