

Class #4: God's Purposes for Similarity in the Church

I. Introduction

So far in this class, we've been talking about unity in diversity in the local church. But this morning we're not looking at *diversity* but *similarity*. In particular, we're looking at why God cares about similarity in the church. Why? Well, let me turn that to you as a question.

What are the potential dangers of *not* talking about similarity in a class like this?

If I can summarize, we need to examine the value of similarity because we need to understand *all* that God has built into our congregation, not just our diversity.

In a class like this, there are really two dangers that we need to avoid:

- 1) Most obviously, we need to avoid a church where people only befriend those who are similar to them. If that happens, we don't have the diversity that glorifies the gospel. Or, if we do have diversity, it's not true unity in diversity but a bunch of pockets of homogeneity. In fact, that's a real danger for a church of our size, where we're large enough for many different subgroups in the church to form their own subcultures. Where moms of young kids only hang out with moms of young kids. And East Asians only know East Asians.

And singles only socialize with singles. That's the danger we've been talking about the most in this class.

- 2) But there's another danger, which is where we feel guilty for any relationship where we have more than Christ in common. So I'm male, married, with young kids, white suburban background, college educated. Does that mean that I should avoid friendships with people who fit into those demographic categories? Or, well, not avoid them entirely but balance time with those people so I don't invest in those friendships any more than I do other people?

Well, there's a few problems with thinking like this:

- It's not how we're made. God's made us to crave understanding—which people who share our background can offer.
- It's short-sighted. There are some real spiritual benefits to a relationship where we share more than Jesus—as I'll explain in a moment—and we *need* those things to grow well.
- It's paralyzing. If I just say, "diverse friendships good, similarity friendships bad," that doesn't give you any ability to make godly tradeoffs between the two. Just like if I teach "evangelism good, career bad" and never teach on the spiritual value of investing in your career, I'll never equip you to tradeoff time and opportunity for evangelism with time and opportunity for your career. We need to understand the

spiritual value on both sides—friendships of diversity, friendships of similarity—if we’re to make good tradeoffs between them.

So that’s what we’re going to do for the rest of our time together. I want to look at the value of similarity in a church. And then we’ll examine some guidelines for navigating the tradeoffs between different types of friendships.

II. The Value of Similarity

Though they were all male and Jewish, Jesus’ disciples were a motley group. Wealthy tax collector Matthew would never in his life, probably, thought of sharing a meal with crazy Simon the zealot. Until he met Jesus, of course. And yet when Jesus chose his inner circle of three, it was three fishermen—Peter, James, and John. Whatever his purposes for choosing those three, Jesus didn’t shy away from their similarity.

So what’s the value of similarity? Well, mainly that people who are similar to me understand me. Whether it’s similar life stage or similar culture —similarity gives someone a natural understanding of you. They don’t have to ask. And that understanding is so useful! Why?

1) People who understand you can instruct you better. Why in Titus 2 does Paul instruct “older women” to train the young women to love their husbands and

children? Why not leave all training to the pastors? Because men and women are different, that's why. And older women know something about being a young woman that neither the young nor the men can speak to.

2) People who understand you can encourage you in your struggles. Think of 2 Cor. 1:4, "we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." Or most profoundly, think of the incarnation. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) Encouragement by someone who "gets it" has a special place in our lives. **Let me turn that into a question for you: what are examples in your life where you've received encouragement that was significant because that person was similar to you?**

3) Understanding builds trust. I've always been struck by the dynamic between trust and understanding in 1 Peter 3. Peter's writing to a woman who is tempted toward fear because she's chosen to submit herself to a man who will sometimes use that authority for his good and not hers. Peter encourages her to resist fear by trusting ultimately in God, not only her husband. But then Peter advises the husband. He says, "Live with your wife in an understanding way." Literally, "according to knowledge." His advice isn't to have a great decision-making track record—though that will certainly help. No: his advice is to know her. To understand her. Beyond that, to make sure that she feels understood and

considered. So while a decision he makes may be difficult for her, she knows that it hasn't been made without careful attention to the cost she'll bear.

