

Echoes of John 17 in Nicaea: A Paradigm for Wider Ecumenism and Dialogue

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Abstract:

This article re-reads John 17:1-26 with a focus on the theme of oneness within and beyond the narrative framework. The Nicæan Creed is brought into a dialogue with John 17 to illuminate both the texts. A multi-layered and polyvalent analysis of John's text reveals that the theme of oneness holds the prayer together to suggest a new way forward for the Johannine community. The vision and the mission expressed in the prayer align with the thought patterns of the Nicæan Creed to foreground its message for ecumenical brainstorming and theological conceptualization. The interactions and the resultant wider perichōrētic relationships within both John 17 and the Nicæan Creed point out some of the significant truths related to ecumenism, dialogue, and unity. The article has nine major sub-sections: while the first sub-section introduces the theme and the task of the paper, the second sub-section looks at the theme of oneness in John 17 in relation to the Nicæan Creed; the sub-sections from three to seven analyze John 17 in correspondence with the Nicæan Creed; and while the eighth sub-section suggests some implications in the contemporary context, the last sub-section brings out some concluding remarks.

Key Words:

Gospel of John, Nicæan Creed, ecumenism, dialogue, unity, *homoousios*, *perichōrēsis*

Introduction

This paper re-reads John 17:1–26 in the light of the Nicæan Creed with a focus on the theme of oneness. A multilayered and polyvalent analysis of the text reveals that the theme of oneness holds the prayer together to suggest a significant way forward for the Johannine community. The vision and the mission expressed in the prayer align the thought patterns of Jesus, the narrator, and the Johannine community to convey some significant truths related to unity. The interactions and the resultant wider perichōrētic relationships within the text and beyond it communicate some principles related to dialogue and ecumenism. The incorporation of the ideas of oneness within both the Fourth Gospel and the Nicæan Creed illuminates the texts to suggest new paradigms. The Nicæan Creed and the affirmation of unity between the Father and the Son can be reinterpreted in the light of John's understanding of oneness and ecumenical bonding. The contemporary church can derive several ideas from John 17 and the Nicæan Creed to facilitate a paradigmatic model in her role and function in the extended world. We shall explore some of the principles underlie the Johannine and the Nicæan frameworks to develop practical implications in the contemporary context. A Johannine-Nicæan model can be considered as a paradigm in our ecumenical journey over against the prevailing exclusive and parochial approaches to ecumenism. The task of the article is threefold: understanding the theme of oneness in John 17; exploring the possibilities of integration between John 17 and the Nicæan Creed to illuminate each other; and developing a paradigm out of a correspondence between the texts to suggest some practical lessons to the contemporary church and the society.

Oneness in John 17 in relation to Council of Nicaea (325 CE)

John 17 has some of the key expressions indicating the oneness theme of the Fourth Gospel (Carson 2018:197-236). The narrator uses some of the significant expressions to develop the theme with focus. This aspect of oneness was further discussed in the first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 CE (Giulea 2024:133-171). McGuckin says, “The mysterious harmony of the Logos and the Father is fully understood only when one confesses the coequality of the Father and the Son. That means not simply sharing a similar status of being, or even sharing a same level of power in being, but more precisely the Son sharing the self-same being of the Father (Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus)” (McGuckin 2009:2). At the outset of Jesus’s prayer, the glorification aspect is presented as the Father glorifies the Son and in turn the Son brings glory to the Father (v. 1b). The theme of glory is overarching as it establishes the oneness between the Father and the Son. The Father-Son interaction and association is at the center of all the expressions stated until 17:10. In John 17:10, a dynamic oneness interaction between the Father and the Son is once again discussed (Moule 2007:72-78). In John 17:11, through the narrative expression “they may be one, as we are one,” the paradigmatic role of the Father-Son relationship is clearly stated as a model for the world. Byers states that “the term ‘one’ is a means of group identity construction correlating the Johannine disciples with the ‘one’ God of Israel” (Byers 2017:107). This aspect of group identity and correlation is at the root of the Johannine discussion. As the Johannine narrator affirms the Father-Son relationship and the Father-Son and *Paraklētos* unity in concrete terms, the Trinitarian and Christological beliefs propounded by the Nicaean Council in 325 CE establishes a foundation for subsequent Christian thought (Ayes 2004:11). While the Nicaean Council in 325 CE affirmed the oneness between the Father and the Son, the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE brought the Trinitarian discussions into a fulfilling shape. But, the Johannine Farewell Discourses in chapters 13-17 lay strong foundations for such a Trinitarian, Christological, and Pneumatological discussions.

In John 17:11, the expression *hen* (one) is used with an emphasis on “they may be *one*, as we [Father and Son] are *one*” (Byers 2017:106).¹ In this context, the idea of oneness in Jesus’s prayer goes in closer relationship with his discourse in John 10:30 and 15:1-5 (Byers 2017:106). The expression *hen* is again used in 17:21a: “that they may all be *one*. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (Moule 2007:164-170). In John 17:22, the narrator further uses the construction *hōsin hen kathōs hōmeis hen*, meaning “they may be one, as we are one” (Blum 2010:331-332). In John 17:23, the expression *hōsin teteleiōmenoi eis hen*, means “they may become completely one,” is once again stated within the prayer of Jesus (Moule 2007:171-177). All these together confirm the reader that oneness aspect is one of the primary concerns of the narrator. The Nicaean and the Constantinopolitan concept *homoousios* derived from the Greek expressions such as *homo* (same or identical) and *ousia* (being or essence) is in correspondence with the Johannine understanding of *hen* (oneness; see Bethune-Baker 2004:1-2). This conceptual framework runs from the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* to the Johannine community (*Sitz im Leben Kirche*) understanding and from the *Sitz im Leben Kirche* to the Nicaean understanding of oneness and unity (see Giulea 2024:133-171).

