

Unity and Diversity in the Local Church

Class 1: Diversity? Unity? For God's Sake!

I. Introduction

Bill Anderson started visiting CHBC in his early 60s. He wasn't a Christian. At the time, he taught a class at Harvard called "The Madness of Crowds." It teaches concepts of mass psychology by examining things like New England witch hunts, urban legends and financial panics. But a career studying crowds didn't prepare him for the local church. The diversity of the congregation impressed him. But beyond that: the *genuineness* of that diverse fellowship impressed him. In his words: "It was striking from the first moments I came through the door. It was clear that something special was going on. The relationships seemed not so much unnatural as highly uncommon. So I was introduced to the idea of a healthy church—a concept that had before eluded me." The power of this corporate witness provoked him. And it was part of what God used to lead him to Christ. To join our church. And eventually, to marry Claudia who first invited him.

Where did this corporate witness come from? It came from the gospel. When you become a Christian, you undergo a complete identity shift. Now, you're a new creation (2 Cor 5:17); part of God's family (Gal 4:5); united to Jesus (Rom 6:1-8). Being a Christian is more fundamental to your identity than your family, your ethnicity, your job, your nationality, your sexuality, your personality—or any other way this world defines identity. And so the unity you share with every other Christian is more profound than any other conceivable bond. That means that wherever the gospel exists, diversity should exist too since all types of people can be saved. Diversity is a natural outgrowth of the gospel.

And so, diversity's probably more important—and at the same time less important--than you may have thought. It's more important because, as Bill discovered, when people with no worldly bonds or connections love each other sacrificially in the church, it's a giant advertisement that something supernatural is going on. Jesus says, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

People may ask, “Why is race so important?” Jesus tells us. Far from “nice to have,” unity and diversity should be one of the most obviously supernatural characteristics of a local church.

But at the same time, diversity might well be less important than you’ve thought—because it’s not an end in itself. And it’s easy for people or whole churches to make it such. Folks love to talk about how diverse heaven is, and rightly so, but we ought to remember that hell is diverse too. What’s more, you can be a diverse church, yet an unhealthy church with no unity, love, or gospel. The kind of diversity that was compelling to Bill was compelling precisely because it highlighted gospel unity. And so diversity in a local church matters very little in and of itself. It matters a ton to the extent that it reflects a deeper reality of gospel unity that is believed and lived out.

So that’s the topic of our class. Where does this unity and diversity come from? How can we, Christians in minority and the majority, live it out? What does this practically look like in real life? And what does it accomplish for God and for the gospel? Today I want to start our exploration by asking a very simple question. “Why does God care about unity and diversity in the local church?” We have all sorts of reasons for why these virtues are important, but sometimes our reasons are different than God’s—and that can get us into trouble. We’ll start by tracing the theme of unity in diversity through Scripture from beginning to end. We’ll talk about reasons we care about these things that may diverge from God’s purposes. And finally we’ll try to nail down exactly why diversity and unity matter to God.

But first, let me explore this in the form of a question. ***Why are unity and diversity important in a church?*** We’ll answer this in our second point on the front of your handout.

II. Unity and Diversity in the Bible

The story of community in the Bible begins with God. Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man in our image, after our likeness.’” And so did Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in perfect fellowship from eternity past—make just a man? No, verse 27, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created *them*.” Man and woman, we read in

chapter 2, where the woman was to be “a helper fit for him.” She corresponded and complemented him. She was different from him.

And yet, verse 24, she would be one flesh with him. Man and woman don’t simply point us to God because of how they represent Christ’s love for the church in Ephesians 5. They image God in their diversity—and their unity. From the very beginning of man’s existence it is community—even this community of two—that images God. God, who is three different persons, so there’s the diversity, yet who function in perfect harmony as one God; there’s the powerful unity that you and I get to display. Isn’t this wonderful?

