***Core Seminar***

**Living as a Church**

**Class 3:  Diversity: Unity through Breadth of Commitment**

**September 13, 2015**

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**I. Introduction**

Many of you may know a member of our church named Bill Anderson. Bill started visiting our church in his early 60s. Wasn’t a Christian. At the time, he taught a class at Harvard called “The Madness of Crowds” on mass psychology that examined things like New England witch hunts, urban legends and financial panics. But a career studying crowds didn’t prepare him for the local church. In his words, he was “struck with the genuineness of the diverse Christian fellowship.” He said the relationships here seemed “highly uncommon” in his experience: these Christians interacted not as subdivided coalitions of people with similar interests, but as a single unit. This began the process that would eventually lead Bill to new life in Christ.

Where did this corporate witness come from? Ultimately, it came from God’s saving grace to us in Jesus. When you become a Christian, you undergo a complete identity change. 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 and permanent than any other conceivable bond. That means that wherever the gospel exists, diversity should exist too. 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 provides agrand witness to the truth of the gospel for a watching world. So diversity isn’t just nice to have, it’s central to our witness. It’s the outcome of brotherly love.

But at the same time, diversity could be less important than you’ve thought—because it’s not an end in itself. You can be diverse yet unhealthy, with no unity, love, or gospel. The kind of diversity that was compelling to Bill was compelling precisely because it highlighted gospel unity.

So, if diversity is an important part of our witness and yet simply being diverse for its own sake isn’t the purpose of the church, how should we as a congregation think about diversity in our midst? In this class, we’ll start by examining the *purpose* of diversity in Ephesians 3 and then what exactly this diversity is, where it comes from, and finally three ways to cultivate our unity in diversity.

**II. The Purpose of Diversity**

First: what is the Biblical purpose of diversity in the local church? To answer that question, let’s return to the book of Ephesians, really the bedrock for this whole Living as a Church core seminar. Look with me at 3:8-10, where we see Paul’s purpose statement for the local church:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, 10 so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3:8-10)

What is God’s eternalpurpose? For the church to display his wisdom to all creation. How? Paul here says it has to do with a mystery that God has now revealed. What’s this mystery? He’s already told us, in chapter 3, verse 6.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

What God has done is amazing! He promised in 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.” Now, in Christ, using Paul’s gospel ministry, God has done it. Now, in Christ, the descendants of Abraham aren’t merely those who have his *flesh* but those who share his *faith*.

And why do even the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” take notice of the unity between Jew and Gentile in the church? It’s because of how separated they were before Christ—a separation that Paul in 2:14 calls “the dividing wall of hostility.” These two groups were of different ethnicity, different culture, different theological beliefs, and all of this separation was openly hostile.

“But,” a first century reader might object, “that kind of unity is impossible! That would take a miracle!” And that’s precisely the point. Look at Paul’s doxology in 3:20-21:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Paul’s aware that when he describes Jews and Gentiles loving one another in the Ephesian church, despite centuries of animosity, he’s talking about a unity that’s infinitely beyond our human capacity to achieve. If it’s God’s power that’s “at work within us,” God will gain glory as his wisdom is manifest *through the church.*

In other words, diversity’s not the main point – *unity IN diversity* is. This unity is what shows off the power of the cross! In the first century, and uniquely in salvation history, that meant Jews and Gentiles worshiping together. But the basic principle of Ephesians 3 remains: God is glorified when previously separated people are united in Christ and love each other despite all their differences.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So if the purpose of diversity is to display the power of the gospel, we should look more closely at just what we mean by diversity. What kind of diversity shows off the power of the cross? That leads us to our next point,

**III. The Character of Diversity**

When Paul talks about Jews and Gentiles, he’s emphasizing the fact that without the power of the gospel, these are two groups that would have remained apart. And so the “diversity” that we’re thinking about includes lots of different areas where the world keeps barriers up but where the church should be characterized by unity and fellowship. Let’s identify six in particular.