There is a gradual development of thought patterns in John 17 by way of using the explicit and implicit connotations of *hen* as follows: first, a dynamic oneness relationship

¹ Byers says, “Oneness in John portrays the divine identity as somehow interlinked with ecclesiology, and conversely, the oneness language expressing ecclesiology in this Gospel is always grounded in the oneness of divine identity.”

between the Father and the Son was already in existence and that dialogical interaction was considered basis for all other community fellowships (v. 10; Blum 2010:331-332; Moule 2007:72-78); second, as the Father and the Son are in oneness, the same is standard for the believers to adopt in their interpersonal and community relationships (v. 11; Blum 2010:332); third, the believers' oneness relationship should be aligned within the foundational Father-Son oneness fellowship (v. 21a; Moule 2007:164-170);² and fourth, the oneness relationship among the believers in the world remains open for a wider fellowship so that the Father-Son-Believers fellowship may grow further for a universal integration (Moule 2007:171-177). Byers states that "Though 'one' is recognized as some sort of expression of Father-Son unity in 10:30, readers of the Gospel regularly understand 'one' in John 17 as a call to social harmony among believers" (Byers 2017:106). As stated above, the oneness fellowship expressed in John 17 is envisioned as wider and inclusive, universal in scope, heaven and earth interactional, eternal in duration, and transformative in praxis. This basic ideological framework is explicit within the Nicaean Creed as it uses the explicit expressions such as *hena theon patera pantokratora* (one God the Father Almighty), *hena Kurion Iēsoun Christon ton huion tou theou ton monogenē* (one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God), *mian hagian katholikēn kai apostolikēn ekklēsiān* (one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church), and *hen baptisma* (one Baptism).³ The Creed also has some implicit expressions connecting to the theme of oneness (McGuckin 2009:2).

Father and Son relationship

In a context in which *Arianism* (Gk. *Areianismos*, referred by Gregory of Nazianzus) was spreading in the Alexandrian church and across the globe, Arius argued that Christ is not divine but a created being (see Brennecke 2014:1-3). While Arius propagated a superior and inferior dichotomy between the Father and the Son, the Johannine expressions like glory and glorification suggest how the Father and the Son share divine faculties. As a first layer, John 17:1-5 builds a paradigm for wider Christian unity. In the prayer of Jesus, he states that his hour in the world has come so that the Son may be glorified by the Father (Bauckham 2015:58, 43-62).⁴ The glorification of the Father in heaven is well aligned with the glorification of the Son in the world (17:1b, 22, 24; see Loader 2017:107). As the glory of the Father and the Son is one and same, overshadowing of the divine glory both in the heavenly and in the earthly realms is in the view (Adams 2020:163-200). The corresponding relationship between the Father and the Son is expressed through the phrases like *doxason sou ton huion* (glorify your [Father's] Son) and *ho huios doxasē se* (the Son may glorify you [Father]). This correspondence is further expressed through the expression *homoousion tō patri* (one substance with the Father) in the Nicaean Creed (Ortiz and Keating 2024:74-102). The flourishing of the divine glory is possible only when the Father-Son oneness is established (Akala 2014:109-117). Jesus's filial identity and agency language are recapitulated by Köstenberger and Swain (2008:58) to show the Father-Son interaction:

² "Oneness is the building up of the believers (Eph 4:4, 16). Such oneness is genuine and intrinsic." See <https://livingtohim.com/2014/09/three-aspects-of-oneness-in-john-17-1-oneness-in-the-fathers-name-by-the-eternal-life/>, accessed on 10 December 2021.

³ The derivatives of 'one' like 'hen,' 'hena,' and 'mian' (feminine for 'hena') are used in the Nicaean Creed. See https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/nicene_creed.htm, accessed on 2 October 2024.

⁴ Bauckham states that, "The whole Gospel story moves toward what it calls 'Jesus's hour.' By this, John seems to mean the complex of events that occur in chapters 12-20 (i.e., the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus). This is the hour of Jesus's exaltation, when he is exalted on the cross in order to be exalted to heaven."

Jesus himself is the referent of *theos* in 1:1, 18 and 20:28. He is called the ‘Son of God’ in 1:49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; and 20:31 (and possibly 1:34; his claim is disputed in 19:7). Other Christological titles involving reference to *theos* are ‘Lamb of God’ (1:29, 36); ‘Chosen or Holy One of God’ (1:34 variant; 6:69); and ‘bread of God’ (6:33).

