“***The Secret of Unity***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, June 2, 2019

**Revelation 21:10, 22–26**

10And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. . . .

22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.26People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

**John 17:20–26**

20“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. 22The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. . . . 25“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Both of these passages give us a hint as to the secret of spiritual unity. In the Revelation passage, the nations walk by the light of God and the Lamb. Quite simply, it is the light of God that brings the nations together. There is no need for a temple in the new and Godly Jerusalem, because God and the Son *are* its temple.

You see, in this lifetime, many of us need buildings, rituals, symbols, and reminders of holiness. In the new Jerusalem, apparently, people won’t need these symbols and reminders. They will have God in mind at all times. Their hearts will be a temple for God. We aim, here and now, to let our hearts be a sanctuary for God. In the new Jerusalem or in heaven, that will be the reality. Since “glory” usually means a kind of spiritual light, this is probably what is meant by people bringing their glory into the open gates of the city. It’s a beautiful image: spiritually radiant people, in a city of perpetual daylight, whose gates are always open. Obviously the gates are for *entry*, not for military defense. We see images of inclusiveness, light, safety. There is no exclusion, no danger. There isn’t even *night*. Hopes and ideals are here fulfilled.

The gospel passage is more down to earth, and is concerned with an ideal that we *still* have not achieved, namely, spiritual unity. That is what is meant by “being one.” Jesus prays that his followers may achieve this kind of unity. I want to take note of how attentive he is to the needs of his apostles. He is very concerned about the eleven loyal apostles, their good hearts but somewhat shallow minds. He knows they will experience extreme despondency after he is killed, and he is worried about possible divisiveness among them. He is also concerned that, even though their love for *him* is secure, they might resent the Father, and might conclude that the Father does not have the same love that the Son does. And so, in his prayer, he keeps emphasizing that God’s love is *in* him *and* in believers, that if they will accept God as thoroughly as they accept him, they will have unity.

The secrets of unity are having God, God’s love, and Jesus’ love within oneself. God’s love is in Jesus, and Jesus’ love is in believers (17:26). These together make for openness to all others who have God’s love within. Jesus prays, “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (17:23). It is God’s love *within* that is *key* to our achieving spiritual unity. Too many Christians assume that Jesus is loving and kind but that God the Father is stern and judgmental, more of a lawgiver than a love-giver. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus’ teaching. Revelation shows that it is *God’s* light as much as it is *Jesus’*, that lights up the new Jerusalem.

If the secret of spiritual unity is God’s love within us, and our connection with that love, then we don’t all have to agree about every religious belief, every theological doctrine, every particular slogan or interpretation of scripture. We can have differing ideas and understanding, yet still have unity with each other, if we recognize the basis of spirit unity. It is sincerity and purity of spiritual *motivation*, not correctness of beliefs or purity of doctrines, that make for spiritual unity among people who have differing understanding. And when you get a roomful of believers, how could you *not* have varying concepts, differing understandings?

We don’t have to *think* alike in order to be *spiritually* alike, or to have unity of spirit *feeling*. We don’t need anykind of authoritarianism over us. We don’t have to believe alike. Authentic spiritual unity never needs to be *enforced*, since it is *felt* and experienced inter-personally. Love does not make us all the same. It does not eliminate our quirky originality; it just includes us in an environment of good will and cooperation. Love allows and even *invites* quirky originality. *Vive la différence!*

So the prayer “may they be one” does not mean “may they all think alike”; it means “may they have a similar love-motivation that comes from God within them, enabling them to recognize religious motivation in other people.” This is a case where God can give us the “a-ha” of spiritual recognition.

So I ask you to pause and reflect on the love of God and the love of Jesus within you, and to allow that this love may also exist in those who have different opinions, but a similar religious motivation. This ties me back into my point from Revelation, that some of us need symbols and reminders of faith, but that we can outgrow a dependency on those symbols. When we can commune with God without needing a temple and rituals, then we really *do* have God securely in our hearts.

Now I could end there, with that point, but I’m going to push my luck just a little. I’m going to say we can even have spiritual unity with non-Christians.

Is that surprising? They can have the same kind of love-motivation, the same sincerity of love that *you* have. If both you and, let’s say, a Muslim have outgrown your dependency on buildings and symbols as reminders, if you both recognize that God is the light within you, then you won’t need to fight over symbols or beliefs. You can appreciate the other’s inner light. You might even recognize that you have similar spiritual motivations.

As regards your differing understanding of Jesus, you can decide to trust that God will eventually clarify your understanding. The Muslims believe that Jesus is a great prophet. Christians believe that he is divine, the Son of God, and the unique revealer of God. If we can *both* trust that God will someday show us exactly who Jesus is, we can prevent that from being a source of disunity for us. We can have spiritual unity if we respect God, and trust that God will eventually enlighten us all.

Of course, achieving spiritual unity with a non-Christian is more challenging than it is with a Christian. But we need to recognize that Jesus’ love belongs to all humanity. There were Persians at the Lord’s nativity, there were Syrians and Greeks who believed in Jesus, there were Parthians and Arabs at Pentecost (Acts 2:9–11), and Revelation tells us that many “kings of the earth” will enter the holy city (21:24). Step by step, Jesus will teach humanity about love. He can even teach people who don’t understand much about who he is. Love carries its own power of conviction, and he says that it is our *love* that will win people over, not our *belief*.

May the power of divine love be revealed to you and enrich your understanding of God the Father and of all your brothers and sisters who have the divine love within. All who love God will eventually find out about Jesus.