

“That they may all be one”

Diversity and unity within the ministry of Jesus

Dorothy Jean Weaver

Even the most casual tour through the canonical Gospels reveals a striking and undeniable fact: Jesus’ disciples and the crowds who gather around him are, by the most positive reading of the Gospels, a motley crew. Within the cultural and religious boundaries

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of their first-century context—largely Palestinian and predominantly Jewish—the people who associate themselves with Jesus of Nazareth reflect vivid diversity on a variety of fronts: class, gender, lifestyle, ethnicity, and ideology. These people are not carefully screened for compatibility with one another or even for their likelihood of success as followers of Jesus. One might actually wonder what Jesus hopes to accomplish with a following this diverse. And yet these are the folks

whom Jesus links to one another in the closest of human bonds, when he names God as their “one Father” (Mt. 23:9; compare Lk. 11:2//Mt. 6:9)¹ and claims them collectively as his brother and sister and mother (Mk. 3:35b//Mt. 12:50b). These are crucial and transformative claims that have profound implications for Jesus’ first-century followers.

And these are claims that we, from our 2000-year distance, need to hear. Within our twenty-first-century context, we too live with diversities on all manner of fronts. And these diversities, even as they expand and enrich our collective identity, present a challenge to the unity for which we long. What can we learn from the story of the earliest Jesus movement with regard to our own diversity and our own unity? How can the canonical accounts of the first-century ministry of Jesus give us insight and courage for our corporate search to be faithful disciples of Jesus, even and precisely in the midst of our twenty-first-century diversity? The

following study offers a brief glimpse of the insight we might gain from the canonical Gospels on the diversity and the unity of the people of God.²

Diversity within the ministry of Jesus

Perhaps the most prominent diversity reflected within the earliest Jesus movement has to do with socioeconomic factors and associated class divisions. Jesus' immediate circle of associates comprises for the most part people of humble origins and means. They are fishermen who ply their trade on the Sea of Galilee and mend their nets on its shore (Mk. 1:16–20//Mt. 4:18–22; compare Lk. 5:1–11; Jn. 21:1–14). They are shepherds who tend their flocks in the wilderness (Lk. 15:4b) or on the mountains of Palestine (Mt. 18:12b), who search persistently after lost or strayed sheep (Lk. 15:4c; Mt. 18:12c), and who live in the fields in order to keep watch over their flocks (Lk. 2:8). And they are village women who grind at the village mill (Mt. 24:41//Lk. 17:35), draw water at the village well (Jn. 4:7), mix yeast with flour to make bread dough (Mt. 13:33//Lk. 13:21), spin wool (Mt. 6:28//Lk. 12:27), serve men (Mk. 1:31//Mt. 8:15//Lk. 4:39), and nurse their children (Mk. 13:17//Mt. 24:19//Lk. 21:23). These are the folks who surround Jesus day by day throughout his ministry.

But there are also people of greater prominence and means within Jesus' circle of associates, men and women alike. Jesus engages with wealthy Jewish men,³ synagogue leaders (Mk. 5:22//Lk. 8:41//Mt. 9:18), respected members of the Jewish Sanhedrin (Mk. 15:43; compare Lk. 23:50), prominent Jews with access to the highest Roman authorities,⁴ Jewish leaders from the Pharisees (Jn. 3:1; Lk. 14:1), teachers of Israel (Jn. 3:10), and wealthy Roman centurions who build synagogues for local Jewish communities (Lk. 7:2–5; compare Jn. 4:46). Jesus encounters women with costly items in their possession (Mk. 14:3//Mt. 26:7; compare Jn. 12:3), wealthy female householders (Jn. 11:1–2; compare Lk. 10:38–42), and women of means who provide for Jesus out of their resources and follow Jesus to Jerusalem (Mk. 15:40–41//Mt. 27:55–56; Lk. 8:1–3). And Jesus' associates likewise include prominent women married to public officials (Lk. 8:3).