In the world, the Father gave authority to the Son so that he can provide eternal life to those who are given unto him (17:2). Jesus is sent with authority to execute the heavenly mission in the world (17:3, 8b, 18, 21, 23, 25; Adams 2020:163-200). The Son glorified the Father by way of doing the heavenly work and also accomplishing it in the world (17:4-5; Köstenberger and Swain 2008:165-186). The narrator explicitly states about the unity between the Father and the Son in glorification and mutual engagement. The Nicaean Creed affirms that Jesus is *phōs ek phōtos* (light from light), *theon alēthinon ek theou alēthinou* (true God from true God), and *gennēthenta ou poiēthenta* (begotten not made). While Arius proposed Jesus’ createdness, the Nicaean Creed affirms that Jesus was an extension of God from heavens to fulfill the mission in the world (Jackson 2007:29-44). The Johannine expressions attributed to Jesus like light, truth, and begotten are part and parcel of the Nicaean Creed (Micks 2005:33-42).

The Son revealed the Father in the world and the Father in turn gave him the disciples out of the world (17:6, 26). Everything given to the Son comes from the Father (17:7, 9, 24). The Son gives the words of the Father to the world (vv. 8a, 14) and prays for their protection (v. 15; Kim 2017:53-58). The people of the world believed that Jesus came from the Father (v. 8b; Akala 2014:109-117). The understanding that the Father and the Son are in corresponding relationship through *homoousios* was discussed in the Nicaean Council. That means, the Johannine narrator emphasizes that whatever belong to the Father belong also to the Son, and whatever belong to the Son belong to the Father (v. 10a; Blum 2010:131-132; see Kroll 2012:1). In the light of the Nicaean Creed, Holcomb says, “It is like light. How can you separate light from light? You cannot. Neither can the Father and the Son be separated” (Holcomb 2014:37). As the Son came from the Father and returning back to the Father, he is no longer going to be accessible in the world (v. 11, 22, 23; Köstenberger and Swain 2008:149-164). Moreover, the name that the Son holds is Father’s possession (vv. 11-12). As the Father’s love remains in the Son (vv. 23b, 24, 26), the Father and the Son are able to indwell mutually (v. 21; Köstenberger and Swain 2008:165-186). This love relationship between the Father and the Son was established even before the creation of the world (vv. 5, 24). As Jesus knows the Father (v. 25), he is obedient to his will (Kim 2017:53-58). The oneness relationship, mutual indwelling, and heavenly-and-earthly interaction between the Father and the Son are clearly stated through the prayer. While on the one hand the oneness of the Father and the Son is at the center of both the Fourth Gospel and the Nicaean Creed, on the other hand the preminent Christology of John (1:1-5; cf. Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-3) is reflected in the Nicaean Creed as follows: *dia hou ta panta egeneto* (through whom all things came into existence; cf. John 1:3). Thus, we notice that several of the expressions in the Creed are directly connected to the Fourth Gospel.

Son and believing community relationship

The communion between the Son and the believers is yet another layer of oneness embedded within the framework of John 17 (Hera 2013:123-140). As the relationship between Jesus and the believing community is explicit within the framework of Jesus’ prayer in John 17, the

ecumenical community of God is explicit in the Nicæan Creed through the following expressions: *pisteuomen* (we believe), *homologoumen* (we confess), and *prosdokōmen* (we look for). These expressions in the Creed demonstrate the communitarian outlook of the Nicæan Council (Jackson 2007:9-14). The Father granted authority to the Son over all people and as a response the Son lavishes eternal life to all those who believe in him (vv. 2-3; Blum 2010:331). Jesus revealed God's glory among the people in order to complete the heavenly work (vv. 4, 6a). The works of Jesus are instrumental for the people to obey the message of salvation (v. 7; Gifford 2011:52-53). Through their obedience the believers are transformed to know that Jesus came from the Father (vv. 7, 8b; Blum 2010:331). Thus, Christology and discipleship are integrally aligned within Jesus's prayer (Gifford 2011:51-52; Hera 2013:123-138). As the community of God is integrally connected to Christ, the extension of Christ's unity with the community is based on the unity between the Father and the Son. The aspect of salvation through Christ is reflected throughout the Nicæan Creed. Hera comments: "Jesus gives a positive assessment of the disciples. However, he does not describe their response to his revelation as the result of their achievement. The reason for their acceptance, knowledge, and faith lies not in their effort but by the initiatives of Jesus: it is because (*hōti*) he has given them the words that were given to him by the Father (*hōti ta rhēmata ha edōkas moi dedōka autois*)" (Hera 2013:138). On the one hand, Jesus provides the believers the words that the Father gave him, and on the other hand, the believers wholeheartedly accept him and his words (v. 8a). The ecumenical relationship that the community of God declared through the Nicæan Creed is rooted in the connectivity between the believing community of God irrespective of their various backgrounds and the bonding love of Jesus.

While Jesus prays for the community of believers (v. 9), they together stand as a means of divine glory in the world (v. 10). Ecumenism as a means of divine glory is demonstrated through the unity of the church communities from the time of the Nicæan Council and even before. In the contemporary context, the ecumenical initiatives among the various church communities show the divine witness in the world.⁵ When Jesus is about to depart them, he makes sure that Father's protection is upon them (v. 11; Blum 2010:331-332). The virtue of oneness among the believing community is based on the paradigmatic unity of the Son with his Father (v. 11b; Beasley-Murray 1999:298-299). The believing community shall be protected in the world through the power of the name Father gave to the Son (vv. 11, 12, 15; Blum 2010:332). Thus, the relationship between Jesus and the believing community establishes a wider *perichōrētic* unity (Lampe 1961:1077; Torrance 1966:102; Lawler 1995:49).⁶ Moreover, the *homoousios* is extended even to the level of the community of God. The Christian churches, organizations and associations in the contemporary context can take the message of Christ and

⁵ Even before the Nicæan Council, the idea of organization of the Christian community was initiated during the apostolic and sub-apostolic ages. But the Nicæan Council contributed much in the stabilization of community organization. See Daniélou 1964:339-356.

