

Long division: Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

The unity of Christ's followers is not incidental to our salvation.

by [Scott Bader-Saye](#) in the [April 24, 2002](#) issue

A person's final words are important. When they are out of character or trivial, we remember them with some embarrassment. Elvis Presley, for example, supposedly said, "I'm going to the bathroom to read." Well-spoken words, on the other hand, provide a fitting conclusion to a life and encouragement for those who remain. This week's lectionary readings juxtapose two sets of final words, one from John's Gospel as Jesus prepares to go to his death, and another from Acts as he prepares to ascend into heaven. Given this one last opportunity to say what needed to be heard and remembered by his disciples, Jesus' attention centers on our unity and our witness, which turn out to be one and the same thing.

Every fall my university begins the school year with a mass of the Holy Spirit. It is a beautiful liturgy that includes the opportunity for faculty and staff to pray a blessing over the students. The service creates a strong sense of unity in our common goal of educating the whole person. Then we celebrate the Eucharist. The great thanksgiving overflows with references to the unity established by this sacrament, but when all rise to receive it, some of us stay seated. As a Protestant I am not invited to the table. I don't take this personally, as I understand the Catholic Church requirement that ecclesial unity must be reached before we can share the Lord's Supper. Lacking that unity, the table becomes a reminder of our brokenness. I wonder (as I sit and sing "We Are One Body") who else feels the brokenness. Do the priests notice those who do not receive? Does it pain the presider that the gathered flock is, in fact, not one body?

Unfortunately, the pain of Christian division is rarely felt by any of us. We seem to have become complacent about our denominational and racial divisions. We cover the gaping wound in Christ's body with thin appeals to personal preference: "There is a church out there for everyone; join the one that fits you best!" We take something that should be a scandal and treat it as an asset. We think about

denominational differences as consumer options. Will it be Jiff or Skippy, Eddie Bauer or the Gap, Presbyterian or Lutheran? Choose the style that works for you.

But in the biblical text, this laissez-faire attitude is a contradiction of the gospel. John recounts that Jesus prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name . . . so that they may be one, as we are one.” Why does Jesus specifically ask God to protect the *unity* of his followers—to guard us against division? To answer this we must proceed a bit further into John’s text: “As you, Father, 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. . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:21-23).

Jesus’ language seems circular, but as the relationships are untangled one thing becomes clear: the unity of Christ’s followers is not incidental to our salvation. As we are made one with Christ so we are made one with the Father. But we are one with Christ only if we are one with each other. Our fellowship with God depends upon our unity, as does our witness to the world—we are to be one “so that the world may believe” that Jesus is from God and that God loves us (John 17:21, 23).

Just before his ascension, Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit to bear witness to him. Reading Acts alongside John, we may surmise that the Spirit empowers us not only for proclamation but also for unity. Notice that after Jesus’ ascension, the apostles immediately chose a replacement for Judas, to restore the unity of the Twelve. When we fail to embody in our communities the peaceful reconciliation that is salvation, when we fail to restore unity, our words about Jesus appear hollow. The solidarity of the church not only enables our witness, it *is* our witness.

J. R. R. Tolkien’s book *The Fellowship of the Ring* includes an evocative scene that failed to make it into the movie. The eight who accompany the ring bearer on his journey are men, hobbits, dwarves and elves. In order to defeat the power of the Dark Lord, these historically divided groups must endeavor to work together for a common goal. As the fellowship approaches Lothlórien, an elven region, the elven guard refuses to let Gimli the dwarf pass without a blindfold. The resulting tension threatens to divide the fellowship. But Aragorn, the group’s leader, suggests that if one of them must face this indignity, they will all go blindfolded. Legolas the elf protests: “Alas for the folly of these days! Here all are enemies of the one Enemy, and yet I must walk blind, while the sun is merry in the woodland under leaves of

gold!”

“Folly it may seem,” says Haldir. “Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him.”

We may take a lesson from Tolkien’s wisdom. The forces of darkness that oppose the ways of God draw strength from the disunity of God’s people. Our calling is not only to proclaim God’s reconciliation but also to live it. Lacking that, our mission to the ends of the earth will appear redundant, reinforcing a division that the world already knows. Better all blindfolded than only one; better yet, all eyes open to the God who makes us one.