Beyond economic disparities Jesus' associates likewise reflect significant divergence in social standing within their respective

communities. Along with rich people (Mt. 27:57) and respected community leaders (Mk. 15:43), Jesus associates regularly and openly with people of low status or public disrepute. There are blind beggars who sit beside the road and importune the passersby (Mk. 10:46//Lk. 18:35; Jn. 9:1/8), and poor widows with little money (Mk. 12:41–44) and no means to support themselves (Lk. 7:11–17). There are tax collectors, who extort their compatriots and earn their contempt.⁵ There are sinners and prostitutes, who associate with the tax collectors and share their negative reputation.⁶ There are women with colorful marital histories (Jn. 4:16–18). And there are Zealots (Lk. 6:15; compare Mk. 3:18//Mt. 10:4), known for their hatred of the Roman occupiers, and criminals executed by Rome for their crimes against the empire (Lk. 23:32–33/39–43).

How can the accounts of the ministry of Jesus give us insight and courage for our search to be faithful disciples of Jesus, even and precisely in the midst of our diversity?

Nor do the diversities stop with economics and social standing. Gender diversity also plays a significant role within Jesus' ministry. In a social world profoundly shaped by patriarchal structures and perspectives, where men are the prominent actors in society, women are strikingly visible and active among Jesus' associates. They seek Jesus out, actively and urgently, to find healing for

themselves (Mk. 5:25–34//Mt. 9:20–22//Lk. 8:43–48) or for others (Mk. 7:24–30//Mt. 15:21–28; Jn. 11:1–44). Men likewise bring women into prominent attention as they appeal to Jesus in their behalf.⁷ And Jesus reaches out on his own initiative to heal women with physical illnesses (Mt. 8:14–15; Lk. 13:10–17). Women are present in the crowds that Jesus heals and feeds (Mt. 14: 21; Mt. 15:38). They bring their children to Jesus for his blessing (Mk. 10:13–16//Mt. 19:13–15//Lk. 18:15–17).⁸ Women follow Jesus throughout his ministry and provide for his physical needs.⁹ They accompany Jesus on the way to his crucifixion (Lk. 23:26–31) and stand vigil at his cross.¹⁰ Women witness Jesus' burial (Mk. 15:47//Lk. 23:55–56//Mt. 27:61) and return to the tomb on the first day of the week to anoint Jesus' body (Mk. 16:1//Lk. 24:1) and see the tomb (Mt. 28:1; compare Jn. 20:1). And because they are present at the tomb, women are the first to learn that Jesus is alive (Mk. 16:1–8; Mt. 28:1–7; Lk. 24:1–8), the first

to meet the risen Jesus (Mt. 28:9–10; Jn. 20:11–17), and the first to proclaim his resurrection (Mt. 28:8/11a; Lk. 24:9–11; Jn. 20:18).

Along with economic, social, and gender diversity, the people who surround Jesus also exhibit a wide range of physical illnesses for which they need healing. The list of those whom Jesus heals is long and diverse. Jesus casts out unclean spirits and demons from those oppressed by the powers of evil.¹¹ He cures the one with epilepsy (Mt. 17:14–21) and heals people burning with fever (Mk. 1:29–31//Mt. 8:14–15//Lk. 4:38–39; Jn. 4:46–54). Jesus restores the limbs of those with paralyzed legs¹² and withered hands (Mk. 3:1–6//Mt. 12:9–14//Lk. 6:6–11), and he heals people who are lame (Mt. 15:29–31; Mt. 21:14), crippled (Lk. 13:10–17), and maimed (Mt. 15:29–31). Jesus cures those regarded as untouchable, men stricken with leprosy (Mk. 1:40–45//Mt. 8:1–4//Lk. 5:12–16; Lk. 17:11–19) and women plagued with long-term hemorrhaging.¹³ He restores sight to people who are blind,¹⁴ hearing to those with deafness (Mk. 7:31–37; 9:14–29), and speech to those who are mute¹⁵ and with speech impediments (Mk. 7:31–37). And Jesus restores life itself to those who have died.¹⁶ As the Gospel accounts clearly suggest, Jesus' circle of associates includes people who have suffered a wide variety of human diseases and afflictions.

