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Oneness in John 17:1–26 as a paradigm for wider ecumenism and dialogue

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This article re-reads John 17:1–26 with a focus on the theme of oneness within the micronarrative. A multilayered and polyvalent analysis of the 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 missio-praxis expressed in the prayer align the thought patterns of Jesus, the narrator, and the community of John. The interactions and the resultant wider perichōrētic relationships between Father and Jesus, Jesus and believers, Father and believers, believer(s) and believer(s), Father–Jesus–believers and *Paraklētos* and Father–Son–*Paraklētos*–believers and the World exist as a paradigm for today's ecclesiastical bodies and theological institutions and organisations for wider ecumenism and dialogue.

Contribution: This article discusses the theme of oneness in John 17:1–26 as a paradigm for wider ecumenism and dialogue. As *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* emphasises biblical, ecumenical and dialogical engagements in theological discussions, this article fits well within the scope of the journal.

Keywords: oneness; John's gospel; wider ecumenism; dialogue; wider perichōrēsis.

Introduction

This article re-reads John 17:1–26 in the light of the existential struggles of the universal church in ecumenism and dialogue. Although the aspect of oneness in Jesus' prayer received much interest among the scholars, the text was often analysed without expounding the textures of the text. In this article, the oneness theme from an analytical and exegetical perspective has been investigated. A multilayered and polyvalent analysis of the text shall foreground the power dynamics embedded within the framework of the text. The methodology of the article is framed by making use of polyvalent literary and narrative aspects to unfold the semantic domains of Jesus' prayer (Anderson 2008:93–120; Gowler 2000:443; Lawrence 2018:428–430; Thomaskutty 2015:19–26).[1] The narrative annals of the prayer shall also be analysed in relation to other oneness aspects of the Fourth Gospel. The central question posed in the process of reading the text is: How the theme of oneness holds the prayer of Jesus as a literary whole? Alongside of that, the following questions are also investigated: How is a wider perichōrētic relationship part of the prayer of Jesus? How is the theme of unity in John 17 framed in relation to the *Paraklētos* passages? What are the ways and means through which we can bridge the gap between the prayer of Jesus and the ecumenical scenario in the world today? The task of the article is threefold: firstly, framing a theory of oneness from Johannine perspective; secondly, understanding oneness in John 17:1–26 in relation to the current ecumenical scenario and thirdly, developing a new way forward in ecumenical discussions in church and society.

Explicit expressions of *oneness* in John 17

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. At the outset of Jesus' 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 centre 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 brought to the foreground (Moule 2007:72–78). In John 17:11, through the narrative expression 'they may be

1.David B. Gowler calls this method a heteroglossia, a term used by Michael Bhaktin (1981, 1984) to mean 'the dynamic interaction of a number of voices, ideologies and positions, but none of them in pre-eminent, none rules or controls the others'.

Note: Special Collection: Africa Platform for NT Scholars, sub-edited by Ernest van Eck (University of Pretoria).

one, as we are one', the paradigmatic role of the Father–Son relationship is clearly stated as a model for the world. Byers (2017:107) states that 'the term "one" is a means of group identity construction correlating the Johannine disciples with the "one" God of Israel'. This aspect of group identity and correlation is at the root of the Johannine discussion. 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).[2] In this context, the idea of oneness in Jesus' 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*, meaning 'they may become completely one', is once again stated within the prayer of Jesus (Moule 2007:171–177). All these together confirm to the reader that oneness aspect is one of the primary concerns of the narrator.

There is a gradual development of thought patterns in John 17 by way of using the explicit and implicit connotations of *hen* as follows: firstly, a dynamic oneness relationship 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); secondly, as the Father and the Son are in oneness relationship, the same is standard for the believers to adopt in their interpersonal and community relationships (v. 11; Blum 2010:332); thirdly, the believers' oneness relationship should be aligned within the foundational Father–Son oneness fellowship (v. 21a; Moule 2007:164–170)[3]; and fourthly, 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 (2017) stated 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, divorced from connotations established earlier in the narrative. (p. 106)

As stated here, 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.

Father and son relationship

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).[4] The glorification of the Father in heaven is well aligned with the glorification of the Son in the world (17:1b, 22, 24; 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 flourishing of the divine glory is possible only when the Father–Son oneness is established (Akala 2014:109–117). Jesus' filial identity and agency language are recapitulated by Köstenberger and Swain (2008) to show the Father–Son interaction:

> 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). (p. 58)

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 & Swain 2008:165–186). The narrator explicitly states about the unity between the Father and the Son in glorification and mutual engagement.

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). That means, the narrator emphasises that whatever belongs to the Father belongs also to the Son, and whatever belongs to the Son belongs to the Father (v. 10a; Blum 2010:131–132). 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 & 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 & 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.