⁶ *Perichōrēsis* derives from the Greek noun *chōra*, meaning 'space' or 'room,' and from the verb *chōrein*, which can be translated as 'to contain,' 'to make room,' or 'to go forward,' with the added idea of reciprocity introduced by the particle 'peri.' Lampe translates *perichōreō* as 'encompass,' 'alternate by revolution,' or 'pass into reciprocally.' "It indicates a sort of mutual containing or enveloping of realities, which we also speak of as co-inherence or co-indwelling." It is "the dynamic process of making room for another around oneself." This Greek term is used to describe the eternal mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity which also means that "all three persons occupy the same divine 'space.'" In the current article, the *perichōrētic* union is conceived in a broader sense as the Father, Son, *Paraklētos*, Believers, and the World outside are brought to the focus.

community relationship in their ecumenical witness in the world. For that, the messages of John 17 and Nicaean deliberations are significant foundations (Jackson 2007:9-14).

Furthermore, Jesus's prayer is that the believers might enjoy the full measure of heavenly joy among themselves (v. 13; Beasley-Murray 1999:299-300). This aspect of joyfulness is significantly at work in the modern ecumenical initiatives. In that process, the Nicaean Council played a significant role. As John says, the disciples possess the word of God and continue believing in Jesus and they are a sanctified group set apart from the rest of the world (vv. 14, 16, 17, 19; Beasley-Murray 1999:300-301). While Arius and his followers were drifting away from the word of God, the community of God considered that the word of God as a valuable treasure for their life and sustenance (Williams 1987/2001:29-47). Richey says, "Jesus wants all believers to live sanctified or holy lives as God is holy (Lev 19:2; John 17:17) . . . The lives of the believers are to reveal Jesus's character, love, and presence to the world (John 17:10) . . . Jesus wants us to be joyful (see John 15:11; 16:24, 33; 17:13). The key to joy is living in an intimate relationship with Jesus, the source of all joy (John 15)" (Richey 2012:70). After preparing them for mission, Jesus sends them into the world just as he was sent by the Father (v. 18; Beasley-Murray 1999:300-301). Through ecumenical unity, the church exemplifies a Christ-centered solidarity in the world. This spirit of unity and joyfulness is one of the significant contributions of the Nicaean Council. The church is called to witness the mission of sanctification through her oneness with Christ to lead the world an abode of divine virtues.

The expression in the Nicaean Creed *sotērian katelthonta ek tōn ouranōn* (for our salvation he came down from heaven) shows Jesus' salvific initiative in the world. In that sense, both in the Johannine narrative and in the Nicaean Creed the unity between the Jesus and the believing community in the world is emphasized. The believers are entrusted the task of mission so that they may witness the heavenly truth among the unbelievers (v. 20; Bolsinger 2019:342).⁷ Jesus envisions peace and harmony in the world through the witnessing initiative of the believers (v. 21; Beasley-Murray 1999: 302; Gifford 2011:52-53).⁸ He shares the heavenly glory among them so that they may actualize the reality of oneness in the world (v. 22; Matson 2002:98). A complete unity of the believers and the future believers is the master plan of Jesus (v. 23; Gifford 2011:52; Matson 2002:98). John 17:24-26 emphasizes the love relationship between the Father and the Son and its impact upon the believers (Richey 2012:70). In sum, the first layer of unity between the Father and the Son lies at the root of the second layer of unity between the Son and the believing community. The Church in the contemporary context is encouraged to engage in a Christ-centered ecumenism, unity, witness, and extension of love so that the salvific plan of God may be fulfilled. As the theme of salvation is at the center of both John 17 and the Nicaean Creed, the *ekklēsia* of God is expected to spread the message of salvation, liberation and transformation.

Father and believing community relationship

As a third layer of unity, the narrator foregrounds the Father and the believing community relationship. The prayer is addressed to the Father in heaven on behalf of the believers (v. 1). The

⁷ According to Bolsinger, "In John 17, Jesus pushes the theme of embodiment and unity even further than the spiritual unity of his followers with him. Indeed, the very purpose of the life-conforming spiritual unity is not conformity for conformity's sake, but for the sake of mission and witness."

⁸ Beasley-Murray comments that "the unity of Christian believers . . . is more radical and fundamental: it is rooted in the being of God, revealed in Christ, and in the redemptive action of God in Christ."

Son takes initiative to make a connection between the Father and the believing people (vv. 4-5, 6a; Veiss and Hunt 2021:164).⁹ In the Nicæan Creed, the initial statement progresses as follows: *pisteuomen eis hena theon patera pantokratora poiētēn ouranou kai gēs horatōn te pantōn kai aoratōn* (We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible). The believing relationship of the church community with God the Father is stated right at the outset of the Creed (Oden and Bray 2009:1-110). The Father gives authority to the Son over the people (v. 2a) and also he expects they receive eternal life (v. 2b; Whitacre 1999:403-406). By definition, eternal life enables people to know that Father is the only true God (v. 3; Whitacre 1999:403-406). The believers belong to the Father; hence they are given to the Son (v. 10). They know that everything came to them including the words are from the Father (vv. 6b, 7, 8a, 14a). The ecumenical *ekklēsia* is connected to God the Creator as they are Christ's body. This very reality is explicitly stated both in John's Gospel and in the Nicæan Creed as Jesus appears as the begotten Son of God, light from light, and true God from true God (see Suerte Felipe 2013:36).