And there is ethnic diversity as well. Within the largely Palestinian and predominantly Jewish context of the Gospel narratives, the circle around Jesus includes ethnic outsiders as well: Syrophenicians (Mk. 7:24–30) or Canaanites (Mt. 15:21–28), Samaritans (Lk. 17:11–19; Jn. 4:1–42), Romans (Mt. 8:5–13//Lk. 7:1–10), and Greeks (Jn. 12:20–36). At the beginning of Jesus' life it is Gentile stargazers from the east—most likely Persians—who seek out “the child who has been born king of the Jews” and travel long distances to pay him homage (Mt. 2:1–2). And as Jesus makes his way toward the cross, it is a native of Cyrene, a distant Mediterranean city on the northern coast of Africa, who is forcibly drawn, even in this penultimate moment, into Jesus' circle of influence (Mk. 15:21//Mt. 27:32//Lk. 23:26).

Within Matthew's narrative Jesus knows his mission as a mission to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24) and charges his disciples to bypass the Gentiles and the Samaritans on their mission to these same Israelites (Mt. 10:5–6). But Jesus

nevertheless travels beyond Galilee to predominantly Gentile areas: the district of Tyre and Sidon to the north (Mt. 15:21; compare Mk. 7:24, 31) and the Decapolis across the Jordan to the east (Mk. 5:20; 7:31; compare Mt. 4:25). And Jesus ultimately breaks through his own Israelite boundaries (Mt. 15:24) and finds his calling and his ministry transformed as he engages in dialogue with ethnic outsiders (Jn. 4:1–42; compare Jn. 12:20–36), heals them of their illnesses,¹⁷ and casts out their demons (Mk. 5:1–20// Mt. 8:28–34//Lk. 8:26–39). In Luke’s narrative Jesus specifically highlights foreigners—a widow from Zarephath in Sidon and a leper from Syria—as the recipients of God’s healing power channeled through the ancient Israelite prophets

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Elijah (Lk. 4:25–26) and Elisha (Lk. 4:27).

There can be little question that Jesus’ circle of followers and adherents reflects wide diversities and seemingly intractable differences. Where does the hope for unity lie within this motley assortment of folks? What ideological partnership can exist between Simon the Zealot (Lk. 6:15; compare Mk. 3:18//Mt. 10:4), who hates the pagan Roman occupiers with the righteous passion of a faithful Israelite, and Levi (Mk. 2:14//Lk.

5:27; compare Mt. 9:9) and Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1–10), tax collectors whose rich hands are filled with Roman coins they have extorted from their own compatriots on behalf of the occupying power? What social links connect a destitute widow with two leptons to her name (Mk. 12:41–44) and Joseph of Arimathea (Mk. 15:42–47//Mt. 27:57–61//Lk. 23:50–56), a man whose personal wealth is reflected in the tomb he has hewn in rock for himself (Mt. 27:60), whose personal stature is reflected in his public reputation as “a good and righteous man” (Lk. 23:50) and “a respected member of the council” (Mk. 15:43), and whose political clout gets him access to the highest Roman authorities (Mk. 15:42–45//Mt. 27:57–58//Lk. 23:50–52)? And how can Jesus, with a well-earned reputation as a partygoer (Mt. 11:19//Lk. 7:34), associate himself with John the Baptist, an ascetic (Mt. 11:18//Lk. 7:33)? These questions send us back once again to the Gospels on a search for answers.

Unity within the ministry of Jesus

The search for unity within the circle around Jesus must focus by definition on the person of Jesus himself, since it is Jesus and none other who both calls and draws this improbable and disparate circle into being with his proclamation of the reign of God (Mk. 1:14–15/Mt. 4:17 and throughout) and his ministry of powerful deeds.¹⁸ The unity that exists within Jesus' circle of followers and adherents is not a unity built on common ethnic origins, common social ties, or common ideological perspectives. Rather this unity emerges from the powerful magnetic force of Jesus himself, as he proclaims the reign of God,¹⁹ heals the sick,²⁰ challenges the *status quo* and the religious authorities who carry it out,²¹ calls people to follow him,²² and sends them out²³ on his behalf to multiply his mission. Accordingly, to characterize the unity among Jesus' followers is to identify the prominent motifs highlighted by Jesus' ministry itself.

