

## The Priority of Unity: It Is the Mystery of God's Will

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EPHESIANS 1:3-10 (NRSV) *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup>He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the* *Beloved. <sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup>that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

Remember "Memory Verses?" EPHESIANS 1:9-10 (RSV) *(God) has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

I don't watch much TV other than football games; but, I served a 19-month interim in Trenton, MO, and was up there by myself quite a bit; so I'd come in from work and turn on the TV while I was fixing dinner—and eating; and I got drawn into a couple of shows that I watched regularly for a couple of years after that.

My favorite was "NCIS (Naval Crime Investigation Service)". I've always enjoyed the kinds of shows that involved reasoning things out—you know, putting the clues together and solving the mystery—Perry Mason, Boston Legal... As a youth I thought about going into forensics; I liked cutting up those frogs and earthworms in biology lab, and always was fascinated by research: solving mysteries.

You remember, when your kids were growing up, the most frequent question they asked? ["Why?"] Well, I never outgrew that. I still want to know why. I want to know how something works. I'm the kid that took his parents' alarm clock apart to see how it worked. ("But, Dad, I'll put it back together.")

I was a curious kid. I remember a Sunday School teacher, exasperated by a barrage of my questions, responding, "Jimmy, there are just some things we're not supposed to know." And when I responded, "Then why did God give us a brain?" she slapped me—right across the chops. Then she told my father I'd been disrespectful. Talk about double jeopardy! When we got home my dad got right to the seat of the problem, and, while the questions didn't go away, I learned not to ask her.

And to this day I don't believe her comment: "There are some things we're just not supposed to know." Really? Then why DID God give us a brain?

Today's memory let's us in on the "mystery of God's will!" If we're privileged with that information, what else is there? What is it we're "not supposed to know?" The prophet writes, "Your ways are not our ways," but, the only information that's withheld—even from Jesus, himself—is the day and he will return.

**"The Mystery of God's Will." What is it? Look with me again at the memory verse: *(God) made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time—to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.***

The mystery of God's will is (what?) [to gather up all things] The NIV says, "...to bring unity..." The RSV says, "...to unite"; the KJV says, "...to gather together in one..." It's a Greek word whose full meaning is really difficult to grasp with one translation. In mathematics it meant "to sum up" a column of figures; in rhetoric it meant "to sum up" an argument or to reduce a complex set of ideas into a single phrase. [For example, Jesus said all the commandments are "summed up" in this sentence: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."]

But in our memory verse, the idea is modified: ***"to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth"***. It's like "all the vital forces of the universe are brought into focus in Christ. Christ is the focal point of the universe. And when "all things in heaven and on earth" are brought into their true relationship with Christ, they also are brought into their true relationship with each other and therefore into an all-embracing, universal harmony. One way to know if we're in a true relationship with Christ is to examine our relationship with each other!

Nothing is more important to God than the unity of all God's creation. It is the mystery of God's will. Listen:

- **1 CORINTHIANS 1:10** *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*
- **EPHESIANS 4:11-13** *It was (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*
- **COLOSSIANS 3:13-14** *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*
- **PSALM 133:1** *How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!*
- **ROMANS 12:16** *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*
- **GALATIANS 3:26-28** *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*
- **1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-13** *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the*

*one Spirit to drink*

And listen to Jesus in the garden, praying for his disciples:

- JOHN 17:20-23 *“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,<sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.<sup>22</sup> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity.*

I could go on and on with verse after verse. Nothing is more important to God. Unity is the mystery of God's will; and that should make it a priority for us!

But a clarification is needed. Unity is not uniformity—it's not “same-ness.” It was never intended to be. We're not called to be alike. Each of us unique; with our own unique set of spiritual gifts.

Nor is unity found in agreement of opinion, or theology, or ideology. It's not humanly possible (maybe theoretically) to experience agreement at those levels. Democrats and Republicans will never agree totally—on anything. The tragedy is that since the days of Truman and Eisenhower—and maybe Kennedy—there's been virtually no effort on the part of either to even understand the other! And that sickness has been carried on the winds of social media until it has infected the ethos of this entire nation—including the church.

God created free choice! I can't believe God realistically expected—or intended—humans to agree on everything, or to do everything the same way. A choir singing in unison produces beautiful music, as long as each singer is on pitch and all the vowels are unified. But a choir doesn't reach its fullest potential until it produces wonderful, rich harmony—beautiful precisely because the sopranos, altos, tenors and basses all are singing different notes at the same time! I know of no better metaphor for the unity described in our memory verse for today.

God created us differently so we could mutually enrich each other. In the Epistles of Ephesians and Romans it becomes clear that the Body of Christ lives up to its full potential precisely because each of us is different!

So, having establishing the theme of the epistle in our memory verse today, the writer of Ephesians moves through the metaphor of church as Body of Christ to this literary masterpiece, summarizing the unity that is the mystery of God's will: *“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,<sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly— as each part is working properly— as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”* EPHESIANS 4:15-16 (NIV)

And so, the cat's out of the bag! It's no longer a mystery; but it is a high priority.