Son and believing community relationship

The communion between the Son and the believers is yet another layer of oneness embedded within the framework of

2. Byers (2017:106) 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'.

3. '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.

4. Bauckham (2015:58) 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'.

John 17 (Hera 2013:123–140). 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' prayer (Gifford 2011:51–52; Hera 2013:123–138). Hera (2013) 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 in 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*). (p. 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). While Jesus prays for the community of believers (v. 9), they stand as a means of divine glory in the world (v. 10). When Jesus is about to depart them, he makes sure that Father's protection is upon them (v. 11; Blum 2010:331–332). The 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 (ed. Lampe 1961:1077; Lawler 1995:49; Torrance 1966:102).[5]

Furthermore, Jesus' prayer is that the believers might enjoy the full measure of heavenly joy among themselves (v. 13; Beasley-Murray 1999:299–300). As they possess the word of God and continue believing in Jesus, they are a sanctified group set apart from the rest of the world (vv. 14, 16, 17, 19; Beasley-Murray 1999:300–301). Richey (2012) said:

> 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). (p. 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). The believers are entrusted the task of mission so that they may witness the heavenly truth among the unbelievers (v. 20; Bolsinger 2019:342).[6] 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).[7] He shares the heavenly glory among them so that they may actualise 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 emphasises 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.

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 Son takes initiative to make a connection between the Father and the believing people (vv. 4–5, 6a; Veiss & Hunt 2021:164).[8] The Father gives authority to the Son over the people (v. 2a), and he also 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 believers realised 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 & 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 believers is emphasised.

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

5.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 (1961) 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' (Lampe 1961:1077). It is 'the dynamic process of making room for another around oneself' (Lampe 1961:1077). 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.

6.According to Bolsinger (2019:342), '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'.

7.Beasley-Murray (1999:302) 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'.

8.Veiss and Hunt (2021:164) comment: 'In John 17 glory appears as a significant theme as displaying/acknowledging perfected character (Jn 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 (Jn 17:1; 17:4; 17:10); and heaven (implied), a place, Jesus's dwelling (Jn 17:24)'.

sanctifies them by the truth (v. 17; Veiss & 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). The Father's vision about an open-ended mission is obvious here. While involved in the *missio Dei*, the believers should 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 and Hunt (2021) 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. (p. 168)

The believing community can conceive a complete measure of unity only when they know the Father–Son unity (vv. 23, 26a). 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.

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 realise 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). Culpepper (2021) 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. (p. 72)

They know that the Father gave everything including the words of eternal life to Jesus (vv. 7, 8a; Moloney 1998:462). 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). 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).

The believers can enjoy a full measure of Jesus' 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 favours 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 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 (1998) 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. (p. 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; eds. Mosher & 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; eds. Mosher & Marshall 2015:160). 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 Father–Son–believers oneness 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 towards the unbelieving world (Okure 1998:1566–1568). 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 1999:296). Beasley-Murray (1999) 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). (p. 296)

Although Jesus completed the work of God in the world and the mission 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, 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). People like Judas Iscariot conform themselves to the patterns of this world (vv. 12–14).

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 ed. 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). Jesus' mission agenda comes to a circle in the following ways: firstly, unity among the believing community in the world; secondly, extension of unity between the believing and the unbelieving through open-ended relationships; thirdly, expansion of the Father–Son–believers unity to the unbelievers for wider collaboration; and fourthly, 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 centre of the unity established by the attempts of Jesus in the world (vv. 23, 26). Okure (1998) 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. (p. 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.

Oneness in John 17 as a paradigm for wider ecumenism and dialogue

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 – have to be perceived in closer relationship with the role and function of the Holy Spirit. John 17 has to be analysed in connection with the rest of the Farewell Discourses (chapters 13–16). The wider unity described in Jesus' prayer makes more sense when it is related to the *Paraklētos* (Jn 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 or his oneness with Father–Son –believers is in the view (Ashton 1992:5:152). When Jesus departs from the world, the disciples need not be paralysed by sadness as *Paraklētos* would help them to realise the presence of Christ (Schnackenburg 1980:3:126). The word used with *Paraklētos* is not *heteron* but *allon* (14:16).[9] The 'another' should not be taken as different in substance but of same kind (Carson 2018:50). The Holy Spirit proceeds not as a different entity but as a person of the trinity sharing the same substance (Witherington 1995:251). Bruce calls this 'another Paraklēte' as Jesus' *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' mission on earth (Hoeck 2012:27–28). In other words, *Paraklēte* mirrors Jesus' 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* and believers unity formed in the world is a paradigmatic oneness open towards the wider realities of the world for conversation and dialogue. The inclusive mission of Christianity takes into account the following two aspects: firstly, witnessing Christ and secondly, 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 towards the wider world to embrace the Father, Son, *Paraklētos* and believers oneness (Doohan 1988:174). The open-ended unity experienced in the Johannine community context can be a model in the contemporary Christian ecclesiastical scenario for wider integration and cross-pollination (Doohan 1988:174). In the multi-denominational, multireligious and pluralistic global context, a wider ecumenical understanding should be developed that takes the following things into consideration: firstly, an integration of the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal and Charismatic views and secondly, an extension of a dialogue between the Christian and other religious ideologies (ed. 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 (ed. 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 approach shall facilitate a wider ecumenical and open-ended mission of the church.

