

# Unity and Diversity in the Church

## *Class 6: Counsel for Christians in the Majority*

### Introduction

For the last two weeks of this class, we've going to look at things through the lens of the minority—that was last week—and this week the minority. How can we love each other well coming from those two backgrounds? For both weeks, the passage we'll work from is Romans 12:9-13. It's a gem of wisdom on how we relate to each other as Christians. You can see it on your handout:

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Well worth memorizing. Let me pick out a few descriptive words that I think will be useful for the rest of our time together. What should characterize our love for each other in the church?

1. Genuine in affection. That's how Paul opens these verses. We don't simply love because we have to; we aim higher than that. Let love be genuine. Let it be with affection.
2. Self-forgetting. That's a word that summarizes that last part of verse 10, "Outdo one another in showing honor." As we talked about last week, it should be almost a competition to see who can best look to the needs of his brother or sister. And who wins in that competition? Jesus does!
3. Zealous and proactive. As it says in verse 11, do not be slothful in zeal but fervent.
4. Constant. Come good times and bad, we should be constant in love and constant in prayer.
5. Sacrificial. You see monetary sacrifice in verse 13, along with other kinds of sacrifice.

For the rest of our time today, we'll take these five words: Genuine, Self-Forgetting, Zealous, Constant, and Sacrificial, and apply them to the majority in our church. Then, after some of them, I'll do a mini-interview with Caleb so you can get another perspective on how these apply.

And like we began last week, it's useful to keep in mind that some of us are in the majority in some categories—like I'm white and that puts me in the majority in this church—and the minority in others. Like I'm over 40 which, astonishingly, makes me old in this church. But Isaac also talked about the fact that being in the

majority or minority in some categories will have more of an impact on how you experience life than others. Right-handed—not so much; being the only woman in your office: pretty significant.

So we *all* needed to hear the teaching last week for the minority and we *all* need to hear this week's teaching for those in the majority. But that's not because we all fit cleanly into both categories. It's because we're in a church, composed of both majority and minority—and we care for and are committed to each other.

So with all that as introduction, let's turn to the inside of your handout and look at that first word:

## **1. Genuine**

For the majority, what does it look like for love to be genuine? Abhorring what is evil; holding fast to what is good. Loving with brotherly affection.

There's a saying I've heard before that's worth a thought: "Don't just find someone who physically looks different than you but is culturally the same. That's tokenism, not friendship<sup>1</sup>." That idea of tokenism is a good one to consider as we talk about unity amidst diversity in the local church. And it's an important concept to keep in mind as someone coming from the majority culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Source unknown.

You look across the main hall on a Sunday morning and you see a lot of people like you. But you've been to this class, so you know that simply befriending people based on similarity doesn't capture God's gospel purposes for the local church. But...if you just focus in on those friendships because of that, it can be dangerous. One way to say what you're doing: "I'm a great Christian, so I need to look like a great Christian, so I'm going to have a great friendship mosaic." Now, that's not necessarily the case. It could be that you're simply reaching out in faith and doing something uncomfortable.

And that's where Paul's word is so helpful. Be *genuine* in affection. So interesting. That's not something you can muscle up, is it? Just like you can decide to love someone, but you can't decide to *like* them. Well, God is telling us not simply to love each other, but to like each other. To enjoy it. To have genuine affection. In other words, trust God that you need these friendships. You need them because of how they complement you. But you also need them because of the warmth and grace that you'll find there. Remember something we talked about earlier in the class: when you share nothing but Jesus with someone, you actually are likely to go much deeper in your friendship. Because all you've got in common is what is ultimately important. Over time, as we trust God's word and build friendships with people who don't have much in common with us but Jesus, and make them real, genuine friendships--we'll find that it's just as easy to feel that affection there as in any other friendship. Not tokenism, but affection.

## 2. Self-Forgetting

Instead of competing to honor ourselves and focus on ourselves, we should compete to honor each other. Let me give a specific application of that to the majority culture in a church. I think that outdoing one another in showing honor involves making an effort to make the invisibility of your culture a little more visible to you. We talked about this a little in week #2. The first time someone told you that you had an accent, you probably laughed it off. “I don’t have an accent. It’s other people who sound funny.” Do you think that the main concerns facing our church are sexual purity and legalism? You’re probably a young, single male thinking that everyone else in our church has the same struggles you do. Do you see in both those instances the invisibility of your own assumptions, of your own culture? It’s really easy to assume that other people see this basically the way you do. And when you share a background with most of the people in a church, that assumption is that much stronger.