*1) Boundaries of ethnicity:* First is what may come first to mind for many of us when I say the word “diversity:” ethnic diversity. And as those who live in a city where racism isn’t merely a haunting memory but a present reality, we must have a concern for love in Christian churches that crosses ethnic lines. Scripture celebrates ethnic diversity; certainly, that’s at least part of what Paul speaks of in Ephesians 3 with Jew and Gentile. The gospel is true no matter the color of your skin – and the gospel doesn’t erase the color of your skin. Jews and Gentiles, Blacks and Whites, Latinos and Asians united in Christ are “in Christ” first, but then we all really do have an ethnicity. The world can go wrong here in two directions. First is worldly racism that denies the image of God in others; on the other hand is the idol of pluralism that deifies a “diverse and tolerant” society but without Christ at the center – diversity only for diversity’s sake. As a church we value ethnic diversity *because* it testifies that Christ is our all and the center of our identity. But that’s not all:

*2) Boundaries of age:* Where in the world do you see young men having lunch with 80 year old women that they’re not related to? It’s not a common sight. But that’s just what I saw within my first month of coming to CHBC in 2009. I lived across the street at a single men’s house nicknamed the Bull Moose, and one of our roommates invited all the senior ladies of the church over for a Valentine’s Day luncheon. He recruited a bunch of dudes in their twenties to cook quiche and make salad. College students got dressed up and served tea to their sisters in Christ, we all went around and shared testimonies of God’s goodness, and sang “Amazing Grace.” It’s one of the most memorable times of fellowship I can recall – precisely because our differences highlighted our unity in Christ.

*3) Boundaries of economics:* Our world’s familiar with rich people doing kind things for poor people. But when those rich people go home to their neighborhoods, they find themselves with other rich people—or at least with those with a similar educational pedigree. It shouldn’t be so in the church. That’s why James attacks the church in James 2 for showing partiality to the rich. Favoritism reeks to God. Some in the church may have nice gadgets or eat at nice restaurants. Those who can’t afford those luxuries need to protect their hearts from jealousy. But those who can shouldn’t assume that everyone else is in the same financial place they are.

*4) Boundaries of politics:* The local church must speak strongly on moral issues. But rarely does that moral authority translate cleanly into specifics of public policy. As a result, the local church should be a place where Christians with divergent views of government policy can find commonality in the more ultimate reality of God’s kingdom. For us, being on Capitol Hill, this is especially crucial. If you work in politics, you can debate each other all week long from 9 to 5, but as a church we’re united in submission to King Jesus.

*5) Boundaries of personality:* 1 Cor 12 says that everyone has a gift and everyone is needed in the body. If someone is socially awkward, do you think they’ll find our church to be a refuge? Or, just as impatient with them as the cold world outside? Those who are extroverted might find it easier to make quick friendships in the church, but that makes them no more essential to the church than the quiet introvert who listens well, loves deeply and serves whole-heartedly.

*6) Boundaries of cultural background:* Especially for those who grew up in the church, cultural background carries with it expectations for what a church should be like. So, some degree of sacrifice is necessary to have a church composed of Christians from suburban, rural, and urban backgrounds; liturgical, Pentecostal, and African-American religious traditions; and many different countries of origin. And that’s just fine. We need to be honest that our church does have a certain culture: we use the English language, we have simple musical accompaniment, or songs come from the European-American tradition. But sacrifice is needed from everyone, those in the cultural minority *and* majority. For those in the majority, that sacrifice might start by asking folks from different backgrounds what might be uncomfortable for them in the church and how you can serve them.

This is probably a good time to pause and praise the Lord for the diversity that he’s already worked in our midst in all these categories. Do we have room to grow? Yes. But I can think of scores of examples of folks in our body who selflessly and cheerfully cross these boundaries to pursue others for their spiritual good. That’s the kind of love that perplexes the world around us in the best way. It’s also not easy. Let me encourage us to not become weary in well-doing. Take heart, 1 John 3:14 reminds us, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.”

