

Unity and Diversity in the Local Church

Class 2: How God Builds Unity and Diversity

I. Introduction

Last week we learned about God's purposes for unity and diversity in the church.

Can anyone remind us why God cares about unity and diversity?

To quote: 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. 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.

Jamie told me a story I want to share: When he was a sophomore in high school, he spent a summer in the recently broken-up Soviet Union, and he bought his mom a vase in a Moscow shop. At home he filled it with water, put fresh flowers in it. But a few hours later, much to his dismay, the water was dripping out of the vase and onto the floor. It turns out the vase was cracked. But the vendor had glazed it over so that it looked perfectly fine.

There was a unity there that was artificial. And so once the truth was out, the vase hardly served as a testimony to the craftsman's ability. No: it advertised his incompetence.

It's that distinction between real and artificial diversity in the church that we want to look at this morning.

II. Unity in Diversity is God's Work

To do that, let's start in Ephesians 2-3 that we talked about last week. If you have a Bible, open it up there.

Paul gives us the gospel in the first 10 verses of chapter 2, and then he moves to its primary implication: unity in the diversity of Jew and Gentile. OK. So here's what I want you to see in this passage that we didn't cover last week. We'll do a little grammar lesson. ***Can someone find a verb in this section that runs from 2:11 to 3:21?*** What is it? And another? OK. Anyone able to find a third?

[point out that all these verbs are descriptive. How many imperative verbs do we see? The only imperative verb in the whole section is 2:11, "remember."]

This section of Scripture is not about what we need to accomplish in the local church. It's not about what we need to do. No: it's about what God has *done*.

There's nothing left for us to do! The gospel creates new life and fashions for every Christian a new identity in Christ that is infinitely more profound than any worldly identity based on ethnicity, education, class, or ability. And so it brings together Christians from all backgrounds who share that same identity. Another way to put this is that when Jesus prays in John 17:21 that "they may all be one," we can have absolute confidence that God is answering Jesus' prayer! This unity between those who believe the gospel is an accomplished fact, and the bond we feel with true believers we've never met testifies to that.

Now, when you make a fire, what comes out? Heat. Likewise, when Christ saves all sorts of different people and calls them to one another in his church, what happens? Unity. In that sense, there's nothing for us to *do* to establish unity in diversity. God's already built the fire. We just get to watch, and then worship as God does the impossible in the community of the local church.

What must we do to see unity and diversity co-exist in our own churches? In one sense, we do nothing.

BUT of course, does the fact that God is the one who establishes our unity mean that we should lazily sit back and expect people with all sorts of different personalities and backgrounds to love another automatically? Do we all just sing kumbyaya every Sunday evening? No. Again, marriage is a helpful picture here; I

have yet to meet the husband who thinks, “Hey, I’m married; I’m united to my wife. The unity this marriage will enjoy now requires no more work.” No, we need to cultivate unity. And we’ll come to that in a bit.

But it’s so easy to jump immediately to what we need to do and forget what God has done. We evangelicals have a tendency toward immediately jumping toward an action. Mark Knoll, an evangelical writer, says in *Divided by Faith*, that:

“Evangelicals—like the broader American Culture they shape—value action more than careful thought...The evangelical culture allows little space for broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment.” That’s a piercing, but true indictment.

Unity and diversity are *God’s* doing. Too often churches cultivate these virtues by doing things that, frankly, would probably attract a diverse crowd even if the people coming weren’t Christians. Just like universities and corporations pursue diversity. But we need to remember that as Christians, we’ve got something special going on. God is working a unity and diversity wherever the gospel is believed that is evidently supernatural. This isn’t just the natural laws of social dynamics at play!

So what happens if we *don’t* have this kind of unity and diversity in our churches? What if our churches aren’t diverse, or they’re diverse but not united, or the unity

and diversity we have is more due to our expertise at niche marketing than a clear demonstration of the Spirit's power?

III. When God-Built Unity and Diversity go Missing

There's a ton that we lose. But let me zero in on two things that the Bible says depend on unity and diversity in the church.

1. Preservation of the gospel

It's interesting, looking at Ephesians 4, how we are to stay true to the gospel. Open up there if you have a Bible. Christ gives us (that is, churches) ministers of the Word, verse 11. What do they do? They equip us—by teaching us—for the work of the ministry, “for building up the body of Christ.” They are equippers; we are ministers. And what's the result? Unity and maturity, verse 13. And stability, verse 14. Various teachings may blow here and there, but we are grounded in the gospel. And what does this ministry depend on? Verse 15 and 16: diversity. Let me read these verses from your handout:

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held

together by every joint with which it is equipped, *when each part is working properly*, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

We need every part working properly so that the body can build itself up in love...so that we can reach unity and maturity, so that we can hold onto the gospel.

At one level, this is straightforward. God has given each person to a congregation for a reason. We need all of them—all of their diverse giftings—in order to do what He’s asked us to do as a church.