No doubt the most prominent point of departure in this search for unity lies in the call accounts of the Gospels.²⁴ Here Jesus challenges fishermen (Mk. 1:18–22//Mt. 4:18–22; Jn. 21:15–22; compare Lk. 5:1–11), tax collectors (Mk. 2:13–14//Lk. 5:27–28//Mt. 9:9), wannabe disciples (Mt. 8:18–22//Lk. 9:57–62), the rich and powerful (Mk. 10:17–22//Mt. 19:16–22//Lk. 18:18–25), and all who hear his message (Mt. 10:38//Lk. 14:27; Mk. 8:34//Mt. 16:24) to a lifetime of following. And those who accept this call to follow Jesus find themselves unified by that very act. Following Jesus not only brings them together but it also gives their lives a powerful and unifying focus. These followers go where Jesus goes,²⁵ stay where Jesus stays,²⁶ listen to what Jesus says,²⁷ witness what Jesus does,²⁸ and participate corporately in Jesus' ministry to the crowds.²⁹ Accordingly, the unity among those who follow Jesus is a unity of calling that depends, by definition, on Jesus himself, and not on those whom he calls.

And this is only the beginning. When Jesus calls people to follow him, he claims them as children of God, their one Father³⁰ and their heavenly Father.³¹ And Jesus likewise claims all these children of God as his own siblings: “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt. 12:49b–50//Mk. 3:34b–35//Lk. 8:21). To follow Jesus and to do the will of God creates

indissoluble bonds not only with Jesus and with Jesus' Father but also with all those others who likewise follow Jesus and do the will of God. Here is unity of kinship that cannot be denied. As Jesus points out in parabolic fashion (Lk. 15:30; compare Lk. 15:32), those who are sons (and daughters) of the same Father are always and undeniably brothers (and sisters) of one another.

And for those who follow Jesus and do the will of God, this unity of calling and kinship opens out, ultimately, if gradually, into a unity of character. Jesus' proclamation focuses crucially on the arrival of the reign of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk. 1:15). And to repent and believe in the good news is

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to experience profound transformation of character. The unity among Jesus' followers is ultimately the unity of those whose deep-rooted perspectives and whose daily praxis are invaded and transformed by the reign of God which has come near in the person and the ministry of Jesus.

Such a unity reflects core values of the reign of God, as Jesus spells them out in his proclamation and teaching: reconciliation among brothers and sisters;³² forgiveness for those who have wronged you;³³ refusal to judge, condemn, or despise others;³⁴ refusal to harbor jealousy (Mt. 20:1–16; compare Lk. 10:38–42; 12:13–21) or anger (Mt. 5:21–22); love of enemies (Mt. 5:38–48//Lk. 6:27–36); active concern for the physical welfare of others;³⁵ faithfulness vis-à-vis earthly riches;³⁶ honesty and sincerity in place of hypocrisy (Mt. 6:1–18; 23:1–39); profound trust in God for the resources of daily living (Mt. 6:25–34); sexual integrity and marital faithfulness;³⁷ radical hospitality to all people in need;³⁸ and willingness to emulate Jesus in being a servant and slave to others (Mk. 10:41–45//Mt. 20:24–28; Lk. 22:24–27; Jn. 13:1–20).

As the canonical Gospels make clear, however, such unity is deeply challenging for Jesus' disciples. They find Jesus' marital ethics rigorous beyond possibility (Mt. 19:10). They experience extravagant generosity as waste (Mk. 14:3–9//Mt. 26:6–13). They are ready to "command fire to come down from heaven" in order

to consume their enemies (Lk. 9:54). They strike out with the sword when threatened (Mk. 14:47//Mt. 26:51//Lk. 22:49–50//Jn. 18:10). And they regularly jockey for positions of prominence within their own circle (Mk. 9:33–37//Mt. 18:1–5//Lk. 9:46–48; Mk. 10:35–45//Mt. 20:20–28; Lk. 22:24–27). Transformation of character, as the Gospels illustrate, is not an instantaneous reality but rather an ongoing, lifelong process of growth toward unity, a growth intimately tied to the lifelong calling to follow Jesus.