**Any questions so far?**

**IV. The Foundation of Diversity**

Now, you might be asking, this all sounds great—but how can we grow in diversity in all these areas?

My answer might at first sound naïve, and even offensively naïve. What must we do to see unity and diversity co-exist in our own churches? In the most important sense, we do nothing.

Consider the evidence of Ephesians 2-3 that we looked at a few moments ago. Paul says in 2:14-16:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Who did this? Who created one new man and made peace? Christ! In these chapters, Paul is simply describing what *has happened* in our salvation. There’s nothing we do to the make this unity – the one imperative verb in the section is simply to *remember* what God has done (2:11,12).

But does the fact that God 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? Not at all. In fact, we can selfishly and sinfully *resist* unity. We’re fallen people; we face constant temptation to live against the grain of God-established unity. And we’d be naïve to overlook the fact that historical realities influence us in this area too. Assumptions about ethnicity and class and culture are often inherited and often need to be corrected by the truth of scripture. We don’t approach the subject of unity from a neutral starting point but as fallen, complex people. So we begin by admitting that our gospel unity comes only from Christ. Yet, rather than resist unity, we’re called to embrace and even cultivate it. Like a farmer watering and fertilizing a plant, we can recognize that we’re not the ones who give the plant of our unity its life, but what we do matters tremendously to keep that plant growing and healthy.

So, 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” 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.” The gospel has united you – now make every effort to keep the unity established through the bond of the peace that Christ obtained.

**V. How do we cultivate our unity in diversity?**

How do we do that? Much could be said. We should first recognize that “total” or “ultimate” diversity won’t be found in any church on earth, most especially because we all still speak different languages. In heaven that won’t matter anymore, but until then, God is not grieved by the fact that his people have different tongues, and this necessarily means that our churches will be language-specific – and therefore somewhat culture-specific also, since language is one element of culture. Every church is local, and so every church’s diversity is naturally limited by its location and its language. That’s just fine.

But once we’ve recognized that, how do we cultivate unity in diversity in our particular context? Of course we start with prayer – that’s why we pray for our unity in diversity almost every Sunday night. Beyond that, let’s focus on three suggestions. First,

**A. Recognize the Invisibility of Your Culture**

I wonder if anyone’s ever told you that you had an “accent” to your speech. Early on, my reaction to that was: “I don’t have an accent. It’s *other* people who sound weird.” It can work this way with our culture. Now, those who are part of a minority culture in a church usually don’t have any trouble being aware of it. It’s those in the majority who may need to have their eyes opened to the fact that not everyone shares their experience or their perspective. For example, one of the first times I got to lead in the prayer of confession on Sunday morning, most of the sins that I confessed are sins that young people, especially young men, tend to fight against. And the pastors challenged me after that! I’d worked from my own experience outward, assuming everyone was basically like me. Instead, I should have meditated more broadly and prayed about things that my 75 year old brothers and sisters in Christ are struggling with too.

In Acts 6, when conflict arose between two different groups within the church, it was because the Greek-speaking widows were being “overlooked” in the daily distribution of food. The fact that their complaint was against the Aramaic-speaking Jews, and that the apostles took the problem seriously, suggests that there may have been a problem with the majority culture not realizing the needs of others.

When Paul in Romans 12:10-11 tells us to “love one another with brotherly affection” and to “outdo one another in showing honor,” this must surely involve working to make the assumptions of my own culture a little more obvious to myself so that I can care well for others. One of the best ways we can do this in our relationships is simply asking thoughtful, open-ended questions to learn about others’ experience of the Christian life and how it may differ from ours. I’m not talking about interrogating someone and making them feel uncomfortable or self-conscious because they’re different. I’m talking about sensitively and humbly taking the time to get to know someone so that you can sincerely learn about their life and background, their joys and struggles.