As Jesus is the only mediator between God and the world, the people of God are connected to God through the means of the Son. As the relationship between God and the world is emphasized through the expression "God so loved the world, that he gave" (John 3:16), the Nicæan Creed also affirms the same relationship in the first few clauses of it (Green 2001:17-23). The believers realized that Jesus is a heavenly representative sent from the presence of the Father (vv. 8b, 9; Whitacre 1999:408-413). The Father is able to protect the believing community through his very name (vv. 11a, 12a; Veiss and Hunt 2021:166). Van der Watt states, "Through them [the believers] the presence and love of God should reach the world. This whole process will be guided by the Father's love (17:23, 26)" (Van der Watt 2019:219). As the Father remains in unity with the Son, he wishes the believers remain in unity among themselves (v. 11b; Beutler 2013: 434). In John 17, the theology proper is well conceived in relation to discipleship and a *perichōrētic* unity between the Father and the believing community. This is the divine *homoousios* that is integrally connected to the believing community (Dünzl 2007:3-20).

The believers are protected by the Father while they remain in the world (v. 15; Beutler 2013:434-437). As they are the Father's gift to the Son, they believe and obey the Father-Son unity (vv. 16, 25; Beutler 2013:439). In turn, the Father sanctifies them by the truth (v. 17; Veiss and Hunt 2021:166). Just as the Father sent the Son into the world, the Son sends the believers into the world (vv. 18, 21b, 23; Beutler 2013:437). Father is not only concerned of the existing believers but also of those who are about to be transformed in the future (v. 20; Williams 2011:145). As the Johannine Jesus reveals his descending and ascending motif to save the world, the Nicæan Creed mentions that the Son descends from the Father, ascends back to the heavens, and sits at the right hand of the Father. As the mission of Jesus is both present- and future-oriented and the Nicæan Creed intended to solve the present crisis of the church and mentioned about Jesus's coming again to the world, the presence of Jesus with the Father in heaven is for the glorification and sanctification of God's name in the world. The Father's vision about an open-ended mission is obvious here. While involved in the *missio Dei*, the believers can model the Father-Son unity among themselves (v. 21, 23). The Son gave them the glory of the Father so that they may be one as Father and Son are one (v. 22, 23; Van der Watt 2019:219-220). Veiss

⁹ Suzana Dobric Veiss and Elizabeth K. Hunt comment: "In John 17 glory appears as a significant theme as displaying/acknowledging perfected character (John 17:5; 17:22); open approval of God (17:1); lifted to a position of authority (17:1; 17:22; 17:24); honoring another by words, actions, and thoughts (John 17:1; 17:4; 17:10); and heaven (implied), a place, Jesus's dwelling (John 17:24)."

and Hunt say, “Jesus calls for unity between Jesus and the Father, the disciples, Jesus, and the Father, and finally between all the believers. Unity may be viewed as centered around the mission and vision of the organization” (Veiss and Hunt 2021:168). The believing community can conceive a complete measure of unity only when they know the Father-Son unity (vv. 23, 26a; see Dünzl 2007:11-20).

The Nicaean Creed states that through the witnessing, sanctifying, and unifying mission of Jesus, he makes the name of God known among the disciples. The Father loved the believers as he loved the Son (vv. 23b, 26b; Williams 2011:146). As the Son returns back to the abode of the Father, the believers are prepared to hope for the same destination in the future. In that sense, the unity of the Father, the Son, and the believers might come to an eternal reality (v. 24; Williams 2011:146). The narrator of John 17 envisions a paradigmatic relationship between the Father and the believing community through the medium of the Son. This is further reflected in the Nicaean Creed. Such an idea is at the root of the Creed and hence of the whole enterprise of ecumenism.

Relationship among the believing community

The fourth layer of unity develops among the believing community. They experience eternal life among themselves and that enables them to be united under Jesus (v. 2; Moloney 1998:461). The believers know the only true God and perceive that Jesus comes from the Father (v. 8b; Moloney 1998:462). When they realize the unity between the Father and the Son, they understand the necessity to maintain unity among themselves (vv. 3, 6, 8; Moloney 1998:461). The believers exist in the world to exemplify cordiality and fellowship (v. 4; Beutler 2013:429). When the community of God confess the Nicaean Creed, they affirm the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they accept the fact that the unity of the Triune God is a paradigm for them to function in the world as a united community (Anatolios 2011:235-240). Culpepper comments, “The unity of the church is based on its common origin, at the cross. Ultimately, however, John insists that the unity of believers is rooted in Jesus’s oneness with the Father, so that just as Jesus was one with the Father, ‘his own’ will find their unity through their unity with him” (Culpepper 2021:72). They know that the Father gave everything including the words of eternal life to Jesus (vv. 7, 8a; Moloney 1998:462). As the words of the Father incarnated in the person and work of Jesus, the ecumenical body of Christ can exemplify the divine voices and actions through her involvements in the world.