But if the unity of Jesus' disciples grows out of calling, kinship, and character, it likewise grows out of commission. As the Gospels make clear, it is the disciples' common mission—given to them by the risen Jesus, who sends them out (Mt. 28:18–20; Jn. 17:18; 20:21; compare Lk. 24:44–49) on a cosmic journey to “proclaim the good news to all nations” (Mk. 13:10//Mt. 24:14)—that unites the followers of Jesus in a monumental task far beyond their individual capabilities and their individual lifespans. This task will occupy the energies of Jesus' disciples until the end (Mt. 24:14). It is a task for which they need the authority of God (Mt. 28:18b–20a), the presence of the risen Jesus (Mt. 28:20), and the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 24:46b–49; Jn. 20:21–22). And this task is, ultimately, one that calls for the unity that God alone can give (Jn. 17:20–23a), “so that,” as Jesus prays, “the world may know that you have sent me” (Jn. 17:23b).

Diversity and unity: challenge, gift, and calling. May God give us the courage to acknowledge the challenge, receive the gift, and live out the calling with faithfulness.

Notes

¹ In this article I will use the first-century “God language” found within the canonical Gospels. All biblical references are from the NRSV.

² This study will draw on the collective witness of the canonical Gospels for a composite account of the ministry of Jesus and, where possible, will cite parallel texts to substantiate this account.

³ Mk. 10:17–22//Mt. 19:16–22//Lk. 18:18–25; Mt. 27:57.

⁴ Mk. 15:42–45//Mt. 27:57–58//Lk. 23:50–52//Jn. 19:38.

⁵ Mk. 2:13–17//Mt. 9:9–13//Lk. 5:27–32; Lk. 15:1–2; Lk. 19:1–10.

⁶ Mk. 2:15–17//Mt. 9:10–13//Lk. 5:29–32; Lk. 15:1–2; Mt. 21:28–32; Lk. 7:36–50.

⁷ Mk. 1:29–31//Lk. 4:38–39; Mk. 5:21–24/35–43//Mt. 9:18–19/23–26//Lk. 8:40–42/49–56.

⁸ While the Gospel writers do not specify this detail, it seems most likely that it is women, those who are the normal caregivers for children, who take this initiative.

⁹ Mk. 15:40–41//Mt. 27:55–56//Lk. 23:55–56; compare Mk. 1:31//Mt. 8:15.