That leads us to the second suggestion:

**B) Embrace Those Who Are Different from You**

Turn with me to 1 Cor 12:13-14:

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Imagine with me if the church in Corinth heard that verse, and then decided that since Paul was calling the church to unity, they would set up groups within the congregation for similar folks to be around those they’d be most comfortable with. So they’d make a group for Jews, and a group for Greeks; a group for slaves and a group for the free. We’d say, “No! That’s not what Paul has in mind at all!” And yet, if we only pursue fellowship with those who are just like us, that’s essentially how we apply those verses.

Now, you might say, Matt, does that mean that we shouldn’t have men’s and women’s small groups? Or a youth group, or a women’s retreat? Not necessarily. Having friendships in the church with those who are the same age, gender, ethnicity or occupation as yourself can be a wonderful thing. Often God uses those relationships to do important work in our hearts because we’re able to speak to one another out of our common experience. Relationships of similarity aren’t evil. But they can be dangerous, if they so characterize our community that they obscure the natural diversity that the gospel produces.

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 pour 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, we should be concerned.

A good place to start is to ask ourselves some diagnostic questions. 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 specifically for things going on in their family and their job? If you’re not African-American, have you asked any of our African-American brothers and sisters what they think about the recent protests regarding police brutality? What are their views on the “Black Lives Matter” movement as a Christian? Ask, is there anything as a non-black person you think I should know or understand better? And we could multiply these sorts of questions for different ethnicities and areas.

What if you realize you don’t know many who are different from you? Or you simply want to grow in this area? That leads us to our final suggestion:

**C) Make Sacrifices for the Sake of Unity**

Paul says in Rom 12:1 to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.” What does that look like in the church? He goes on in the same chapter: 12:9, “Love must be sincere.” 12:13, “Practice hospitality.” 12:16, “Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.”

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. In that sense, God calls us not to be “consumers” in the church, but to be producers. If we value diversity, we should put that into action by making personal sacrifices to see it grow.

What kind of sacrifices am I talking about?

* We can sacrifice our **comfort** to reach out and associate with someone we’re not naturally drawn to. Mk 9:35, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all, and *servant of* ***all.****"*
* We can sacrifice our **preferences** in all sorts of areas – what kind of food at the fellowship event; which songs we wish the church sang more often. Rom 12:10, “Honor one another above yourselves.”
* We can sacrifice our **resources and time** to serve fellow church members in need, to host them in our homes, to give them a ride to church, to care for their kids. 1 John 3:18, “Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”
* We can sacrifice our **habits** to make space for knowing others who may have different schedules from us or live in a different area of town. If you’re someone who always plans your schedule 2 months out, be willing to spontaneously go to lunch after church with someone who’s different from you – and vice versa.

Again, the point in making these sacrifices isn’t diversity for diversity’s sake. It’s *not* to check off the box and say “OK, great, now I have a couple friends who look different from me.” Christ’s death has already purchased and produced our fundamental unity. Now, by cultivating our unity in diversity, we testify to his matchless wisdom and grace. What a privilege that we get to conspire together to cultivate our unity as a church for the sake of building one another and making his name famous!

So, for now, let me leave us with the amazing vision of what all our diversity – and that of the church universal and throughout time – will look like around the throne of Christ. Revelation 7:9-12:

**9**After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. **10**And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

1. One illustration that’s helpful for this is marriage. Marriage celebrates unity and diversity simultaneously. The power of marriage is that husband and wife are different from each other: Eve was created to be a helper who “corresponded to” or “fit to” Adam (Gen 2:18). She was different. And yet at the end of Genesis 2, we read that Adam and Eve must “hold fast” to one another and be “one flesh” (2:24). As anyone who’s married understands, each person’s differences help make a marriage strong--but those differences only create weakness if there is no union, oneness, unity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)