

Unity and Diversity in the Church

Class 7: Working Through Disunity

Introduction

Does anyone know what the Hagia Sofia is? [collect some factoids]. When I was a student, I spent a summer with an engineering project in Istanbul, studying the Hagia Sofia—climbing up to the very top of its dome. For a thousand years, it was the world's largest cathedral. It still has one of the world's largest masonry domes. Sort of like a superdome from 532AD. And that's all the more amazing because in Istanbul, earthquakes are common. How has it stood for so long? It's got a hidden secret. The cement that holds it together is from an island in the Mediterranean and it has very special properties. One of those is that even after 1500 years, the cement has never fully set. That means that when an earthquake sends little cracks and fissures down through the church, they're fixed as soon as it rains. Then water seeps in, sealing the ancient mortar tight.

That's a good image of what I want us to talk about this morning. In a very physical sense, the Hagia Sofia is a self-healing church. And in a spiritual sense, that's what we're called to be as well. When cracks and fissures run through our congregation, our church culture should lean so strongly toward unity that, by the

grace of God, they heal up. Just like the Hagia Sofia, we should be a self-healing church.

But, of course, in a congregation that should be marked by diversity, that's much easier said than done. In a church full of people who're different from me, it's so easy to be overlooked. To be forgotten. To be misunderstood. To be undervalued. To be offended. What do we do in those times? Grin and bear it? Let them have it? Some balance between the two? What do we do when life in a real church runs us over?

Well, this morning I want to look beyond the Hagia Sofia, to the original self-healing church. Not Istanbul but Jerusalem. Not 532AD but about 33AD, in Acts chapter 6 where in the space of a few sentences we see a remarkable model for working through disunity together as a congregation. We're going to peer over the shoulder of the New Testament church together. So if you have a Bible, open up to Acts 6. You'll also see it on your handout. Let's look over the shoulder of this first New Testament church and see what they do.

¹Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out

from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Now, to understand what’s going on here, we need a bit of context. You’ll recall from all the work we did in Ephesians 3 the first few weeks of this class how important unity between Jew and Gentile is—to us and to God. Well, that’s not quite what’s going on here. The people our passage calls “Hebrews” and the people it calls “Hellenists” were probably both Jews. The Hellenists were Jews from across the Roman Empire who’d gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost; the Hebrews were Jews from Palestine. Hellenists would have been more comfortable in Greek culture, Hebrews in Jewish culture. Hellenists would have been more comfortable speaking in Greek, Hebrews in Aramaic¹. Historians from that era wrote about the animosity between the two². So unity between them would have

¹I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1980; repr., Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 125-126.

²K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), 149.

been remarkable. Not quite the gulf between Jew and Gentile—but a big deal nonetheless.

The gospel asserts that unity in Christ is stronger than worldly difference. The apostles faced a natural fault line that threatened that unity. So under their leadership, what did this first church do? For the rest of the class today, we'll work through five observations about how this first church safeguarded its unity.

1. Pay Attention to What Threatens Church Unity

Just a bunch of widows complaining about food, right? Not worth paying much attention to. I'm sure that's what most people in that society would have thought. But not this church. Just think what's going on in verse 2. The twelve call together the full number of the disciples. That may well have been thousands of people! Nearly every Christian on earth! That's how seriously they take widows. That's how seriously they take unity. The apostles leapt to action because this was much more than a food distribution problem. What was threatened was the claim that Christ is more powerful than whatever might separate us. This unity issue was a gospel issue. That's why they took action. And that's why, I suspect, Luke features this story so prominently in the book of Acts. The gospel will only survive for so long if it's not reflected in the community that proclaims it.

Disunity should not surprise to us. Later in this same book, as Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders, he warns them: “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Sometimes sheep nip at each other. They scratch and bite. And sometimes it turns out they’re not sheep at all, but wolves who want to tear the flock apart. Threats to unity deserve our attention. That’s our first observation. Second:

2. Take Responsibility to Protect Church Unity

I find it fascinating what the apostles do next. This is a really big deal, right? The gospel is at stake here. So they address the problem, right? Wrong. They gather the whole church together and then basically throw this problem back to them. “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” They don’t tell the church how to solve the problem. They simply tell them to select seven men to do that. And they don’t even tell the church who the seven men should be. This is some serious hands-off management, isn’t it!

That's because as much as we need good leadership, protecting unity is *our* job as the congregation. *We* are those who must maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Ephesians 4:3.

That has some pretty significant implications. For one, it means that when we're at a fault line of unity in the congregation, we don't have the option to retreat into some hole in the ground and wait until things blow over. We need to own this unity as *our* responsibility and *our* stewardship. If you've been offended, overlooked, misunderstood, forgotten, or undervalued in this congregation, you need to do something about it. Not to fight for your rights and respect. But to fight for unity. The call of the Christian is not, "I respect myself" but "I respect Christ, whose image we bear together."

