**Unity and Diversity in the Local Church**

*Class 1: Diversity? Unity? For God’s Sake!*

**NOTE: BRING A BOX OF PENS FOR THE EXERCISE AT THE END**

**I. Introduction**

Quick show of hands: how many of you know Bill and Claudia Anderson? [Older couple in our church; live on E Street NE.] How many of you know Bill’s testimony? Well, Bill started visiting CHBC in his early 60s. Wasn’t a Christian. At the time, he taught a class at Harvard called “The Madness of Crowds.” It teaches concepts of mass psychology by examining things like New England witch hunts, urban legends and financial panics. But a career studying crowds didn’t prepare him for the local church. The diversity of the congregation impressed him. But beyond that: the *genuineness* of that diverse fellowship impressed him. Here’s what he wrote me about that first visit, quote: “It was striking from the first moments I came through the door. It was clear that something special was going on. The relationships seemed not so much unnatural as highly uncommon. So I was introduced to the idea of a healthy church—a concept that had before eluded me.” The power of this corporate witness provoked him. And it was part of what God used to lead him to Christ. To join our church. And eventually, to marry Claudia who first invited him.

Where did this corporate witness come from? It came from the gospel. When you become a Christian, you undergo a complete identity shift. 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 than any other conceivable bond. That means that wherever the gospel exists, diversity should exist too since God is saving all kinds of people. 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 little self-interest at stake love each other sacrificially in the church, it’s a giant advertisement that something supernatural is going on.

But at the same time, diversity might well be less important than you’ve thought—because it’s not an end in itself. And it’s easy for people or whole churches to make it such. Someone pats themselves on the back, saying “yep, I’m a member a *diverse* church. That makes us pretty awesome, doesn’t it?” That’s a man-centered view that makes diversity an end in itself, diversity as worldly respectability. You can be a diverse church and unhealthy all at the same time, with no unity, love, or gospel. The kind of diversity that was compelling to Bill was compelling precisely because it highlighted unity around the *gospel*. And so diversity in a local church doesn’t matter in and of itself. It matters enormously when it reflects a deeper reality of gospel unity that is believed and lived out.

So that’s the topic of our class. Today and for the next six weeks. Where does this unity and diversity come from? How can we, Christians in minority and majority positions, live it out? What does this practically look like in real life? And what does it accomplish for God and for the gospel? Today I want to start our exploration by asking a very simple question. “Why does God care about unity and diversity in the local church?” We have all sorts of reasons for thinking these things are important, but sometimes our reasons are different than God’s—and that’ll get us into trouble. We’ll start by tracing the theme of unity in diversity through Scripture from beginning to end. We’ll talk about reasons *we* care about these things that may diverge from God’s purposes. And finally we’ll try to nail down exactly why diversity and unity matter to God.

But first, let me explore this in the form of a question. ***What reasons does the Bible give for why unity and diversity important in a church?***

**II. Unity and Diversity in the Bible**

The story of community in the Bible begins with God. Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man in our image, after our likeness.’” And so did Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in perfect fellowship from eternity past—make just one human being? No, verse 27, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created *them*.” Man and woman, we read in chapter 2, where the woman was to be “a helper *fit* for him.” She corresponded and complemented him. She was different from him. And yet, verse 24, she would be one flesh with him. Man and woman don’t simply point us to God because of how they represent Christ’s love for the church in Ephesians 5. They image God in their diversity—and their unity. From the very beginning of man’s existence it is community—even this community of two—that images God. God, who is three different persons, so there’s the diversity, yet who function in perfect harmony as one God; there’s the powerful unity that you and I get to display. Amazing, isn’t it!?

And that’s just the beginning. God calls Abraham out of Ur and tells him that his plan will be to create an entire nation from his descendants. Then, Exodus 4:23, when God creates this nation Israel, he calls them “my son.” He tells, Pharaoh, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” Why “my son?” Because sons look like their dads. They image their fathers. So in Deuteronomy 4, God tells the people to obey *so that* God will be great in the sight of the peoples around them (4:6-7). The task to image the triune God now falls to an entire nation, a corporate representation. But those people don’t image God very well, do they? So in Ezekiel 36 God explains that the reason he threw them out of the land was because of this false representation; instead of proclaiming his name, they defamed it.

But then Jesus arrives on the scene. As the gospel of Matthew opens, Jesus comes out of Egypt. 2:15, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” He’s called into the desert, like Israel. He’s tempted, like Israel—and yet perfectly trusts the Word of his Father. He goes through the Jordan like Israel. And at that baptism, what does God the Father say? “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus perfectly images the Father. So what does Colossians 1 say? “Jesus is the image of the invisible God.” He finally fulfills God’s mandate at Creation to bear his image perfectly!

