

# **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle**

## **GROWING UP IN CHRIST**

### **Ephesians 4:1-16**

### **Eighth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 13)**

### **Analysis by Bruce T. Martin**

Eph 4:1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. 7But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." 9(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) 11The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13until 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. 14We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 15But speaking the truth in

love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

*Exegetical note: Whether or not Ephesians was written by Paul (compare the description of grace-gifts in this text with those in I Cor 12; compare also Eph 4:17-23 with Rom 1:21 and 12:1-2), this circular letter is within the orbit of a basic Pauline understanding: there is "growth" in Christian maturity without thereby changing the "full measure" of one's faith. Faith-in-Christ, being Spirit created, is alone sufficient for inclusion into Christ and his body (salvation, the "bond of peace"). Faith generates acts of christic love apart from any commandment to do so (2:15). But insofar as a person remains apart from Christ, in unfaith (sin), one is subject not only to God's demand for faith ("You shall not have any other gods") but ethical demands as well (see Rom 6-8). Because sin clings tenaciously to the old creation, the Christian dichotomy remains with us until our own death and resurrection.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Children in Christ**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Blown About**

Without exception, all Christians are and remain adopted "children of God" (a popular Pauline-Johannine expression; see Eph 1:5 and 5:1 in opposition to "children of wrath" 2:3) by reason of their inclusion into Christ's body, by faith-in-Christ alone – but not by reason of their common humanity (see 3:6; 5:6). To change the object of the metaphor and get at the nub of this text, we "saints" (v. 12; see 1:1) are nonetheless "children (in Christ)" (v. 14), that is, we are immature

Christians when we participate in the disunity of Christ's body, the Church (1:23). Since we are and remain sinners even while we are saints, there is "work of ministry" (v. 12) aplenty for us to do, even among ourselves (the point of this text), which for us is an unending task. The best that can be done, which is its own reward, is a movement towards greater maturity, a "life worthy of our calling" (v. 1). Along that way in our growing up, we are likely to be "blown about" (v. 14) by the ill winds of many false gospels. But we can test false gospels by whether or not they promote faith in "one Lord" (v. 5) and his "body's growth" (v. 16), to the real advantage of all Christians "in the unity of the Spirit" (v. 3) – or to only a few and the exclusion of many.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Futility of Mind*

We are "blown about" by "trickery and deceitful scheming" (v. 14) and the unity of Christ's body is undermined when, following "the ruler of the power of the air" (2:1) – alluding to the overwhelming power of sin to enslave us, we persist in "the futility of our minds . . . darkened in our understanding . . . hardened in our hearts" (vv. 17-18). From such backsliding (yes, by Christians) there is absolutely no escape – only rescue.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *Alienated from God*

Woe to those who foster false gospels, and woe to we who believe them (5:6)! Although continuing in sin reaps its own reward through many acts of sinfulness, falling again into unfaith is more deadly still, for as such we are "alienated from the life of God" (v. 18) and subject to "God's wrath" (5:6). Our death, finally, will complete sin's mortifying impact upon us, but for we who believe in Christ, God's wrath is not the Last Word.

## **PROGNOSIS: Mature in Christ**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *One Lord*

What makes for "growth" in Christ, what draws us away from

unfaith's "futile mind" and towards full "maturity" in Christ (v. 13), is exactly the same "gospel-grace" by which we were accepted as "children of God" into Christ's body (1:6-7; 2:5-10; but "grace" in 3:2 and 4:7, 29 are specific gifts for building up the body). The one grace spawns many graces. In Ephesians, the originating grace takes place in Christ's own body, by his "blood . . . through the cross" (2:13, 16). In him, both Jews (those supposedly "near") and Gentiles (those apparently "far off") have been reconciled (to God, and on that basis also to each other) in the one body (Christ's, and on that basis also the Church) – trumping God's own wrath under the "dividing wall" (2:14) of the law. For this reason, there is for all who believe, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (v. 5) – Jesus the Christ.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *One Faith***

There is "one Lord," that is, for all who believe that in Christ's body "there is one body and one Spirit . . ." (v. 4-5). For Ephesians, as for us, this expression of our common faith is foundational for the unity of "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" (Nicene Creed). When this faith is not forgotten (4:23), the body of Christ grows together into a stronger unity (v. 15-16), showing us to be "children" in Christ no longer but on the road to "full maturity" (v.13).

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *One Baptism***

The road to full maturity in Christ passes through the drowning and vivifying waters of baptism, embodied in Christ's external expression: the Church. In the formulaic language of Ephesians, "one baptism" means the unity of "one Spirit" in the "one body" of "one Lord" – which is "the hope of our calling" (v. 5). But not statically. Baptism is a way of life, a growing up in Christ, even "learning Christ" (4:20) in the school of the Spirit. In this regard, we (in so far as this "we" is "clothed with a new self" 4:24) are empowered by the Spirit of God to

love one another “as God in Christ has forgiven you . . . as Christ loved the Church” (4:32; 5:25). The basis for such loving is not any command of law (though such commands do address our rotting flesh) but the Spirit only. True, we are and remain both saints and sinners throughout our life, subject as saints to the Spirit and as sinners to the commands of law, but our only lasting hope is the promise of Christ to “create us according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:24). In fulfillment of Christ’s promise, the Spirit of God provides us with various “grace-gifts,” not of course for ourselves alone, but for “up building” the body of Christ “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (v. 13).