And that means that often, counterintuitively, *doing* something to protect unity will mean *not* doing something. That is, it means overlooking an offense. Proverbs 19:11 tells us, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."

Of course, it's hard to know when pursuing unity is best served by overlooking, and when it's best served by addressing an offense. Clearly in this case the apostles decide to address it. But simply making unity our goal rather than serving ourselves is a huge step forward. Here are some more guidelines to keep in mind in determining when to address an offense:

- You should choose to address an offense when someone's sin is dangerous for *them*—either because it's serious or because it's repeated.
- And when someone's sin becomes an impediment to your relationship, you need to address it. Or, as an old theologian once put it, when it “diminishes your affections” for them. Of course that may be a humbling thing to admit, since if you were a better person you could just overlook it. But since when do relationships *not* require humility?

A third implication: we shouldn't expect our elders to solve these problems. At least not on their own. Someone comes to an elder and says, “our church struggles with X!” Implication: “fix it!” And then they're somewhat surprised when the elder comes alongside them to help them determine what *they* can do about the problem. Elders and other church leaders do have a role; we'll get to that in a bit. But we need to remember that protecting unity is *our* responsibility.

3. Be reluctant to take sides

One thing that jumps out when you look at this passage is the apostles' care to avoid putting themselves on either the Hellenist or Hebrew side of the argument. There's no mention here of whether the apostles made any effort to investigate whether the Hellenist widows *were* being neglected. Apparently, simply the perception of favoritism was problem enough. There's no dividing of the congregation, with the apostles meeting first with the Hellenists and then with the

Hebrews. Instead, Luke writes that the apostles summoned the “full number” of the church. Then, when they speak with the congregation, there’s no mention whatsoever of any kind of factional divide. “We’ve heard that some of you are having trouble getting along...” And then, the one thing the apostles do to solve the problem—directing that *seven* men be chosen—would seem designed to keep the congregation from having equal representation by both sides on the diaconal committee. The apostles are certainly not blind to the division that created this conflict. But in no way are they going to enshrine that division in anything they do about it.

I think there’s a world of good wisdom for us here. So often, we value our own preferences above the unity of the congregation—and one way we do that is by recognizing factions in the congregation. We do that in the way that we talk: “we poor people in this church struggle with...” or “those popular people...” as if I can speak for all members of a certain group. We also do that in the way that we act, when we talk about a problem only with people we know will feel like we do. We even do it in the way that we think, when we assume that a particular group of people will all have the same attitude toward an issue.

But we need to recognize how dangerous this is; this would be an example of abusing our similarities like we talked about last week. At its extreme, Paul lists dissensions and factions alongside sorcery, idolatry, and sexual immorality as works of the flesh in Galatians 5:20. And he mocks the Corinthian church for

thinking this way: “for there *must* be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized (1 Cor. 11:19). We do not want to create, perpetuate, or encourage factions in any way.

And we should be careful to not implicitly ask our leaders to take sides when we bring problems to them. I can think of a woman who came to me recently asking me to mediate in a conflict with her roommates. But she was so careful to make it clear she didn’t assume I’d see things the way she did. If she was in the wrong, she wanted me to make that clear to her. What a great, humble attitude! So much better than trying to lobby a church leader to take your side in a conflict. So when you need to bring church leaders in, be like this sister! Remember, elders and deacons struggle with people-pleasing too. Help them resist the temptation to simply want to make you happy by making it clear that you have no expectation that they will necessarily see things the way you do.

One great way to avoid taking sides is to spend time with people on the “other side.” It is so easy to pigeon-hole or stereotype or straw man people you don’t know well. So if you’re a Hellenist widow being overlooked, ask a Hebrew man how you can pray for him and his family. Go out of your way to love those who are different from you in this congregation, and you’ll probably find that “taking sides” becomes that much less a temptation—because sides don’t really seem to exist.

This is a good time to tap into our own experience here. How can we avoid wrongly taking sides in disputes or discontent in our church?

4. Seek and recommend structural solutions

Sounds pretty theoretical, doesn't it? But I think this is a really powerful point. Here's what I mean. Given all the mistrust and tension between Hellenists and Hebrews that we know existed in the first century, it seems unlikely that this was the first time the two groups had run into difficulty. But rather than simply responding to a general sense of discomfort or existential angst, the apostles were slow to act until they saw an issue that was structural and tangible. They didn't see their job as making everyone happy all the time. That's neither Biblical nor realistic. Nor did they ignore the problem. But they did wait until they saw something very specific they could do before they took action.

Let me share two examples from our congregation's life to illustrate what this might look like.

Back in the early 2000s, our entire nursery consisted of what is now the men's bathroom and my office. That's how few kids we had. But as this church grew, the number of families with young kids exploded. And the families with young kids felt, at times, like they were being overlooked and undervalued in the church. That's something the elders talked about and prayed about. But it wasn't until

something very tangible came along that they chose to make any changes. One young dad pointed out that moving the evening service forward by an hour would make it much easier for young families to be involved. One of our staff members asked different types of members—suburban members, student members, retired members, single members, and so forth—how the change would affect them. Turns out this would be a huge help to young families and not much cost to the rest of the church. So we made the change. Did that clear up all the tension? No. Did it help? Yes. Here's the point: when a church makes structural changes in response to non-specific, generalized discontent, they risk causing as many problems as they're solving. So best to wait for structural problems before responding with structural solutions.