But he’s only one man, isn’t he? And so God’s plan continues. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurates the church. His followers now have a special job: to reveal him to the world. How? John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Or John 17:21, Jesus asks “that they may all be one…so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Now, we saw the diversity of God’s plan expands from a diversity of two in Genesis 1 (Adam & Eve) to a nation in Exodus. So what do we see in the Great Commission of Matthew 28? That the church will include disciples from *all* nations. As God had said through the prophet 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.”

That’s exactly what we see as the Gentiles, Cornelius and his family enter what’s at the time a Jewish Christian church in Acts 10. And then we see God’s intention for a diverse people united in Jesus laid out in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. He describes the gospel in chapter 2 verses 1-10. And his first implication of the gospel, chapter 2 verse 11 is that the Gentiles are members of God’s new family just like the Jews, just like Israel. Verse 13: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”

Why is this diversity a big deal? Because Jews and Gentiles had been enemies for centuries theologically, politically, and ethnically—little in common; at odds with each other. But when Paul describes their unity, he reaches for the most committed bonds we know of: blood and family. He calls the Jews and Gentiles ONE new humanity (verse 15) and ONE new household (verse 19). This unity in Christ, chapter 3 verse 20, is the work of “him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.”

But why? Why does God create unity between Jew and Gentiles in the local church? Chapter 3 verse 10: “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rules and authorities in the heavenly places.” In other words: it’s to show off the glory of God. Is this “one household” kind of unity in diversity hard? Yes. Oh my goodness, yes. In fact, it’s so hard as to be impossible. Humanly speaking. Which is the whole point. Through its astonishing diversity and yet supernatural unity, the church testifies to the wisdom and power and goodness of God in a way Adam and Eve could not. It bears God’s image in a way more profound than Israel alone could ever do.

So what is the focal point of God’s glory in heaven? It is, Revelation 7:9,

“a great multitude that no one could number, from *every* nation, from *all tribes* and *peoples* and *languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

All these different people, with one song, praising their one, risen Lord. Unity and diversity matter because that’s how we show off the image of God that we bear. Because they are integral to his plan, from beginning to end, creation to consummation, for his people to show off the glory of his excellence.

So what kind of things should Christians value? The gospel? Ephesians 4 says that for a local church to protect the integrity of the gospel, we need the full diversity of brothers and sisters he’s given us. Evangelism? John 13 says that it’s our love for each other that marks us out as different from this world. Heaven? Heaven is unity in diversity, united around God’s throne. The glory of God? It is love in a diverse church that makes even the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms marvel at his wisdom. I remember one Sunday evening seeing Maxine and Lois sitting next to each other, and Mark called on both of them to pray. I thought to myself, isn’t this amazing, two sisters — who grew up in a culture that legalized segregation—sitting together in church, before the throne of God, united. I can well imagine the rules of heaven marveling, “God, you are so wise!”

So think back to the last time you felt annoyed or angry, or hurt because of another member of our church. Would your experience of that situation have been different if these ideas had been forefront in your mind?

Unity and diversity in the local church is how God 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. He is the source and definition of all those words. 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’s transforming work in our lives. *That’s* why these things matter to God. And that’s why they should matter to us.

***Any questions so far?***

**III. Why *We* Care About Unity and Diversity**

The problem is that we often care about unity and diversity for lesser reasons than God does. Sometimes that works out OK, like Paul telling the Philippians about those who preach Christ from mixed motives. But sometimes it’s a disaster. So what I want to do now is to talk about this together. I’m going to give you a few different reasons why we value unity and diversity. And then I want you to tell me what’s wrong with each of them, and what the consequences might be if we hold too closely to each reason, OK? So time for some class participation. We’ll start with…

*Insufficient reasons to value unity in the local church*

* Unity means we have less conflict. What can go wrong if that’s our main motivation for unity? [We’re afraid to rock the boat when needed. It’s unity around *the gospel*—which means when the gospel’s at risk, we are willing to destroy unity to protect it.]
* Unity looks good to the world [this is good in a John 13:35 sense. But it can lead to being afraid to do what’s unpopular, fear of man.]

*Insufficient reasons to value diversity in the local church*

* Diversity means anyone from any background can feel comfortable here [Can emphasize what should be secondary to Christ. Can lead us to value comfort more than Christ]
* Diversity makes our church look good to outsiders [we can be prideful about something God has built—and a temptation to manufacture it ourselves. And it can lead to discontentedness with the level of diversity God has given to a church]

One thing that you’ll see here is the difference between human-built unity and diversity, and God-built unity and diversity. The grand purpose of God for the local church only works when our unity and diversity are obviously *not* the result of *our* hard work and ability. That was Bill’s observation when he first visited CHBC. As an expert in how crowds operate, he was surprised to see people without much in common caring deeply for each other when so little self-interest was at stake. That must mean that there’s something beneath the surface that holds them all together. And what is that unseen bond? Jesus. The goal of our unity and diversity is to point to the reality and power of Jesus.