And that’s just the beginning. God calls Abraham and tells him that his plan will be to create an entire nation from his descendants, and these descendants would be the Jews. But it’s ironic, isn’t it? The first Jew, Abraham, was technically a Gentile. And sure enough, Exodus 4:23, when God creates this nation Israel, he calls them “my son.” He tells, Pharaoh, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” Why does God call Israel “my son?” Here’s one reason: Sons look like their dads. They image their fathers. The task to image the triune God now falls to an entire nation, of all sorts of different kinds of people; there’s a corporate representation. But those people don’t image God very well, do they? So in Ezekiel 36 God explains that he threw them out of the land because instead of proclaiming his name, they defamed it. In a sense, it was a bigger repeat of what happened in Eden: Adam and Eve, remember our little, united, diverse community of two who bore God’s image, they defamed God’s image and they were thrown out of Eden; and now, hundreds of years later, with hundreds of thousands of descendants, that same image-bearing problem exists.

But then Jesus arrives on the scene. As the gospel of Matthew opens, Jesus comes out of Egypt. 2:15, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” He’s called into the desert, like Israel. He’s tempted, like Israel—and yet perfectly trusts the Word of his Father. And so at his baptism, what does God the Father say? “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus perfectly images the Father. So what does Colossians 1 say? “Jesus is the image of the invisible God.” He finally fulfills God’s mandate at Creation to bear his image perfectly.

But he’s only one man, isn’t he? And so God’s plan continues. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurates the church. His followers now have a special job: to reveal him to the world and as I quoted from John 13 before, one

of the most powerful ways they will reveal him is through their love for one another.

Now, we saw the diversity of God's plan expands from a diversity of two in Genesis 1 (Adam & Eve) to a nation in Exodus. So what do we see in the Great Commission of Matthew 28? That the church will include disciples from *all* nations. As God had said through the prophet Isaiah (49:6)

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

That's exactly what we see as the Gentiles, Cornelius and his family enter what's at the time a Jewish Christian church in Acts 10. And then we see God's intention for a diverse people united in Jesus laid out in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He describes the gospel in chapter 2 verses 1-10. And his first implication of the gospel, chapter 2 verse 11 is that the Gentiles are to be members of God's new family just like the Jews, just like Israel. Verse 13: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”

Why is this diversity a big deal? Because Jews and Gentiles had been enemies for centuries theologically, politically, and ethnically—it's hard to imagine two groups with less in common or more at odds. But when Paul describes their unity, he reaches for the most committed bonds we know of: ethnicity and family. He calls the Jews and Gentiles these different groups (plural) ONE new humanity (verse 15) and ONE new household (verse 19). This unity in Christ is, chapter 3 verse 20, what is “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.” Humanly, the uniting of such diverse peoples is impossible! Yet with God all things are possible.

But why? Why does God create unity between Jew and Gentiles in the local church? Chapter 3 verse 10: “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rules and authorities in the heavenly places.” In other words: it's to show off the glory of God. To image God.

Through its astonishing diversity and yet supernatural unity, the church images God in a way Adam and Eve could not. In a way that Israel could not. Amazingly, even in a way that Jesus alone could not.

And so what is the centerpiece of God's glory in heaven? It is, Revelation 7:9,

“a great multitude that no one could number, from *every* nation, from *all* *tribes* and *peoples* and *languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

Notice that you have people from every tribe—there's diversity—all clothed in white, which represents Christ's righteousness—there's unity. Unity amid diversity. All these different people, with one song, praising their one, risen Lord. Unity and diversity matter because that's how we image God. Because they are the crucial factors of his plan, from beginning to end, creation to consummation, for his people show off his glory to his universe.

So what in the Bible seems worth living for? Is it the gospel? Ephesians 4 says that for a local church to protect the integrity of the gospel, we need the full diversity of brothers and sisters he's given them. Is it the Great Commission? John 13 says that it's our love for each other—and in Ephesians 3 we see it's especially love across boundaries of diversity—that is God's evidence for faith for the unbeliever. Is heaven what's worth living for? Heaven is diversity, united around God's throne. Is it the glory of God? It is love in a diverse church that makes even the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms marvel at his wisdom. I remember one Sunday evening one older white sister and one older black sister were sitting next to each other, and Mark called on both of them to pray. I thought to myself, isn't this amazing, two different sisters—who grew up in a culture that legalized segregation—are sitting together among a church, before the throne of God, united. I think the rulers of heaven were saying then, “God, you are so wise!”