But I think there’s more going on here than that. How exactly does a church protect the gospel? Is it mainly having a good statement of faith? Or solid preaching? Well, those things are helpful. Even necessary. But in reality, they fuel something else, which are the thousands of different conversations that happen between members each week about their walk with Christ. An encouraging conversation helps me return to faith after a moment of temptation. Do that a thousand times and you’ve got a typical week in the life of CHBC. Do it a million times and we’ve held onto that faith for the next generation. It is, to quote Ephesians 4, “speaking the truth in love.” At the most basic level, that’s how we hold onto the gospel.

Now, let's press here: Again, what does diversity have to do with that?

Well, somewhat counterintuitively, the less you have in common with a friend at church, the more grounded your relationship is with them. The more you're likely to speak the truth in love even when it hurts. Let's say you've got a good friend who you share a lot in common with. What do you talk about? Well, all sorts of stuff. Why are you friends? Well, Jesus to be sure—but probably a bunch of other things as well. You know, I've got Jonathan Morgan. We're around the same age, we both have babies, our wives are both pregnant, we're both African-Americans, the main difference we have is that he likes Duke Basketball and I think that's an offense to God and man.

But contrast that with a friendship where you've got nothing in common but Jesus. You may not *only* talk about your shared faith—but it's probably a big piece of your conversation since you don't have much else in common. And instead of that friendship being grounded in Jesus *and* where you grew up *and* what sport you like to play *and* whatever else...it's just grounded in Jesus. Who never changes. Who is far more stable than any of those other things. That's a friendship that preserves faith.

The second thing that the Bible says depends on unity and diversity is ...

2. Confirmation of the gospel

Without unity and diversity, we hinder our ability as a church to confirm the truth and power of the gospel. We've already looked at this, so I won't spend too much time on it. But do you remember in John 13:35 what it is that will show the world that we are his disciples? [love for one another.] Well, what kind of love most shows that? In Ephesians 3, it isn't just love, but especially love for one another across the diversity of Jew and Gentile that shows off the manifold wisdom of God even to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Jesus' challenge here from Matthew 5 is useful for us: *"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"* Loving people whom the world says you should hate is a powerful witness.

Beloved, relationships form around something you have in common with someone else. When relationships form in the church, and it's obvious the people have nothing in common with each other, it doesn't mean that there's no bond there. What it means is that the bond is Christ. He's the X-factor that explains the church when nothing else can. And when that shared bond runs deep—as deep as family, as deep as tribe and deeper—that powerfully shows that what is happening in the church truly is supernatural. And when we know its supernatural, we know that we don't deserve the credit for being diversity experts; no, God deserves the glory.

What matters here is that we see *God*-created unity in diversity. If we have unity and diversity that stem from anything else, that's not necessarily bad thing—but it doesn't accomplish what we've been talking about here. A university may promote ethnic diversity. That's not going to show off the gospel. A neighborhood may plan its design to cultivate multi-generational diversity. That's not going to show off the gospel.

All these things may be good—but when we look at the local church, we need to see a unity in diversity that is a giant sign pointing to the gospel. God needs to do this work, ultimately.

So if God does it, what is our responsibility? This is point IV on your handout.

Does all this mean that we sit back lazily and wait for it to happen? Do we join a church that's diverse—so we can pat ourselves on the back for being in a diverse church—and then do nothing?

Well, moments after Paul establishes that it's God alone who unites Jew and Gentile in the Ephesian church, he says in Eph 4:3: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." You recognize that from our church covenant. Make every effort. Hardly sounds like sitting back and watching what happens, does it? That's not a descriptive verb like the many we looked at before; it's a new imperative. Like so many of Paul's letters, the first half of Ephesians says

“This is who you are in Christ” – you’re not only sinners made alive, you’re strangers made one. The second half of the book then says “Therefore, live as who you are in Christ.”

And we see this seeming paradox all through Scripture. 1 Corinthians 3:6, speaking about a church, Paul writes, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” God uses us to nurture what he causes to grow. Or 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” OK. God’s gonna do it! Easy peesy, right? Nope, verse 4: “that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.” Oh. We all know the effort that takes. The Christian life is inherently paradoxical; it’s one of resting and working.

When God creates something *within* us, He is glorified as we fight to nurture what He’s created. It doesn’t simply show off the glory of His power, it shows off our faith in His goodness.

So what’s that look like? Let me give you two big categories we’ll be working with for the rest of these weeks.

1. We need to stop getting in the way. Sadly, we sometimes get in the way to the extreme. We had a church member once who had been excommunicated from his all-white Baptist church in Alabama because he invited four African-American believers to church. And he was the pastor. In

international missions, the “homogeneous growth” principle long held sway—and even does today. It argues that different castes in India, or different ethnicities in Laos, for example, should make up separate churches since similarity breeds growth. How dreadful. Both because of what it compromises about the Gospel, but also for how short-sighted it is. What more powerful witness could there be in early twentieth-century India than for believers to show through their diversity that Christ means more than their caste level!

But even setting aside these extremes, we get in the way. Someone picks a church, or a small group, based primarily on how comfortable they feel. Which often translates into, “are most of the people there just like me?”

