We Are One—What?

by Dr. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder

Can’t understand
Why we treat each other in this way
Taking up time
With the silly silly games we play
We’ve got our love
And no matter how it’s said or done
We are one no matter what we do
We are one love will see us through
We are one and that’s the way it is
We’ve got our love
Why we treat each other in this way
With the silly silly games we play

“We Are One”—Frankie Beverly and Maze

It might seem peculiar to begin this study quoting an R and B artist. Yet, I seize any opportunity to place pop culture in the same room with the Bible. They make good conversation partners. Music from the hands of Bono, Jill Scott, Johnnie Cash, Prince, and Taylor Swift to name a few has spiritual and biblical underpinnings whether intended or not. It is intriguing how a book that is two millennia and counting gets recontextualized and reinterpreted time and time again. I do not aver that Frankie Beverly and Maze had the Gospel of John in mind. Nonetheless, as a biblical scholar and fan of the group, I dare to enter both spaces. Come journey with me.

Frankie Beverly employs the word “one” throughout the refrain of the song. It is most compelling that whereas the chorus and title hinge on this three-letter word, the composer does not answer an implied query. The song maintains “we are one.” Yet, it does not say what comprises our oneness. We are one—race? We are one—voice? We are one—matter? We are one—spirit?

Beverly establishes a polarization. Despite how we treat each other, we are one. Regardless of the games we play, we are one. Notwithstanding our words or deeds, we are one. There is a binary setting, an antipodal action-versus-existence that is the basis of unity. The Gospel of John presents this same degree of dual friction.

The Johannine author begins the Gospel with a piercing prologue (John 1:1-18). Perhaps it was a hymn, a poem or some creed common in the writer’s late first century context. Wherever you cast your interpretive lot, it is clear that this introduction sets up an us-versus-them match. There is light-versus-darkness (v.5); the will of the flesh-versus-the will of God (v.13); and grace/truth-versus-law/falseness (v. 17). Yet, the overarching duality is the presentation of such variables through Jesus who comes out of the world and “into the world...yet the world did not know him (v.10).” It is this contextual conundrum and theological two-ness that shapes the entire Gospel.

Thus in chapter 17 as Jesus prays for himself (vss.1-8) and the disciples (vss.9-19), he pleads on behalf of persons yet to believe (vss. 20-26). Such people live in a world that hates the disciples (v.14). It is this world where the evil one takes up residence (v.15). Here the writer repositions this us-vs-them binary. Therefore, even before or as individuals come to know Jesus via the disciples, He prays for their unity. Because they are already outnumbered by dualistic, divisive, demonic forces, “may they become completely one (v.23).”

The writer of John’s Gospel like Beverly neglects to define the nature of this oneness. Yes, newfound believers are to be one with Jesus as He is in God and God is in Him. The converted-to-come are to reflect the glory of God as given to Jesus (v.22). However, beyond this divine embodiment, John leaves the reader...well...hangin’. “That they may all be one”—what? “That they may become completely one”—what? Sorry, John, but the word “completely,” whereas as adding strong adverbially emphasis, fails to resolve the character of this unity.

In what ways are they, are we to be one? We are one—what? I dare to answer because it seems that any response could yield discord and dissension. It would divide more than unite. To say we are one people could overlook the beauty of our various races, ethnicities, and cultures. To say we are one voice risks silencing persons on the margins who must shout or get shot to be heard. To say we are one denomination lulls us into thinking that any disagreement is un-Christian or un-Stone-Campbell-like. Perhaps the core proposition is not that we are one—one something or one anything. It is not the what-ness of our oneness, but the when-ness of our oneness that should be proclaimed. The question is not, we are one—what? It is more so we are one—when? We are one when we march for equal pay for women and men. We are one when we set the captive free, heal the brokenhearted, loose the chains of injustice, and break every yoke.

The writer of the Gospel of John planted. Frankie Beverly watered. May God give us the increase as we journey towards what it means to be one in this day, at this time.

For Contemplation:
Sit quietly and become one with your own breathing.

Read two different versions of the Gospel of John—chapter 17.

For Discussion:
What is troubling about John 17? What is comforting?
What does it mean to be “one”?
What is the duality in John 17?
Can oneness, unity exist when there is polarization? Why or why not?
What are ways in which people can never be “one”?
Is your personal focus on the “what-ness” or the “when-ness” of being one? Expound.

As a result of this study, I will__________________

For Inspiration:
1. Listen to “We Are One” by Frankie Beverly and Maze.