

04-05-15

Series: [The Anatomy of a Church](#)

# The Anatomy of a Church (54)

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[Acts 20:28](#)

(Continuation from 03/29/15)

## The Internal Systems-2

### UNITY

#### The Root of True Unity

[John 17:20](#) (NASB)

<sup>20</sup>“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word.”

The opening words of [John 17:20](#) introduce the third thing for which Christ said He was not praying. In [John 17:9](#) He made it clear that He was not interceding on behalf of the unbelieving world; while in [John 17:15](#) He said that He was not asking for the disciples to be removed from the world. His words **I do not ask on behalf of these alone** introduce another group distinct from the then-living disciples for whom He had just prayed ([vv. 6-19](#)). Jesus looked ahead through the centuries and prayed for all the believers who were to come in the future. Although the vast majority had not yet been born, they nevertheless were and had been for eternity on the heart of the Savior. He knew them all, since their names have **“been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life”** ([Rev. 3:5](#); [Rev. 17:8](#); [Rev. 20:12, 15](#); [Rev. 21:27](#); [Phil. 4:3](#)). Christ’s intercession for us, which began with this prayer 2,000 years ago, continues to this day, **“since He always lives to make intercession for [us]”** ([Heb. 7:25](#)).

Jesus further identified these future believers as those who would **believe in Him** ([John 1:12](#); [John 3:15-16, 36](#); [John 6:40, 47](#); [John 7:37-38](#); [John 11:25-26](#); [John 20:31](#); [Acts 13:38-39](#); [Acts 16:31](#); [Rom. 10:9-10](#); [Gal. 3:22](#)), reminding all again that salvation comes through faith alone, **“not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”** ([Eph. 2:9](#); cf. [Rom. 3:20-30](#); [Gal. 2:16](#); [Gal. 3:8, 11-14, 24](#)). The Lord’s reference to believing in Him again preserves the biblical balance concerning salvation. On the one hand, only those given by the Father to Christ will come to Him ([John 17:6](#); cf. [John 6:44](#)). But on the other hand, their salvation does not take place apart from personal faith (cf. [Rom. 10:9-10](#)). In much the same way, the reality that the Lord will draw those whom He chooses to Himself ([John 6:44](#); [Acts 2:39](#); [Acts 11:18](#); [Acts 13:48](#); [Acts 16:14](#)) does not obviate the church’s responsibility to evangelize the lost ([Matt. 28:19-20](#); [Luke 24:47](#); [Acts 1:8](#)).

The apostles and their associates were the human authors of the New Testament ([John 14:26](#); [John 16:13-15](#); cf. [Eph. 2:20](#)), therefore all who would be saved in the future would come to Christ **through their word**. Some would hear that message directly from the

04-05-15

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apostles' own preaching (e.g., [Acts 2:14-42](#); [Acts 3:11-26](#); [Acts 4:8-12](#); [Acts 5:30-32](#); [Acts 13:14-41](#); [Acts 16:11-14](#); [Acts 17:22-34](#); [Acts 18:4-11](#)). Most, however, would hear the apostolic message through the written Word of their Spirit-inspired writings. The early church was reading the truths of Scripture when reading “**the apostles’ teaching**” ([Acts 2:42](#); cf. [Jude 17](#)). Through the centuries all who have preached the true gospel have preached the apostles’ word. As Paul wrote in [Romans 10:17](#), “**Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ**” (lit., “a speech about Christ”)—the apostolic message of salvation.

The disciples at that point hardly seemed ready to turn the world upside down (cf. [Acts 17:6](#)). One of them, Judas Iscariot, had turned traitor, and was at that moment preparing to lead those who would arrest Jesus to Gethsemane ([John 18:1-3](#)). Their brash, bold, seemingly fearless leader, Peter, would soon cower before the accusations of a servant girl, and repeatedly deny the Lord ([John 18:17](#); cf. [vv. 25-27](#)). The rest of the disciples would abandon Jesus after His arrest and flee for their lives ([Matt. 26:56](#)).

But Christ’s prayer ensures that the apostles’ ministry would be successful. In His omniscience, Jesus knew that they would fulfill their role in redemptive history. The gospel would prevail, despite the apostles’ weakness, the world’s hatred, and Satan’s opposition. Empowered by the Holy Spirit ([Acts 1:8](#); [Acts 2:1-4](#)), those early disciples would begin the chain of witnesses that continues unbroken down to the present day (cf. [2 Tim. 2:2](#)). All of the church’s evangelistic success is the result of the Lord’s request in [John 17:20](#) for those who would believe in the future. This request guaranteed the successful establishment of the church, and the success of its evangelistic ministry from apostolic times to the present. “**I will build My church,**” Jesus declared, “**and the gates of Hades will not overpower it**” ([Matt. 16:18](#)).

The Lord’s first request may be examined under four headings: **1) the root of true unity, 2) the request for true unity, 3) the representation of true unity, and 4) the result of true unity.**