And while this tendency is totally natural, it’s really quite dangerous for our unity as a church. So on Mother’s Day, if a pastor would announce, “everyone go home today and call your mom and thank her for being so wonderful,” how does that make the person feel who never knew his mom? Or lost his mom? Or is estranged from her mom? By the way, that’s one of many reasons we don’t make a big deal of Mothers Day or Fathers Day in our church. Our denomination has made a big push recently for so-called “ethnic” churches. Until recently, if you went to their

website, you'd see every church has an "ethnicity" label next to it. Every church, of course, except for majority-white ones. When a denominational head talks passionately about including "ethnics" in our churches, it makes my stomach churn. I deeply appreciate his desire for gospel-driven diversity. But calling other people "ethnics" (as if his is not an ethnicity) and labeling them as a desired "other" is a great way to make them feel that these churches are not for them. Exactly the opposite of what he wants.]

Or it may not be that you assume other people share your same experience—but you assume their different experience. You stereotype. "All black people want to be called African-American." "All Asian people are hard-working." And so forth.

So how can those in the majority help themselves not make these assumptions?

Let me give you a few ideas:

1. Keep the invisibility factor in mind when you speak. And especially when you have the opportunity to speak publically, be it from the pulpit or on Facebook. Simply remembering this handicap that we all share can be really helpful.
2. Make deep friendships with people who are different from you. There's nothing like a close-in perspective as someone travels through life to help you see where your assumptions aren't as universal as you'd thought.
3. Listen carefully to sermon application that doesn't apply to you. So you're listening to a sermon and the application is about loneliness. "I don't feel

lonely,” you think. Tune out. No: you need to tune *in* and think about what you can learn about those who are different. Same thing as you’re listening to the pastoral prayer on Sunday morning. What Mark prays can clue you in to struggles others have that you may not have noticed.

4. Keep this in mind when you pray through the directory. Think about what these people you’re praying for might be thinking about or facing today, given whatever is going on.
5. Use your imagination. I guess this is similar to the previous point. Google the term “sanctified imagination” and you’ll find all sorts of articles about a very important idea: we can outdo one another in showing honor by using our imaginations to consider what their lives are like. To use a well-worn expression, we can walk a mile in their shoes.
6. Ask questions. It’s probably not normally beneficial to say, “hey: I don’t understand black people. Could I interview you about being black?” That makes someone feel less like a friend and more like a museum exhibition. But I think it’s a good thing to bake into our DNA to ask lots of questions about what someone else’s life is like. What’s your day like as a working mom? How did you feel as a black person when you saw that on TV? What’s your feeling about police? Why? What’s great about being old? I’m often struck that when I talk with someone in their twenties, most of my conversation is about them. When I talk with someone in their sixties, most of my conversation is about my family. Well, we can accelerate that maturing process. Part of outdoing one another in showing honor is making

an effort to spend more time asking about a friend's life than telling him or her about your own.

It's so hard to see the water you swim in. But part of living together in a church is making an effort to do just that.

### **3. Zealous**

"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." What in particular does Paul have in mind here that we should be zealous and fervent to do? To love in the way he's been describing.

So I intend this third point to layer over the others we've already discussed. We should be genuine. We should be self-forgetful. And we should be zealous in doing that.

I'll give you an example from marriage that we've already explored a bit in this class. 1 Peter 3:1-7 is a passage about otherness. It's about how to navigate the innate differences between husbands and wives—which is why it's a good passage for us to think about in this class. As a reminder, the wife is tempted to fear because she's choosing to submit to an imperfect man. The man is told to live with her in an understanding way. To be considerate. To live life and make



decisions cognizant of how all those things will feel to her. To make it clear that he understands her world. That's how she'll feel cared for.

Now, many young husbands will read this and think, "yeah, yeah. That sounds like a good thing to do." Be considerate of my wife. But I think it often falls into the "good to have category" rather than the "important as air" category. On the same level as "take her out for dinner regularly," "buy her flowers," "make sure I wash my hands," "recycle," and "don't forget to vote." Like a really good thing to do, but not catastrophic if I don't.