- ¹⁰ Mk. 15:40–41//Mt. 27:55–56//Lk. 23:55–56; Jn. 19:25–27.
- ¹¹ Mk. 1:21–28//Lk. 4:31–37; Mk. 1:32–34//Mt. 8:16–17//Lk. 4:40–41; Mk. 3:7–12//Lk. 6:17–19; Mk. 5:1–20//Mt. 8:28–34//Lk. 8:26–39; Mk. 7:24–30//Mt. 15:21–28; Mk. 9:14–29//Lk. 9:37–42; Mt. 12:22–30//Lk. 11:14–23; Mt. 4:23–25; Mt. 9:32–34.
- ¹² Mk. 2:1–12//Mt. 9:1–8//Lk. 5:17–26; Mt. 4:23–25; Mt. 4:23–25; Mt. 8:5–13//Lk. 7:1–10//Jn. 4:46–53; Jn. 5:1–46.
- ¹³ Mk. 5:25–34//Mt. 9:20–22//Lk. 8:43–48.
- ¹⁴ Mk. 8:22–26; Mk. 10:46–52//Mt. 20:29–34//Lk. 18:35–43; Mt. 9:27–31; 12:22–30; 15:29–31; 21:14; Jn. 9:1–41.
- ¹⁵ Mt. 12:22–30//Lk. 11:14–23; Mt. 9:32–34; 15:29–31.
- ¹⁶ Mk. 5:21–24/35–43//Mt. 9:18–19/23–26//Lk. 8:40–42/49–56; Lk. 7:11–17; Jn. 11:1–44.
- ¹⁷ Mk. 7:24–30//Mt. 15:21–28; Mt. 8:5–13//Lk. 7:1–10; Lk. 17:11–19.
- ¹⁸ Mk. 6:1–6//Mt. 13:54–58; Lk. 4:14–30; Mt. 11:2–6//Lk. 7:18–23 and throughout.
- ¹⁹ Mk. 1:14–15//Mt. 4:17 and throughout the synoptic Gospels. Matthew frequently substitutes “kingdom of heaven” for “kingdom of God.” John cites this term only infrequently (3:3, 5).
- ²⁰ See the discussion above. This motif is prominent in all four canonical Gospels.
- ²¹ Mt. 23:1–39 and throughout.
- ²² Mk. 1:18–22//Mt. 4:18–22; Mk. 2:13–14//Lk. 5:27–28; compare Mt. 9:9; Mt. 8:18–22//Lk. 9:57–62; Mt. 10:38//Lk. 14:27; Mk. 8:34//Mt. 16:24; Mk. 10:21//Mt. 19:21//Lk. 18:22; Jn. 21:15–22; compare Mk. 10:28//Mt. 19:27–28//Lk. 18:28.
- ²³ Mk. 6:6b–13//Lk. 9:1–6; Lk. 10:1–20; Mt. 9:35–10:42; Mt. 28:18–20; Jn. 20:19–23; compare Lk. 24:44–49.
- ²⁴ See footnote 23.
- ²⁵ Mk. 2:23; 3:7; 6:1; 8:27 and throughout.
- ²⁶ Jn. 1:39; 2:12.
- ²⁷ Mt. 5:1–2; 10:5; 13:36–37a; 18:1–3a; 24:3–4a and throughout.
- ²⁸ Lk. 5:1–11; Mt. 8:23–27; Mk. 9:2–8; Jn. 13:1–20 and throughout.
- ²⁹ Mk. 6:30–44//Mt. 14:13–21//Lk. 9:10b–17; Mk. 8:1–10//Mt. 15:32–39.
- ³⁰ Mt. 23:9.
- ³¹ Mk. 11:25//Mt. 6:14–15; Mt. 5:16, 45; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 18, 26; 7:11; 10:20, 29; 13:43; 18:14; 21:31; Mt. 5:48//Lk. 6:36; Mt. 6:9//Lk. 11:2; Mt. 6:32//Lk. 12:30; Lk. 12:32; 15:12, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29.
- ³² Mt. 5:21–26//Lk. 12:57–59; Mt. 18:15–20.
- ³³ Mk. 11:25//Mt. 6:14–15; Mt. 6:12//Lk. 11:4; Mt. 18:21–35.
- ³⁴ Mt. 7:1–5//Lk. 6:37–42; Mt. 18:10–14//Lk. 15:3–7; compare Mk. 14:3–9//Mt. 26:6–13//Lk. 7:36–50//Jn. 12:1–8; Lk. 18:9–14.
- ³⁵ Mt. 25:31–46; Lk. 16:19–31; compare Lk. 12:41–48.
- ³⁶ Mk. 10:17–22//Mt. 19:16–22//Lk. 18:18–23; Lk. 6:20–26; 12:13–21; 16:19–31; 19:1–10; 21:1–4.
- ³⁷ Mk. 10:2–12//Mt. 19:3–9; Mt. 5:27–30, 31–32; compare Jn. 4:16–18; 7:53–8:11.
- ³⁸ Mk. 2:13–17//Mt. 9:9–13//Lk. 5:27–32; Lk. 4:16–30; Lk. 10:25–37; 14:12–14; Mt. 22:1–10//Lk. 14:15–24; Lk. 19:1–10.

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