Opening Words

When we have this bigger picture of what Christ is doing and see that we have a role in bringing about the unity of all things, we should live as bigger people and not smaller people.

61 Eph The Glorious Future of the Church 1

God has given you and me a glorious task! He has given us the priceless privilege of using our spiritual gifts to build up the Body of Christ! The glorified, risen Christ has poured out His Spirit and His gifts, and he directs us to use our gifts to mend, heal, and equip the saints of God so that together we can advance God's cause among His people and in the world.

What a privilege to be connected to the risen Lord, to be gifted by him, and to work with him to build up his body! We have been looking at this theme in recent broadcasts as we have studied Ephesians 4:7-12, but today we are focus on the question, "how long we do this?" We know that we are supposed to serve Christ faithfully all the days of our lives. Perhaps a better way of asking this question is, "how long is this phase of Christ's plan to continue?" How long will he give gifted leaders to equip the church so that the church will strongly serve his purposes in the world?

Verse 13 gives us the answer. Let's look at it right now.

> until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

How long will Christ bestow gifted people upon the Church? He will do it, Paul says, **until** the church attains to four things. Here they are:

1. The unity of the faith
2. The knowledge of the Son of God
3. We become a mature man.
4. We reach the stature of Christ.

Each of these phrases is rich. When we understand their meaning, it gives a glorious picture of Christ's goal for the Church. We will look at each of them in detail because we want you to have this picture and vision for the Church. But let me make one small comment first about the word "attain." The word literally means "come to meet" and it has the idea of a standard or a goal that we must reach towards. Christ has set this lofty vision and goal for His Church, and he gives us gifts that we might use them to move the church forward toward this lofty vision so that we might "come to meet" that vision and goal.

I believe it is important to keep this vision in our minds because it will affect our relationships with one another in the Church. We must keep a glorious vision of the Church uppermost in our minds and always before our faces, because, frankly, we fall so far short of it. The Church does not appear very glorious at times – either on a local level or on a national level. The church has problems. The church is filled with people who have problems – and, of course – no other kind of person exists.

People with problems are the only kind of people who are alive this side of eternity. And we must live and serve and worship with these people. And guess what! They must live and serve and worship with us! It is vitally important that we keep Christ's vision of the Church in front of us as we interact in our current condition where we have not yet attained to these lofty ideals. And when we keep them in front of us, that will help us to love one another and forgive one another and build one another up. Let's look now at the four visionary pictures of the Church.

First, he speaks of us attaining to the unity of the faith. What do our minds go to first when we hear such a phrase? They go to the need for churches to experience unity, and that is a true need, and that is part of what Paul has in mind, but Paul has something much bigger in his mind when he uses this phrase. Some might think he is speaking about unity among churches – unity in the Church universal – and that is a true need, and that is part of what Paul in mind, but Paul has something bigger even than this in his mind when he uses the phrase, "the unity of the faith."

Paul is talking in this phrase about the unity of all things in the universe that our faith, that our Christianity talks about. He is not just talking about the unity of Christians. He is talking about Christ uniting everything under his headship. This is the biblical vision. This is a biblical worldview statement. Paul's vision is Christ uniting everything under his Lordship. He has talked about this already.

Listen to his words again in Ephesians 1:8-10.

> In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.

The summing up of all things in Christ – things in the heavens and things on the earth. Paul, in his Greek used a mathematical term that refers to adding up a column of numbers and getting the result, or the sum. All the numbers in your column are summarized by the one number that represents their totality. Paul uses this term to refer to the coming day when all the details of life will find their summary and expression in Jesus Christ who is and will be the head of all things.

Paul uses a similar phrase in Colossians 1:19-20. Listen to these verses:

> For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

The vision that Paul has is the reconciliation of all things. Now, I want to make sure you don't misunderstand me or Paul for that matter. Paul is not teaching universal salvation. But he is speaking from a worldview framework. Paul is looking at the entire cosmos, and he sees that it is broken. Sin has not only affected us personally in our relationship with God, sin has affected us in our relationship with others. Sin has affected the environment for creation was put under a curse. Sin has affected us psychologically – we are broken on the inside. We talked about all of this when we were looking at the first verses of Ephesians 2 and spoke of the four faces of death. But we also

talked about how wherever sin and death has created havoc and destruction God's grace has recreated righteousness and peace. Just as sin has broken the world and the universe for that matter, so the work of Christ is the foundation upon which the world and the universe can have those broken pieces put back together.

And now, I hope you can see why Paul used the word *katartismon* in Ephesians 4:12. God gave gifted leaders to mend, to heal the brokenness of people and we are to use these gifts to put the pieces of our lives back together. And how long are we to do this? We are to do this until we attain to the unity that Christ is working on in the entire world and universe. We work with Christ who is putting everything back together.

And so, when Paul uses the phrase, the unity of the faith, he is talking about much more than unity in and among churches. He is talking about the great vision of everything being united under the headship of Christ. When we have this vision, it should give us great motivation to overcome our petty squabbles in our churches and among our churches. When we have this bigger picture of what Christ is doing and see that we have a role in bringing about the unity of all things, we should live as bigger people and not smaller people.

We must also see the potential and power of unity. We often think of unity in negative terms only, as the absence of strife. We might say, "we are experiencing unity" and be talking about the absence of strife. But unity is something to work towards and be achieved because of its power and potential. The book of Genesis and chapter 11 has an example of the power of unity although it is an example of what can happen when people unite for something wrong. I am talking about the Tower of Babel. God had instructed the post-flood world to spread out to the whole earth, but humanity disobeyed, built a tower devoted to the worship of false gods and God said this: "Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them." And we know what happened, God confused their language so that they could not maintain this unity in their idolatry. And because of their confused language, humanity began to separate from one another and today we have the nations, languages, and cultures of the world.

But God's goal is to reunite the peoples of the world under the headship of Jesus Christ. And this is the vision we have in the book of Revelation. Listen to these words from Revelation 5.

> "And they *sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

This is what Paul has in mind in Ephesians 4:13 when he speaks of the unity of the Christian faith – a unity under the headship of Christ where only righteousness exists, and with such unity that we will one day experience under his Lordship over all, one wonders what amazing things we will do for the glory of God! This is our goal. This is our vision of the Church and of the world. This is why we build one another up with our gifts for the glory of Christ.