When they remain in the unity formed out of the Father-Son communion, they are saved (v. 9; Beutler 2013:432-433). The Father and Son relationship develops into a glorious position when the believers remain united in the world (v. 10a). That means, the heavenly glory is manifested in the world through the unity of the believers (v. 10b; Moloney 1998:466). Armstrong says that, “Jesus’ prayer for relational unity simply means he is praying that all his followers will live as he lived. In particular, his prayer points to his personal relationship with the Father” (Armstrong 2010:44). When the disciples remain united in the world, the Father’s protection is assured for them (vv. 11, 12a; Muthiah 2009:chapter 2). The Father-Son unity is a paradigm for them in the world so that “they may be one as we [Father-Son] are one” (v. 11c; Muthiah 2009:chapter 2). Here lies the crux of the modern ecumenical movement. The first-person plural expressions in the Nicaean Creed (i.e., ‘we believe,’ ‘us people,’ ‘for us,’ ‘we confess,’ and ‘we look forward’) give us a clue concerning the ecumenical spirit of the Christian communities in the Fourth Century CE and their corporate confessions and actions.

The believers can enjoy the full measure of Jesus's joy when they are united together (v. 13b; Moloney 1998:468). While they live in the world, they have the word of the Father as a protection (vv. 14a, 15). As Jesus is not of the world, the believers through their faith and obedience can enjoy the favors and blessings from above (vv. 14b, 16; Beasley-Murray 1999:299-300). They are not only protected in the world but also sanctified by the truth (vv. 17, 19; Beasley-Murray 1999:300). As the Nicaean Creed emphasizes, church unity is not something that is achieved by human efforts but it is a divine-human enterprise. As the Father sent Jesus into the world, Jesus sends them into the world. By remaining in the Father-Son unity, the believers can involve in the mission of God (v. 18; Thomaskutty 2020:77-96). Moloney comments, "As Jesus's association with the Father determined his life, the disciples' association with Jesus, who has revealed the truth to them, determines theirs. They are to make God known in the world" (Moloney 1998:469). The believing community is assigned to make the Father-Son unity known in the world through their fellowship, solidarity and togetherness (v. 20; Moloney 1998:472-473). They witness the truth of God and demonstrate the Father-Son unity in the world so that others can be brought to that unity (v. 20; Mosher and Marshall 2015:160). The mystical union between the Father and the Son can be exemplified through believers' togetherness in the world (v. 21; Van der Watt 2019:219-220). The glory of God/Jesus can be reflected in the world only through the lifestyle of the believing community (v. 22; Mosher and Marshall 2015:160). Goyret comments that, "A good sign of our times is the increasing number of Christians, of various denominations and confessions of faith, who appreciate ever more deeply that disunity cannot be accepted as the status quo" (Goyret 2022:1; cf. Paul II 1995:1). When the believers embrace the Father-Son unity, they enter into a complete oneness based on the principle of love (v. 23; Culpepper 2021:71). Jesus envisions a glorious relationship among the believers in order to introduce a transformed human culture (vv. 24-25).

Father-Son-believers and world relationship

The fifth layer of unity in the prayer is narrated between the Father-Son-believers and the world outside. The oneness of the Father-Son-believers is described not simply as a closed-ended and exclusive entity but as an open-ended and inclusive one where an entrance is widely open toward the unbelieving world (Okure 1998:1566-1568). Similarly, the universal scope of God's mission is obvious in the following expressions of the Nicaean Creed: God is 'maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible' (*poiētēn ouranou kai gēs horatōn te pantōn kai aoratōn*); and Son 'through whom all things came into existence' (*dia hou ta panta egeneto*). As both the Father and the Son together created the universe, the church has a significant responsibility to the world. With that inclusive intention the Father gave authority to the Son over *all flesh* (*pasēs sarkos*, v. 2a) although the eternal life is shared only with those who believe (v. 2b; Beasley-Murray 1998:296). Beasley-Murray (1998:296) comments,

The glory of the Father and the Son is expressed in the bestowal of eternal life upon humankind. The authority of the Son to convey this gift is inherent in his position as Mediator of the saving sovereignty (cf. 5:21-27), and by his exaltation as Lord of the kingdom it extends to "all flesh." The redemption of Christ is universal in scope (cf. 3:16; 12:31-32).

Though Jesus completed the work of God in the world and the mission of God is universal, the people of the world are divided into those who believe and those who do not believe (v. 4; Dockery 2008:47). In vv. 6-19, Jesus focuses on the believing as they received the grace of God and transformed themselves in the union of the Father-Son (Blomberg 2001:220). But those who are not transformed remain as enemies of God. They can believe in Jesus and enter into the unity proclaimed by him. Jesus revealed the heavenly glory to those whom the Father gave him out of the world (v. 6a). In the world, there is a conflicting situation exists between those who believe and put their obedience in Jesus and those who unbelieve and remain in disobedience (vv. 6b, 7, 8; Blomberg 2001:220). The Nicaean Council emphasized not simply a unity that restricts within the Christian boundary but that a unity which extends beyond the *ekklēsia* and hence it was concerned of the world outside.

