

# A Different Sort of Unity

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## A Different Sort of Unity

Ephesians 4: 1—13

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

*But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. There it is said,*

*"When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."*

*(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*

"Familiarity breeds contempt," the saying goes. I don't know whether this is true in the case of the Bible. But I do know that too often, precisely because we are familiar with a text, we do not allow it to surprise us. "The Lord is my shepherd," I heard my mother and my father say with quiet assurance. "The Lord is my shepherd," they heard their parents say. And so on, to the point that we can now say the words without being overcome by the awesome statement that the Lord, the One who in the beginning made the heavens and the earth, the One whose voice brought forth the day and the night, the sun and the moon, the One and only, is my shepherd.

And so, it happens with the text from Ephesians that has just been read. We heard it in Sunday school. We heard it at interracial gatherings. We heard it at ecumenical celebrations. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism. . ." By now, our minds are filled with one great yawn. We know all that stuff. We are supposed to love each other. We are supposed to be one. We are here to feel good about being together. So what?

Ah! But we are not listening! Listen: Now comes the unexpected word: "But." Hold your horses, that little word says. If you think you know that Christian unity is all about being nice to each other, and about covering up our differences, this is not what this text is about.

Before the "but," the key words are "one" and "all." After the "but," the key word is "some." Between the two, holding together the section on "one" and "all" and the section on "some," stands a strange passage.

Ephesians 4: 7-10

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

At the center of our text, as in the center of our lives, as in the center of the church, stands Jesus Christ. And the diversity of which the first half of the text speaks is not just any kind of

unity. It is Christian unity. It is unity in Christ. And the diversity of which the second half of the text speaks is not any kind of diversity. It is a diversity willed, and given, and sanctified by Christ. According to our text, this Jesus Christ is a very specific center, a very specific person, with a very specific history. The One who stands at the center of both our unity and our diversity is the one who "descended into the lower parts of the earth." Listen well: "descended into the lower parts of the earth." You think you have seen racism and bigotry? Jesus Christ has seen that and more. You marvel at the inhumanity with which people treat those who are different from themselves? Jesus Christ has seen that and more. You wonder how religious leaders can be so tied to the institutions that they fail to see the workings of the Spirit? Jesus Christ has seen that and more. You think you are living through hell? Jesus Christ has been there and back.

And back! That is the difference. Our text says that he who descended is also he who ascended on high and led a host of captives --or, as another translation says, "led captivity." The sin, and the bigotry, and the divisions, and the selfishness, and the pompous religiosity, and all the myriad things that otherwise would bind us, have all been taken captive! What this text is saying is that the center both of our unity and of our diversity is the one who took the worst that the world could throw at him and still was not defeated.

And the text is also saying that this defines both our unity and our diversity.

Let us look first at our unity. The world knows many sorts of unity that are not of what this text speaks. There are unities that are held together by authoritarian fiat: "Do as I say or get out. Unfortunately, throughout the history of the Christian church, there have been too many cases when we have substituted that for the unity which is in Christ. There are unities that are achieved by excluding others: "We have such a nice neighborhood, only the right sort of people live there." Again, I am sorry to say that too often our churches have boasted of that kind of unity. There are unities that are based on fear: "If we don't stick together, those other people will overrun us. And sad to say, this sort of unity has also been promoted in the church.

Yet according to this text, ours is a different sort of unity. Ours is not a unity we build by exclusion, or by authoritarian structure, or by fear. Actually, ours is not a unity we build at all. Ours is a unity that is given to us. We may like it. Or we may not like it. Still, it is given to us. That is who we are, and we cannot change that.

In my family, there are lots of uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, etc. Some I like better than others. But that has little to do with our being family. Those I like and those I don't like are still family. I can be nice about it, or I can scream and fuss, but they are still family.

Likewise, in this family that is the church, we are all one, like it or not. We can be nice and loving to each other. We certainly should be nice and loving to each other. But one thing we cannot do

is **not** be one family with each other. In Christ we are one. There are no buts about it. We are one.

The only option we have, as our text says, is whether or not we will “live a life that is worthy of our calling.” We are called to share in life everlasting with the One who led captivity captive. There is none other but Him. If we share in His life, we share in each other’s lives. We cannot claim Him and not claim each other. I cannot claim him and not claim my racist brother who makes my blood boil. I don't have to like him. I certainly won't agree with him. But he is still my brother. I cannot claim him and not claim my sister who calls me names behind my back. I may not like her. But she is still my sister. And if that sister or that brother insist in not claiming me, with all my sins, as their brother, they will have to claim a different Jesus Christ than the One whom I know and worship --the One who descended to the lower parts of the earth to call and to free me, and to call and to free that sister and that brother.

And then, as to our diversity, that too is defined by this Jesus Christ who descended into the lower parts of the earth, and who, in ascending took captivity captive, Again, there are many sorts of diversity. There is diversity caused by social injustice when some people are made inordinately rich while others are made inordinately poor. Unfortunately, that sort of diversity has crept into the church. But that is not the diversity that this text is talking about. There is also the diversity caused by racial prejudice. And we know too well how that has found its way into the church. But that is not the diversity that this text is talking about.

The diversity that this text is talking about is, like our unity, a diversity given by Christ. The one who led captivity captive, our text says, gave gifts to people, to each different gifts. It is here that the word “some” becomes the key word: these gifts were given so that “some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.”

There is nothing wrong with diversity, Scripture says, for some are this and some are that. And yet, there is much wrong in many of our diversities, in the way we classify each other. How are we to make the distinction?

This text from Ephesians gives us a clue. The important thing that this text underlines about the diversity of gifts is that these are gifts of freedom, and not of bondage. They are gifts of the One who led all captivities captive.

We are different, there is no doubt about it. There are in our midst several different cultural traditions, hundreds of different gifts. We can use those differences to oppress and belittle each other. But in that case, we cannot claim that they came from the One who, on ascending, “led captivity captive.” Or we can use them to support each other, as our text says, “for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

If so, our text promises us that we shall “all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature personhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of

Christ.” The Greek text is very clear. It is not a matter of each of us attaining to the stature of the fullness of Christ. It is a matter of all of us, as one body, attaining that stature. In other words, either we do it together or we don't. At the beginning, our text says that we are one body, now, at the end of the text, we are reminded that in that body we must all grow together, or we will not grow.

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A few minutes ago, a Psalm was read. As we look at it now, having examined this text, we see that it speaks of the same sort unity:

Praise the Lord!  
Praise God in the sanctuary;  
Praise God in the mighty firmament!  
Praise God for mighty deeds;  
Praise God according to God's exceeding greatness!

Praise God with trumpet sound;  
Praise God with lute and harp!  
Praise God with timbrel and dance;  
Praise God with strings and pipe!

Praise God in English and Spanish;  
Praise God in Cherokee and Swahili!

Praise God with sounding cymbals;  
Praise God with loud clashing cymbals!  
Praise God with organ and maracas;  
Praise God with guitars and tom-toms!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!

Gloria a Dios!

Amen.