But that's not how God sees it. Have you ever noticed the odd bit at the end of this verse? "so that your prayers may not be hindered." Hmm. What does being considerate have to do with that? Well, keep on reading. Verse 12:

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer.

But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Oh. So if I'm not considerate with my wife, God doesn't listen to my prayer. Why? Because he is *against* me. I'm doing *evil*. He hates that. The authority dynamic in a marriage can be invisible to a husband. But never to a wife. So when a husband blithely and disinterestedly ignores that dynamic, God calls it evil.

Same goes for the relationships we have at church. If you're in the majority culture, you might be blithely disinterested in the dynamic between majority and minority. "Oh, I just feel uncomfortable treading into those waters." "Oh, those issues don't really bother me." That is not being zealous. That is not outdoing one another in showing honor. That is not being fervent in love. That is not the Hebrew believers in Acts 6 picking men with all Greek names for the first diaconal committee. That is not zealous. But the principle we see in marriage is hugely beneficial to us here. Blithe disinterest when you're the privileged party, or the party in authority isn't neutral; it's oppressive. For those in the majority, we *must* be zealous in our love.

***Question: What's an example in our church of someone being zealous to show honor toward those in the minority culture? (Ideally, a way you've done this.)***

#### **4. Constant**

We should be constant in prayer about these things. If you're in the majority culture, instead of ignoring these issues, you need to be constant in prayer for them. We do that together on Sunday nights as we make this a regular item of prayer. But we should be doing that individually as well.

The need to be constant should remind us that these things do not change overnight. Many of us grew up here in DC and plan on spending our whole lives

here. But many of us arrived with a “I’ll be here for a year or two, see what I can get out of it, and then move on.” Well, there’s nothing immoral about investing in this city or this church for just a year or two. But we should take Paul’s call to constancy to heart. Whether it’s this church or another in the near future, make it your ambition to invest in someone for years. For decades. You’ll be amazed at the beauty of what can emerge simply by that kind of constancy and commitment.

## **5. Sacrificial**

The end of our passage talks about sacrifice. "Contribute to the needs the saints and seek to show hospitality." Open your wallet, your home, your lives to others in your church. We can’t love the way Paul calls us to without sacrifice.

Now, the sacrifices that those in the minority make are somewhat implicit and automatic. For example, in past years Sarah Gebremicael has shared with this class about how she joined this church knowing she’d need to give up some of what might make her comfortable in church in order to be part of our congregation. Sacrifice was implicit in her decision to come here. But for the majority, many of those sacrifices must be sought out and embraced. We’re not forced into them.

That’s where the idea of being zealous and proactive leads into zealous and proactive sacrifice. Think of the examples Paul has in mind here. No circumstance

is forcing you to sacrifice your money or to be hospitable. You need to make a deliberate decision in order to give those things away. That's quite parallel to being in the majority culture in a church. You need to make a deliberate decision in order to sacrifice.

So here are some questions to think through in this regard:

- Do you know people in our church well enough to be aware of physical needs you could meet? Do you look for opportunities to give your money to help others in need in our church?
- What do others like to talk about that you find not-so-interesting? Can you sacrifice your interests for the sake of including others in your friendships? Same thing for how you spend your leisure time.
- Are you willing to make sacrifices that aren't noticed? For example, you've got small kids and you take care of the kids on Saturday so your husband can meet with a single guy who's struggling. Even though you've been with those kids all week. But that single guy isn't likely to appreciate what you're going through in order for him to have that conversation with your husband. Whereas if it wasn't a single guy but a married guy with kids, you'd probably get a thoughtful thank you note from his wife who totally understands what you gave up to make that happen. Often, sacrifice in a diverse church will necessarily involve sacrifices that others don't notice or understand.
- What's the time balance you're comfortable with between hanging out with people who are similar to you and with those you don't have much in

common with. Do you need to shift that balance? Keep in mind that this is what your brothers and sisters from the minority culture experience every Sunday.

- What time-related habits do you have that other people in this church don't have? Are you super scheduled and punctual? Super laid-back and spontaneous? What opportunities do you have to give up how you like to operate in order to serve others?

**Conclusion: close in prayer**