Another example: Many years ago, I remember talking with Mark Dever about a particular deficiency in our church culture. I assumed that since he hadn't done anything about it, he hadn't noticed it. O but he had noticed it. He told me he'd been praying about it daily for months. No structural, tangible opportunities to change had come up. But he *was* doing something. Laboring in prayer that God would change hearts and adjust our culture.

So what does all this mean for us? Let me give you a few thoughts:

- Look for structural, tangible solutions when you sense cultural problems.
And bring them to church leaders.

- Earlier, I offered some guidelines about when to overlook an offense and when to respond to it. Well, this is probably another layer of wisdom for that decision. When you don't see something specific that someone can do to change, that would bias you more to the side of overlooking rather than responding.
- Pray for our deacons! In many ways, they are all structural, tangible solutions to unity problems we've faced or might face as a congregation. I am so thankful for them and all their work! So pray...*and* help them in their work.
- Be careful not to complain. This is especially pertinent when you're talking with someone about a unity problem in our church and you *don't* have a specific, tangible problem in mind. It's important to talk honestly about where we're struggling as a congregation. But in times like this we can so easily become complainers. I'm impressed by the importance Paul places on not complaining in Philippians 2:14. Do not complain, he says, and you will shine like stars in this dark world as you hold forth the word of life. Not complaining is a sign that we trust the good providence of our wise Lord and master. What a witness to a lost world without that same comfort and trust!

5. Outdo one another in showing honor

I'm intrigued that while the apostles clearly cared deeply about church unity, their immediate concern was much more limited. All they wanted to do, it seems, was

to stop the Hellenist widows from being neglected. Nothing about living together in unity. Nothing about all having plenty. Nothing about equality. Just “stop bad stuff from happening.” But by the power of God’s spirit, what happens is way bigger than that.

Why does Luke record the names of all seven men the congregation put forward as deacons? “Stephen, Philip, Proculus, Nicanor, Timon, etc.” Well, if I can venture a little speculation, it’s because they’re all Greek names. And that’s remarkable. This was a majority Hebrew congregation, we think. It wasn’t unheard of for Hebrews to have Greek names. But it seems extremely likely that if not all seven, at least most of these men were from the Hellenist minority.

I love that! That’s like the hidden punchline of this whole story. A little treat Luke sneaks into the details. The Hebrews in this congregation loved unity so much that they bent over backwards to take care of their Hellenist sisters—even to the point of entrusting their own widows to these brothers from an unfamiliar Greek culture.

Romans 12:10 puts it this way: “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” “Outdo” one another in showing honor. It’s like a competition to see who can lavish the most honor on the other. Who wins in that competition? Jesus does!

Our job isn't simply to achieve fairness, or equity, or any other judicial-sounding standard. It is to outdo one another in showing honor. Just like this Acts 6 church in Jerusalem did. Remember (and we'll talk about this more next week), what feels generous to the majority might feel unjust to the minority. So just like in marriage, the word "fair" is absolutely caustic when it comes to our life as a church. Our goal should never to simply be fair. Our goal is love.

When you feel our unity threatened as a church, this is what you need to think about. "How can I outdo him in showing honor? How can I outdo her in showing honor? You feel like your particular needs are being ignored. Talk about it—especially if you have some constructive advice. But above all else, ask yourself: how can you outdo the one you're talking to in showing honor? You feel like someone's comments are clumsy and offensive because they ignorantly assume that your life experience is just like theirs. Ask yourself: how can you help them see that *as* you outdo them in showing honor? Something happens in the news that you find profoundly disturbing and some of your brothers and sisters scratch their heads, confused by what's got you so worked up. Help them understand you better, *while* seeking to outdo them in showing honor.

Conclusion

"We love because he first loved us," 1 John reads. So true! That's the power behind our love as Christians. That's how we can do all I've been talking about.

Because Jesus loved us, his Spirit lives in our hearts, enabling us to do things we could never do otherwise. Because Jesus loved us, he set us an example of how to suffer for his glory, entrusting ourselves to our heavenly father who is perfectly good and perfectly in control. Because Jesus loved us, we are forgiven of everything we ever did that was wrong—at the cost of his own life—and that forgiveness can't help but well up into love. Because Jesus loved us, we have hope of eternity with him in heaven and that heavenly reward drives us to earthly faithfulness.

Because he first loved us, we fight to protect our unity. Remember why the parts of the Hagia Sofia stuck together? It's because they had a special property. Our special property is God's love, shown through us by God's Spirit. That's how we become a self-healing church. And so, Acts 6:7, "the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Praise God.

May that be our own experience.