Jesus prays for the protection of the believing community from the evil one (v. 15; Blomberg 2001:222). As the Father sent the Son into the world to transform it, the Son sends the believing to transform the rest of the world (v. 18; Beasley-Murray 1999:300-301). The believers are instrumental in liberating the unbelieving [people] through the eternal message of God (v. 20). Jesus envisions oneness of the believing and the unbelieving in the world (see Fuglisi 1999:22). That becomes a reality only when the believing community engages in witnessing the unity of the Father-Son and the unbelieving people accept the oneness of God (v. 21; Rausch 2005:219). As the Nicaean Creed emphasizes the universality of God's mission, the church is expected to take part in the mission with a wider ecumenical vision in the world. Jesus's mission agenda comes to a circle in the following ways: unity among the believing community in the world; extension of unity between the believing and the unbelieving through open-ended relationships; expansion of the Father-Son-Believers unity to the unbelievers for wider collaboration; and integration of the "from above" ideology in the world "from below" for transformation and liberation (vv. 22-23; Dockery 2008:47). The principle of love lies at the center of the unity established by the attempts of Jesus in the world (vv. 23, 26). Okure comments that, "The united presence of the disciples in the world is a convincing sign that God sent Jesus (v. 23). Conversely, their division puts in question the divine origin of his mission" (Okure 1998:1567). Jesus reveals the name of the Father in the world through his words and deeds and also through the witnessing of the believers (v. 26; Beasley-Murray 1999:304-305). The Father-Son-Believers oneness remains open-ended so that the world can embrace and be part of it. This aspect of John 17 is well-aligned within the framework of the Nicaean Creed.

Oneness in John 17 and Nicaea 325 CE as a paradigm

We could see that the five layers of unity developed in John 17—between Father and Son, Son and Believers, Father and Believers, among Believers, and Father-Son-Believers and world—can be perceived in closer relationship with the Nicaean Creed. Moreover, the role and function of the Holy Spirit inscribed in John's Gospel and in the Nicaean Creed can form an overarching layer within the paradigm (Moule 1978/2000:43-52). John 17 has to be analyzed in connection with the rest of the Farewell Discourses (chapters 13-16). The wider unity described in Jesus's prayer makes more sense when it is related to the *Paraklētos* (John 14:15-17; 14:26; 15:26-27; and 16:12-15; Thomaskutty 2020:97-110). While in the Greco-Roman context *Paraklētos* was considered as a "helper in court" or "one who is summoned" as part of the judicial system, in John the "indwelling" of the *Paraklētos* and her/his oneness with Father-Son-Believers is in the view (Ashton 1992:5:152). When Jesus departs the world, the disciples need not be paralyzed by

sadness as *Paraklētos* would help them to realize the presence of Christ (Schnackenburg 1980:3:126). The word used with *Paraklētos* is not *heteron* but *allon* (14:16).¹⁰ The ‘another’ should not be taken as different in substance but of same kind (Carson 2018:50). The Nicaean Creedal expression *homoousios* can be better understood in relation to the Trinitarian unity.

In the Nicaean Creed, the Holy Spirit is presented mostly in Johannine idiom: ‘the Lord and life-giver’ (*to kurion kai zōopoion*); ‘who proceeds from the Father’ (*to ek tou patros ekporeuomenon*); and ‘who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified’ (*to sun patri kai huio sumproskuvoumenon kai sundoxadzomenon*). In John 17 and in the Nicaean Creed, the Father-Son-Holy Spirit unity is affirmed in relation to the believing community and to the world at large. This is further clarified in the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE (Burns and Fagin 2002:90-154). Both in John and in the Nicaean Creed, the Holy Spirit proceeds not as a different entity; but as a person of the trinity sharing the same substance (Witherington 1995:251). F. F. Bruce calls this “another *Paraklēte*” as Jesus’s *Alter Ego* who is to be with the disciples permanently (Bruce 1983:302). The *Paraklētos* is also considered as *Christomorph*, a person who perpetuates Jesus’s mission on earth (Hoeck 2012:27-28). In other words, *Paraklēte* mirrors Jesus’s earthly mission by guiding the disciples in the way of truth in a hostile situation (Thomaskutty 2020:104-105). The *Paraklētos* functions in complete oneness with the Father-Son-Believers unity.

The Father-Son-*Paraklētos*-Believers unity formed in the world is a paradigmatic oneness open toward the wider realities of the world for conversation and dialogue. The inclusive mission of Christianity takes into account the following two aspects: witnessing Christ; and witnessing the pathos of the world (Augsburger 1971). The Johannine community developed an understanding of unity that bridges the ideologies of the world “from above” and the world “from below” and extended its invitation toward the wider world to embrace the Father-Son-*Paraklētos*-Believers oneness (Doohan 1988:174). This Trinitarian understanding of the Fourth Gospel is further expanded in the Nicaean and the Constantinopolitan councils. The open-ended unity experienced in the Johannine community context and universally proclaimed in the Nicaean Council can be a model in the contemporary ecclesiastical scenario for wider integration and crosspollination (Doohan 1988:174).

In the multi-denominational, multi-religious and pluralistic global context, we should develop a wider ecumenical understanding that takes the following things into consideration: an integration of the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal and Charismatic views; and an extension of a dialogue between the Christian and other religious ideologies (Radano 2012; Walsh 2011). The Christian theological curriculum can facilitate the inner unity concerns and the open-ended approaches for celebrating oneness in the wider scenario (Cornille 2013). The Johannine praxis of inner unity and inclusive approach can be adopted as a visible reality when the Christian church and the inter-religious bodies engage in ecumenical involvements (Kysar 2005:136). This aspect is also emphasized in the Nicaean and in the Constantinopolitan councils. This approach shall facilitate a wider ecumenical and open-ended mission of the church.