But more importantly than us, why does God care about unity and diversity in the local church? Because it is how he intends to show off his glory in this present age.

He is the most beautiful, the most satisfying, the most delightful being in all of existence. He is the source and definition of all those words. And the most loving thing he can do, the highest good he can accomplish, is to let his creation know him. How's that going to happen? Through grand mountain vistas the amazing design of the human body or extreme acts of altruism or exploding quasars or brilliant ideas? Yes, a little. But much more than that, way more than that: through churches like this one. And in particular, through their unity in diversity that shows off the supernatural bond of commonality in Christ Jesus and the power of his gospel. *That's* why these things matter to God. And that's why they should matter to us.

III. Why We Care About Unity and Diversity

The problem is that we often care about unity and diversity for lesser reasons than God does. Sometimes that works out OK, you know, Paul was happy that Christ was preached even if the preachers had mixed motives. But sometimes it comes to disaster. So what I want to do now is to talk about this together. I'm going to give you a few different, maybe surprising, reasons why we value unity and diversity. And then I want you to tell me what's wrong with each of them, and what the consequences might be if we hold too closely to that reason, OK?

Subpar reasons to value unity in the local church

- Unity means we have less conflict [but we're afraid to rock the boat when needed. It's unity around *the gospel*—which means when the gospel's at risk, we are willing to destroy unity to protect it.]
- Unity looks good to the world [this is good in a John 13:35 sense. But it can lead to being afraid to do what's unpopular, fear of man.]

Subpar reasons to value diversity in the local church

- Diversity means anyone from any background can feel comfortable here [though those identities are important, we can tend to idolize them; we can include anybody! the whole point of the local church is that they're secondary. In fact, *very* secondary to our identity in Christ.]
- Diversity makes our church look good to outsiders [we can be prideful about something God has built—and a temptation to manufacture it

ourselves. And it can lead to discontentedness with the level of diversity God has given to a church]

One thing we're going to talk about in this class is the difference between human-built unity and diversity, and God-built unity and diversity. The grand purpose of God for the local church only works when our unity and diversity are obviously *not* the result of *our* hard work and ability. That's what Bill Anderson noted when he first visited CHBC. As an expert in how crowds operate, he was surprised to see people without much in common caring deeply for each other when so little self-interest was at stake. That must mean that there's something beneath the surface that holds them all together. And what is that? Jesus. The goal of our unity and diversity is to point to the reality and power of Jesus.

But it's important to state right up front that what we're interested in is not unity and diversity per se. It's God-glorifying unity and diversity. And, thank God, it is what he builds in churches all the time.

IV. What Kind of Unity and Diversity Matters?

You might notice that I've waited a long time to actually define unity and diversity for the purposes of our class. That's because we really need to understand *why* it's important—and especially, to God—before we can figure out exactly what kind of unity matters, what kind of diversity matters.

Unity

So let's start with unity. What kind of unity will accomplish all that we've talked about so far this morning? Well, it's interesting—when we hear calls for unity in the church, it's often about organizational unity. People say, “if we just didn't have all these denominations, if Christians could all agree and work together, then more people would get saved.”

But while we care very deeply about unity between churches, there are two problems with this focus on organizational unity:

1. The unity we see in the New Testament is unity between true Christians who believe the gospel. Not all organizations that call themselves Christian have a Christian understanding of the good news. And we can't

simply brush all that under the rug; that would be a denial of the biblical gospel. This is an example of prizing obeying God over how unity might look to the world.

2. The unity we see in the New Testament is primarily a unity *within* the local church—and only secondarily between the universal Church. It is unity where unity is most difficult: unity between people who rub shoulders on a regular basis. Who have to put up with each other's sin and eccentricities and annoyances. When the New Testament writes about unity, it mainly has in mind unity between people who are sharing life together in a local church. Yes: we think that unity between churches (big C) is important. I used to work for Together for the Gospel, after all. But that's not mainly what we should be thinking about.

