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## Theological Truths that Divide Us and Engaging in Disagreement Well

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## Theological Truths that Divide Us and Engaging in Disagreement Well

### Abstract

"Eternal life is an eternal fellowship, a communion of difference gathered into perfect oneness through the working of the blood-bought Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead."

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### Comments

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# in things

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## Theological Truths That Divide Us and Engaging in Disagreement Well

**David Westfall**

Is Christ divided? (1 Cor 1:13). Paul's question is rhetorical, and we're meant to say, "No, of course not!" But like the fractious Corinthians, we seem to have a pile of evidence to the contrary on our hands. In nearly every matter about which self-professed followers of Jesus hold any sort of conviction, disagreement can be found: the atonement, baptism, evolutionary science, hell, women in ministry, the Lord's Supper, just warfare and pacifism, gay marriage, the death penalty, predestination and free will—and so on. Meanwhile, those of us who identify as "evangelical" (a controversial term in its own right) and regard the Bible as God's infallible and authoritative word are not spared this confusion. On the contrary: a bewildering array of mutually-exclusive interpretations—what sociologist Christian Smith calls "pervasive interpretive pluralism"—problematizes the assumption that a high view of Scripture, on its own, can provide a basis for unity.

How do we make sense of all this? Is there some perspective on these differences that may help us navigate them more charitably, and perhaps even take steps toward the church's visible unity in our generation? Here, I would contend that our culture's radical individualism and metaphysical dualism do not provide us with helpful tools for answering such questions well. If we are fundamentally self-interested individuals concerned with avoiding hell and escaping earth to get to heaven (the main job of traditional "religion," according to our culture), we tend to develop a sense of identity that revolves around the question of whether *I*, as an isolated individual, yet have the necessary qualifications to feel assured of my destination. This outlook dramatically relativizes my concern for the church's present unity, and indeed, for the church itself. However desirable our visible unity may be, at the end of the day what matters to me

most is whether or not *I* will “make it,” not whether or not *they* will. And if unity with my brothers and sisters in Christ is only incidental to my experience of salvation, then the stakes in efforts at church unity are really quite low. The path of least resistance would be simply to ignore these divisions in practice, while justifying them in theory with some kind of appeal to a hidden, invisible unity that the empirical reality can’t touch.

The problem is that Jesus won’t let us get away with that. While the unity of the church *is* ultimately a transcendent and invisible reality, that unity must be made visible in some way, or else we have to conclude that God will not answer his Son’s prayer “that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11, 22). Jesus isn’t referring to something indiscernible, nor to something that will appear only in the new heavens and the new earth. Neither understanding does justice to the prayer’s missional intent: “that the world may know that you sent me” (v. 21). We *must* strive for outward, visible, concretely demonstrated unity, and if our understanding of the Christian faith is one that permits us to live comfortably with its opposite, then our understanding must change.

How must it change? In order to approach disagreement and difference more fruitfully and in a way that aligns better with our Lord’s intentions, I would suggest that we need a renewed vision of what it even means for us to be “saved”—one that orients us outward toward each other in love and impels us to seek agreement, unity, and fellowship, not as an optional add-on to our pursuit of everlasting life, but as an integral part of it.

We get a taste of such a renewed vision in that dense shot of theological espresso that we call Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 1, Paul describes God’s overarching plan for the cosmos as “his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:9-10). Here is dualism of a fundamentally different kind than our culture’s, one that subverts our individualism and locates unity at the very heart of our salvation. In Jesus, the meeting point of heaven and earth, God reveals his ultimate intention for created diversity, namely, its oneness with an integrated whole. The God who in the beginning separated the waters of chaos in order to bring forth the heavens above and the earth below, distinguished these utterly different spheres and their inhabitants *from* each other because, through the Messiah’s redeeming work, he intends them *for* each other.

Paul celebrates this truth in several other places in his letter, again with reference to the early pages of Genesis. First, consider Ephesians 5:31-32: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This

mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (cf. Gen 2:24). God not only separated the heavens and the earth in the beginning; he also “split the *adam*,” dividing female from male, in order to bring the two together into a fruitful oneness that will fill the world with his image and glory (Gen 1:26-28; 2:18-25). This finds its fulfillment in the union of Christ and the church, “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23).

Second, this body, whose union with the Messiah will fill the world with God’s fullness, is itself a unity that spans the most fundamental divide in the human race after the difference of male and female: Jew and Gentile. In the Messiah, we discover that God’s reason for dividing up humanity in this way, separating Israel and the nations as he separated heaven and earth, male and female, was ultimately to *unite* the two in the messiah, who “himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (2:14-16).

Reconciled fellowship in unity with other people, then, is not incidental to my experience of eternal life: it *is* my experience of eternal life. Salvation *means* the coming together of all things into unity in the Messiah, by the transforming power of God’s grace. Eternal life is an eternal fellowship, a communion of difference gathered into perfect oneness through the working of the blood-bought Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. The very purpose of created difference and diversity is their communion and oneness, and the whole story of Scripture—the story of the human race, of Israel and the nations, ultimately of heaven and earth—is a story of God’s costly grace transforming fraught division into fruitful unity. The Creator makes *two*, in order that the two may become *one*. This purpose is rooted in none other than God’s own character and identity, as an eternal union and communion of Father and Son in one Holy Spirit.

What does this mean for me, then, as I approach my brothers and sisters in Christ amid our differences? It means that one of my foremost needs is for new eyes to see that our fellowship in God is not an addendum to my individual experience of eternal life. Rather, that fellowship is nothing less than an experience of eternal life already begun, of the new humanity that God has established in the death and resurrection of his Son. However long it may take, then, and whatever the difficulty, I *must* seek agreement and unity with my neighbor in Christ, because eternal life cannot be lived without us both, “reconciled to God *in one body* by the cross.”

Although the grace-empowered process of attaining full unity will be complete only in “the fullness of time,” it has already begun in the risen Messiah, and we are called to

safeguard our mutual share in it, “bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:2-3). For this to happen, we have to be “renewed in the spirit of [our] minds” and “put on the new humanity,” viewing ourselves and each other in terms of the transcendent reality of our shared identity in the Messiah and acting accordingly (4:23-24). Only when we locate our differences within the shared context of God’s will to unite all things in his Son can we “get with the program” and start to relate in love, allowing our objective identity in him to exert continual pressure on our relationship.

None of this is to say that doing so is an easy or comfortable process. That is why Paul calls it “*bearing with one another*” (“putting up with” or “enduring one another” would be equally valid translations). Our togetherness in the Messiah will reveal a myriad of obstacles to unity in each of us, and we are called to endure the uncomfortable process of transformation that God promises to carry out in our relationships as he unearths all the things in us that impede our fellowship, passes judgment, and remakes us into people who are truly one. But embracing that process may come more easily if we can recognize that oneness in Christ for what it really is: the foretaste of eternal life.