In India, established theological institutions and universities often function in inter-denominational and ecumenical ways. The Senate of Serampore College (SSC) and the Asia

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

Theological Association (ATA) offer exclusive theological degree programmes. A large number of Catholic theological institutions in India offer theological degree programmes in multiple disciplines and in various levels, and remain open in admitting non-Catholic candidates for the degree programmes. A recent development is that secular universities such as University of Madras, University of Mysore, Madurai Kamaraj University, University of Calicut and others offer theological degree programmes through their Christian Studies Departments and as a result there are wider interactions between Christian theology and other religious and non-religious disciplines (Thomaskutty 2019:91). With the emergence of Christian Studies Departments in the secular universities, a new way forward is initiated in systematising theological discourses with a wider ecumenical focus. It further opens up new opportunities of awareness in the public arena. Today Christian theology functions as part of a wider academic discourse (Thomaskutty 2019:91). As the academic community represents both the Catholic and Protestant confessions and inter-religious and interdisciplinary strands, the views expressed in the discourses are mostly dialogical, interdenominational, inter-religious and widely ecumenical. In the public arena, the arts, iconographies, newspapers, television channels and the social media play significant roles in bridging the gap between the faith concerns of the church and theological discussions of the academic institutions (Thomaskutty 2019:91). In India, the Johannine ideology of inner negotiation and outer interaction aligns well within the current theological and ecclesiastical discussions.

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 & Sinn 2017:153). In India, theological schools witness considerable theological advancement as they emphasise contextualisation 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' 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 India function charismatically in their scope, evangelical in witnessing, ecumenical in relational aspects and liberative in engagements in the public square. As the Johannine community was a contextualised version of Christian community, critical in their engagements in faith and praxes, creative in their thought patterns and social engagements and concrete in moulding the community ethos, the contemporary Indian theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies emphasise all these elements in their theological and missional agenda (Thomaskutty 2019:93). Thus, transformative and liberative educational and missional models are at the core of the existing curriculum and missio-praxis.

There are various streams of ecumenical initiatives in the Indian church and in the theological and organisational levels. While some churches, institutions and organisations are involved in 'open ended' and 'inclusive' ecumenical approaches, there are some that 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 Indian 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* and believers oneness and attain all the divine virtues (Thomaskutty 2019:75–96). On the contrary, the people of the world are filled with 'hatred' (v. 14), steeped in 'unknowing' (v. 25) and against the glorious Father, Son, *Paraklētos* and believers oneness (Coloe 2021:314). When the world is filled in hatred and unknowing, the Johannine community followed an open-ended relationship and invited the world for a wider ecumenism (Wright 2009). This approach of the Johannine community can be a model for the theological fraternity and the ecclesiastical authorities in India. As the Johannine community was transformative, inclusive, wider ecumenical and liberative in its role and status, the Christian theological fraternity and ecclesiastical bodies in India 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 multireligious and pluralistic Indian context. This paradigm of the Johannine and the Indian community can be popularised in other parts of the world for wider ecumenism and dialogue.

Concluding remarks

In recapitulation, Jesus' axiomatic prayer in John 17 foregrounds a new way forward in Christian witness, dialogue and ecumenism. The theme of oneness expressed in the prayer is multilayered as several levels of interactions happen within the narrative framework. The relationship demonstrated between Father and Son, Son and believers, Father and believers, believer(s) and believer(s), and Father–Son–believers and World, and the integral connectivity incorporated in the prayer can be properly understood when we interpret it within the overall framework of the Farewell Discourses. The introduction of the *Paraklētos* in John 14:15–17; 14:26; 15:26–27; and 16:12–15 frames the oneness of the Father, Son, *Paraklētos* and believers with an emphasis on inner negotiation and outer dialogue. John's missional and ministerial paradigm can be conceptualised in relation to a wider perichōrēsis described among the Father, Son, *Paraklētos* and believers. 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 theo-praxis. The churches, institutions and organisations in today's context can adopt a Johannine model in exercising the theological and ideological curriculum, witnessing the truth of God and witnessing the ethos of the world. A Johannine way forward can be considered as a paradigm in our ecumenical journey over the prevailing exclusive and parochial approaches to ecumenism. In the contemporary context, the axiomatic 'they may be one as we are one' can be adopted as a model in bolstering the theological curriculum and missional engagements.

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