4) Understanding gives grace in exhortation. In Galatians, we read about Peter—a Hebrew—caving into those who would force Gentiles to adopt Jewish customs if they wanted to be Christians. And who confronts him? Not a Gentile, but Paul—a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” Paul could see right through what Peter was doing. And as a Jew, no one could accuse Paul of self-serving motives for saying what he did. Do you see the value of his similarity to Peter? There's a wise humility that raises the bar for exhortation when we don't understand someone's background. Yet sometimes that leaves behind some missed opportunities. If I need to be corrected, it's often someone who is similar to me who has confidence that I do in fact need to be corrected—and who can make that correction specific.

We could certainly keep going. But I think those four give us a good taste of why similarity is important in the church. Similarity is important because God uses it to help us follow Christ.

III. Pursuing the Right Balance

Well, so far in this class we've shown the value of diversity in the church—and more specific than that, the value of diversity in *your relationships* in the church. If all your friendships in this church fit into one category, you're missing a huge

reason for why this church exists. Yet we've also seen the value of similarity in the church. If no one understands me because no one is similar to me, it makes my pursuit of Christ that much of a steeper climb. And God has good plans for similarity.

So how can we navigate between these two? Well, as is so often the case I can't give you a fixed set of guidelines. "Make sure that you share no more than 78.9% of your interests with at least 65.7% of your friends and you'll be just fine." Life just doesn't work like that. The best advice I can give you is to talk about this. Ask your friends—maybe the friend who's most different from you and most similar—how you're doing in navigating the balance between similarity and diversity in your friendships in this church. Pray that God would point out any selfishness or short-sightedness in your heart.

That said, here are a few guidelines in this area that I've found helpful.

1) Recognize that you need multiple types of friendships. The image of a "balanced food plate" used by the Department of Agriculture can be helpful here. (When I was growing up it was the food pyramid, but apparently they've upgraded to a plate.) It's unhealthy to eat only burgers and fries – the plate has a section for fruits and vegetables, for grains, and for proteins. So we can think of striving to cultivate a balanced plate of relationships in the church. There are relationships where someone especially builds into you and encourages you. There are

relationships where you build into and disciple someone else. There are mutual friendships. And then – here’s the key – there are relationships where you’re ONLY friends because you’re a Christian, not for any natural reason. All are healthy and important. Some of these categories can overlap. But if there aren’t any in that last category, you should be concerned. And you should also be concerned if you don’t have *any* friendships with people where you share a lot in common. Unless you’re an unusual person, that’s probably not sustainable. The lack of those friendships isn’t cause for a pity party (“no one in my church understands me.”) Remember: God has put you here, at least for now, for a reason. And he understands you. But it is good cause for a conversation with someone you trust.

The best place to start, though, might be to ask ourselves some diagnostic questions. Kind of like the questions we asked a few weeks ago in our first class. How often do you have meaningful conversations with those who are a different age from you? With those who are in a different line of work from yours? Who in the church with a different ethnic background from yours do you know well enough that you could pray for their family and their job?

2) Be honest about what kind of church culture we have. It’s tempting to say that a church is a place where we have nothing in common but Jesus. Sounds great, doesn’t it! Sounds Biblical, sounds spiritual! Problem is: it’s just not true. Every church has a certain culture, a certain feel, a certain majority. So in our church, there are more people with light skin than dark skin. More people who grew up in

American suburbia than anywhere else. More people with post-high school degrees than without. More people (lest I venture into the great unspoken fear that many of us have), who work (I think) for the Republicans than the Democrats. More people under 35 than over 35. More people who like old hymns than who struggle with them. It may not always be like this. And this certainly doesn't mean that someone who isn't in one of those categories can't be a healthy, thriving member here for decades. But what I just described is, I think, true. That is who we are as a church. And it wouldn't serve anyone well to deny that reality.

So later on, Sarah's going to share her experience being an older, single mom from Africa. She was the minority in every category I just described. And she'll share why the loneliness she experienced as a result led her to leave CHBC. When she talks about difficulty fitting in, it wouldn't do well to scold her: "No, Sarah! Come on. When we see you, we don't see an older, African woman. We just see Sarah!"