Or churches segment along demographic lines to build community. A singles group for the singles, a moms of preschool group, a contemporary and traditional service...ministry by similarity tells Christians that community is to be built on the natural things they share in common instead of the supernatural gospel. How much Christian nominalism have we built into the modern evangelical church by insisting on this ministry by similarity instead of ministry by Jesus.

We get in the way. We so get in the way.

But we need to do more than simply stop doing bad things. Like Paul's image of a farmer, we need to *cultivate* unity in diversity. That's point number two:

2. Cultivate unity in diversity

We need to guard unity in diversity. To nurture it. To sacrifice for it. We'll take several more weeks to flesh this out, but let me begin with four categories.

1) Recognize the invisibility of your own culture

The first time you were told you had an "accent" to your speech, you probably laughed at the thought. "I don't have an accent. It's *other* people who sound strange." Or, it's like thinking vanilla is *not* a flavor of ice cream. Now, those who are part of a minority culture in a church usually don't have any trouble being aware of the majority culture. It's those in the majority who may need to have their eyes opened. Not everyone shares their experience or perspective. For example, Jamie tells this story about one of the first times he got to lead in the prayer of confession on Sunday morning, most of the sins that he confessed are sins that young people, especially young men, tend to fight against. And the pastors rebuked him after that! He'd worked from his own experience outward, assuming everyone was basically like him. Instead, he should have meditated more broadly and prayed about things that our 75 year

old brothers and sisters in Christ are struggling with too. He needed to recognize the invisibility of his culture—the one that comes from all the young people in our church; half our church is under the age of 35.

2) Seek those who are different from you

In a few weeks, we'll talk about the value of *similarity* in a local church. There are ways in which it is really helpful to have other brothers and sisters who share our experiences in life. But we need to recognize that because those relationships are so comfortable, we gravitate toward them. To put it simply, if all your friendships in a church fit into the same mold, you gotta break the mold! So let me ask plainly: Do you have a friend, where you're only friends because you both love Jesus?

3) Embrace sacrifice as honoring to God

It's very possible to enjoy the idea attending of a diverse church, and yet never lift a finger to get to know someone who's actually different from you. It's one thing to say, "I like diversity," quite another to invite someone different than you into your home. Or your life. This is where consumerism in the church has to die. We sacrifice not because of what we get in return. We sacrifice because we love God.

We sacrifice because it shows our faith. We sacrifice to show that we value God's glory more than our own immediate comfort. Christ over Comfort. And that's difficult to remember the longer you stay in a church and the longer you feel like much isn't changing. But trust that God *is* at work for his own sake and remember that you can't see all his work. So whether it's sacrificing our musical preferences or the way we like to schedule our time or what we like to talk about or our money or convenience—or even, like the believers in Hebrews, standing side by side with those who are victims of injustice—we should willingly sacrifice for the sake of unity.

Our brother Thabiti offers a helpful example. At T4G 2010 he said, “We ought not to be like players on the National Football League's All-Star team. Every year the NFL completes an all-star selection process in which the best players from around the league are chosen to play in one all-star game for their respective division's team. The players in each division wear a jersey of the same color. The National Conference may wear blue while the American conference dons white. Yet those wearing the same color jersey do not really belong to the same team. During the game, each player wears the helmet he normally wears during the season, for his actual team—the team that pays his contract. During the all-star game the players do not run hard, hit hard, or risk injury because they are not playing for their actual team. So often Christians behave and think like players on the all-star team. We wear Jersey's that say “Christ” but helmets that say “ethnic culture” or

“political party.” Our political parties or ethnic cultures are the teams whose side we’re really on. And too many of us won’t run hard, play hard or risk for those people who aren’t a part of our ethnicity or our political party or our age bracket.”

Brothers and sisters there is a difference between simply tolerating one another and loving one another. So let us sacrifice brothers and sisters, not because, “well, if you want a diverse church, these are the things you’ve got to do.” No! Let us sacrifice for one another because of what Christ has done!

4) Avoid the fear of man

Don’t be like the Peter in Galatians 2 who gave into fear of man and defamed the unity between Jew and Gentile that Christ bled for.

Fear of man is poisonous to God-given diversity in a congregation. It can lead us to avoid people the world says we should avoid—like Peter did. On the flip side, it can lead us to be discontent with the diversity God’s given us, wanting to have something the world would praise. We need to love diversity in the local church for the same reasons God does. That’s how we avoid these pitfalls.

Conclusion

Interview about living in the minority in a church (someone from a different country and culture)

- Tell us about yourself (where did you grow up, when did you come to OKC, why did you move here?)
- What led you to CHBC?
- What were some of the things that were least comfortable about CHBC when you first came here? What sacrifices did you need to make to fully feel like a member of our church?
- What are ways in which you think the average church member doesn't realize what it's like to be a CHBC member who is of another culture? What do you think we who are not the minority overlook?
- What are ways that we can be more considerate to our brothers and sisters from other cultures?
- How has God used the diversity of CHBC to his glory in your life?