So what is the unity that matters? It is when we value our shared bond in Christ more than anything that might divide us. Biblical unity is when we value our shared bond in Christ more than anything that might divide us. And it shows up as love between true believers that should confound the world.

Diversity

God's purposes should also lead us to think carefully about our definition of diversity. Sometimes "diversity" is merely a stand-in for "ethnic (or racial) diversity." We usually evaluate the "diversity" of a local church based on the number of colors we can count of people's skin in the pews. And indeed there is a unique history in the American, evangelical church of division and hostility that arose over the one issue of ethnicity, and we should not minimize that or glance over it. It's no secret that the church has botched this issue at times. Not because of our gospel, but because of sinful mindsets that fostered heresies about race and human dignity and tried to divorce those things from the gospel and its implications.

Nonetheless, if we *only* focus on that history, we might get a one-dimensional idea of diversity, when the biblical understanding of diversity seems multi-faceted. God is complex, and people who bear his image, are complex. So is ethnicity *all* that we should care about if we have God's purposes in mind for diversity?

Well, no. The Jew vs. Gentile divide of the New Testament church was a divide of ethnicity, *but also* of cultural background and religious upbringing and politics. In the same way, we want to encourage unity across any barrier that society has put up but which the gospel has torn down.

So as we think about diversity, I want to give you a few different categories to keep in mind. But before I do that, I want to make sure that this is more than just an academic exercise. So I want each of you to write down the names of 10 of your closest friends in our church. I know it's hard to think of your 10 *closest* friendships. So just pick 10 who are pretty close. Then as I run through these, check off which of these friendships apply to at least one these categories.

Do your friendships have a...

1. **Diversity of age?** So which of those 10 friends you listed are notably older or younger than you?
2. **Diversity of political affiliation?**
3. **Diversity of educational background?** Maybe you've got a college or grad degree. Anyone on your list without one? Or vice versa?
4. **Diversity of income or social level.** In this city, income isn't always a great predictor of social category. But I think we have some idea of who falls where.
5. **Diversity of personality type.** Can you see diversity of personality types within your friendships in this church? Are any of your friends extraverts? Introverts? Socially smooth? Socially awkward?
6. **Diversity of cultural background.**
7. **Diversity of gender.**
8. **Diversity of where people grow up.** Perhaps nationality.
9. **And, of course, a diversity of ethnicity.**

We need to keep all these categories in mind as we think about diversity. In some settings, some kinds of diversity may not be possible given who lives there. In other settings, some kinds of diversity may not be particularly remarkable given God's common grace in that community. But in every setting, the local church should be characterized by unity highlighted by diversity; this is only possible because of the transcendent bond of faith in Jesus Christ.

Which categories of diversity do you think you've seen God's grace especially at work at CHBC? Which are places where we need to pray God would do still more work?

Conclusion

Let me finish our time together with an analogy from marriage that I think is useful. I mentioned at the very beginning of our class how in marriage the husband and wife are different by design. Let me make clear again: they're equal in dignity and worth, different in role. They are designed to complement each other. In fact, their strength is in their difference from each other. If they're exactly the same, what's the point? Remember, that's why God makes a fit for Adam. (Gen. 2:18). As anyone who's married knows full well, those differences can drive us crazy at times. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, right? Our temptation is to think, "if only he/she was more like me, then we wouldn't have to deal with this mess." And we all know how short-sighted that is. I've been married for four years and yet I'm still tempted to think that way!

And yet it's not all about difference, is it? The paradox of Genesis 2 is that verse 18--the strength in difference--must fit with verse 24--that they be one flesh. All the husband and wife's differences are only conflict and chaos if there's not also committed unity. If we don't feel like we're one. And so marriage is a quest to do both those things well. To protect and cherish and value the difference, and to pursue unity. When we can do both, it's a beautiful thing. And we can only do both by God's grace.

So how much more grace do we need for our church!? We are a body of a thousand different parts — and each part is necessary (Eph. 4:16). Our job is to thank God for that diversity, and to prayerfully work toward the unity God's given us through his Spirit.

So let's finish our time by praying for that together, and let me encourage you this week to commit to praying for those areas of growth we talked about earlier.