The Lutheran World Federation International Conference in Namibia in 2015 identified four core features of transformative theology that inform and are informed by political and economic realities: contextual, critical, creative, and concrete (Burghardt and Sinn 2017:153). In the Asian context, theological schools witness considerable theological advancement as they emphasize contextualization of the Gospel message in the political and economic realities of the nation, engage critically with the biblical worldview by adopting the “in front of the text”

¹⁰ Cf. *Jub* 25:14; *T. Jud* 20:1-5; 1QS 3:18-25.

approaches, remain creative in collaborating the biblical message with the contextual realities, and affirm the faith in concrete terms by taking the speech and act concerns (Thomaskutty 2019:89). The theological communities in Asia function charismatic in their scope, evangelical in witnessing, ecumenical in relational aspects, and liberative in engagements in the public square. As the Johannine community was a contextualized version of Christian community, critical in their engagements in faith and praxes, creative in their thought patterns and social engagements, and concrete in molding the community ethos, the contemporary Asian theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies emphasize all these elements in their theological and missional agenda (Thomaskutty 2019:93). As unity and ecumenism are the core realities of the Nicaean and the Constantinopolitan Councils, the church in Asia can foster a wider unity rooted in the spirit of ecumenism and dialogue to demonstrate her inclusive mission. As the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) are champions of inclusive *ekklēsia* and wider ecumenism, the vision and mission of the Johannine community and the Nicaean Council are continued even today through the activities of these global bodies.

There are various streams of ecumenical initiatives in the global church context and in the theological and organizational levels. While some churches/institutions/organizations are involved in “open ended” and “inclusive” ecumenical approaches, there are some implement “closed-ended” and “exclusive” approaches to others (Kärkkäinen 2003). The Johannine method of “inner negotiation” and “outer interaction” can be a good way forward for the theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies in the global context (Lamb 2014:104-105). As the Johannine community attained a “glorious position” (vv. 10, 22), “eternal life” (v. 2), “knowledge” (vv. 3, 6, 8, 23, 25, 26), “Word of God” (vv. 8, 14), “protection” (vv. 11-12, 15), “joy of God” (v. 13), “sanctification” (vv. 16-18), “oneness with God” (vv. 20-21, 22-23), and “love of God” (vv. 23, 26), the people outside the fold are invited by the believing community to embrace the Father-Son-*Paraklētos*-Believers oneness and attain all the divine virtues (Thomaskutty 2019:75-96). The Nicaean Creed foregrounds a scenario similar to the Johannine in which “inner negotiation” and “outer interaction” are facilitated with a wider ecumenical spirit.

On the contrary, the people of the world are filled with “hatred” (v. 14), steeped in “unknowing” (v. 25), and stand against the glorious Father-Son-*Paraklētos*-Believers oneness (Coloe 2021:314). When the world is filled in hatred and unknowing, the Johannine community and the Nicaean Council followed an open-ended relationship and invited the world for a wider ecumenism (Wright IV 2009). This approach of the Johannine community and the Nicaean Council can be a model for the theological fraternity and the ecclesiastical authorities in today’s context. As the Johannine community was transformative, inclusive, wider ecumenical, and liberative in its role and status, the Christian theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies across the globe can adopt this paradigm in their pedagogical, exegetical, homiletical, and hermeneutical engagements (Kim 2014:57-66). A Johannine paradigm of inner negotiation and outer dialogue can be considered as a unique method in the multi-religious and pluralistic global context. This paradigm of the Johannine and the Nicaean can be popularized across the globe for unity and reconciliation.

Concluding remarks

In recapitulation, Jesus’s axiomatic prayer in John 17 in correspondence with the Nicaean Creed foregrounds a new way forward in Christian witness, dialogue and ecumenism. The theme of oneness expressed in the prayer and in the creed is multi-layered as several levels of interactions

are at view. The relationship demonstrated between the Father and the Son, the Son and the Believers, the Father and the Believers, the Believer[s] and the Believer[s], and the Father-Son-Believers and the World and the integral connectivity incorporated in the prayer and in the creed can be properly understood when we interpret them together. The introduction of the Holy Spirit in John 14:15-17; 14:26; 15:26-27; and 16:12-15 and within the creed frames the oneness of the Father-Son-*Paraklētos*-Believers with an emphasis on inner negotiation and outer dialogue. John's missional and ministerial paradigm can be conceptualized in relation to the perichōrēsis described among the Father, the Son, the *Paraklētos*, and the Believers can be better understood in relation to the Nicæan Creed. The church can demonstrate the divine glory in the world through the means of its existence as a united community. This paradigmatic principle underscores the Johannine and the Nicæan theo-praxis. The church/institutions/organizations in today's context can adopt a Johannine-Nicæan model in exercising the theological and ideological curriculum, witnessing the truth of God and witnessing in relation to the ethos of the world. A Johannine-Nicæan way forward can be considered as a paradigm in our ecumenical journey over against the prevailing exclusive and parochial approaches to ecumenism. The concept of *homoousios* highlighted in both the Nicæan and the Constantinopolitan councils was at the heart of the Johannine community existence. In the contemporary context, the axiomatic "they may be one as we are one" can be adopted as a model in bolstering the theological and the missional engagements.

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