But you see that so hurtfully erases part of who she is. And it invalidates any challenges she has in this church. Instead, we need to be honest about the fact that yes: this church is a harder place for her than, say for me. In ways that can be wonderfully rewarding, as Jerry shared two weeks ago. But yes: hard. We have the church we have today because in God's sovereign purposes that's what he's given us. We shouldn't be ashamed of that or think it can't change. But we must certainly be honest about its strengths and weaknesses.

3) Learn how to build understanding without similarity. It might sound like I'm saying, "the best way to get to know someone is to have something in common with them." But that is in no way true! Talk with a 90-year-old veteran who still makes it back to his platoon's reunions—a platoon made of men as different as you can imagine. Yet the furnace of war forged them together. Their shared experience gave them understanding. Or ask a husband and wife on their 5th anniversary, how much of your understanding your spouse comes from the stuff you shared in common before you got married, and how much is from the experience of building a marriage these last five years?

Just stick around in this church for 5 more years and I bet you will find you have a lot more people who understand you. Regardless of your demographic similarity. Better than that, make an effort to live life together. Teach a Praise Factory class with someone you don't know well. Disciple someone from an unfamiliar background. Have people over who are really different from you. Just because you're not apparently similar to other people in our church doesn't mean they can't grow in their understanding of you—and vice versa.

4) Recognize that some people need more similarity than others. Now, this is a hard point to make because it can be the entry point for some serious selfishness. Like if I were to say, "some people need more leisure time than others." But I think it's true! Maybe you're a third culture kid who grew up with the military or on the missions field, and you long ago abandoned hope that *anyone* would

understand you based on similarity. Well, that can be rough, but it's also a great gift. Maybe on the other hand you're someone who really, really struggles if you're not in relationships where people intuitively "get" you. Well, God has good purposes for how he's made you as well.

There's nothing spiritually weak about making decisions based on where God *hasn't* given you a particular strength. Weakness in this area is certainly an opportunity for growth—but not necessarily an indicator that something's gone wrong. In other words, being somewhat comfortable in your church is OK. Remember: one way to make sure you're not using that as an excuse to slip into complacency is to talk with your friends about this—and to check your "friendship plate" like I mentioned earlier.

5) Aspire to relationships where similarity isn't necessary. The more we fall in love with the gospel and with Jesus—who we share in common with every true Christian—the more we'll find it natural to build relationships across chasms the world would consider unnatural. The more experience we have loving the "other" (and, by the way, the workplace, a neighborhood, and marriage are great training grounds for this), the better we'll be in situations where we don't share a lot in common. We shouldn't settle for churches built on community of similarity. Instead, we should aspire to build relationships where all we need in common is Jesus.

6) *See similarity as a special, and potentially dangerous stewardship.* I hope that one thing you take away from all of this is that in a church that desires to glorify the gospel, similarity brings cost as well as benefit. The benefit is a natural understanding that can help us in powerful ways. But the cost is that this same similarity can overrun our unity in Jesus. In other words, because we share so much in common, we can be complacent about the spiritual things we also share. So when we find ourselves in relationships that *do* share a few things in common, we need to see that as a special stewardship from God. Not just a gift, but a stewardship—something to be used for his purposes. Our small groups limited to newly married couples are a good example of this. We resist having small groups oriented around similarity as much as possible for reasons you can now understand. But for newly married couples, the opportunity to provide focused teaching, mentoring, and friendships with their peers seems to us to be a benefit that's worth the cost of similarity. But we work hard to limit the cost. We have very focused curriculum for these groups. After all, how terrible would it be to have groups of similarity that didn't accomplish much spiritual good? We taper them off. They meet half as often in the second year as the first so that couples get eased into relationships with people who *aren't* just like them. And no matter how well the community has gelled after two years, we always shut these groups down. So couples will need to be in a group that's less homogenous from then on. This community that's built on similarity is something we need to steward very carefully.

Moving from small groups to one-on-one friendships, I hope you see the same kind of stewardship. Do you have a friend where you share ethnicity, or home town, or school, or profession? That's great! Use it well. You should be more specific in your encouragement, more knowledgeable in your exhortation. When you answer the question, "what's the value of similarity in that relationship?" I hope that "because it makes things so comfortable" is not at the top of your list. Let's use that similarity for God's honor and glory, not just our own comfort.