We’ll talk about this much more next week. But it’s important to state right up front that what we’re interested in is not unity and diversity per se. It’s *God*-glorifying unity and diversity. And, thank God, it is what he builds in churches all the time. So what kind of unity and diversity does he build? That’s point 4 on your handout.

**IV. What Kind of Unity and Diversity Matters?**

You might have noticed that haven’t yet defined unity and diversity. That’s because we really need to understand *why* it’s important—and especially, important to God—before we can figure out exactly what kind of unity matters, what kind of diversity matters. So let’s get into some definitions.

*Unity*

So let’s start with unity. What kind of unity will accomplish all that we’ve talked about so far this morning? Well, it’s interesting—when we hear calls for unity in the church, it’s often about organizational unity. People say, “if we just didn’t have all these denominations, if Christians could all agree and work together, then more people would get saved.” But while we care very deeply about unity between churches, there are two problems with this focus on organizational unity:

1. The unity we see in the New Testament is unity between true Christians who believe the gospel. Not all organizations that call themselves Christian have a Christian understanding of the good news. And we can’t simply brush all that under the rug; that would be a denial of the biblical gospel.
2. The unity we see in the New Testament is primarily a unity *within* the local church—and only secondarily across the universal Church. Unity that matters most is unity that’s most humanly difficult: unity between people who rub shoulders on a regular basis. Who have to put up with each other’s sin and eccentricities and annoyances. When the New Testament writes about unity, it mainly has in mind unity between people who are sharing life together in a local church. Yes: we think that unity between churches (big C) is important. Our church is home to Together for the Gospel, after all. But that’s not mainly what we should be thinking about.

So when we talk about unity in this class, what are we referring to? When we value our shared bond in Christ more than anything that might divide us. For the purpose of this class, biblical unity is when we value our shared bond in Christ more than anything that might divide us. And it shows up as love between true believers that should confound the world.

*Next,* ***Diversity***

God’s purposes should also lead us to think carefully about our definition of diversity. Sometimes “diversity” is merely a stand-in for “ethnic (or racial) diversity.” We usually evaluate the “diversity” of a local church based on the number of colors we can count of people’s skin in the pews. As in, we are a moderately diverse church because we are 30% non-white. But is that really *all* that we should care about if we have God’s purposes in mind for diversity?

I’d say not. The Jew vs. Gentile divide of the New Testament church was a divide of ethnicity. *But also* of cultural background and religious upbringing and more. In the same way, we want to encourage unity across any barrier that society respects but that’ve been overrun by the gospel.

I’ll give you a few different categories to keep in mind. But before I do that, I want to make sure that this is more than just an academic exercise. So I want each of you to write down the names of 5 of your closest friends in our I know it’s hard to think of your 5 *closest* friendships. So just pick 5 who are pretty close. Then as I run through these, check off which of these friendships apply to at least one these categories.

**Where do your friendships have a…**

1. **Diversity of age?** So which of those 10 friends you listed are notably older or younger than you? Write down an “A” next to those names.
2. **Diversity of political affiliation?** Write down a “P”.
3. **Diversity of personality type**. Can you see diversity of personality types within your friendships in this church? Are any of your friends extraverts? Introverts? Socially smooth? Socially awkward? “T” for type since we already used “P” for politics.
4. **Diversity of cultural background.** Any of these friends grow up in a different culture than you? Write a “C” next to their names.
5. **Diversity of gender.** “G”
6. **Diversity of ability.** Thinking of those with various handicaps, be they physical or mental, that can make for a very different experience in life. “H”.
7. **And, of course, a diversity of ethnicity.** “E”.

And, of course, there are other categories. Marital status. Educational background – maybe you’ve got a college degree; anyone on your list without one? Income or social level. In this city, income isn’t always a great predictor of social category. But I think we have some idea of who falls where. Country of origin. And so on.

We need to keep all these categories in mind as we think about diversity. In some settings, some kinds of diversity may not be possible given who lives there. In other settings, some kinds of diversity may not be particularly remarkable given God’s common grace in that community. But in every setting, the local church should be characterized by unity highlighted by diversity; this is only possible because of the transcendent bond of faith in Jesus Christ.

So what’s the purpose of this exercise? To pat yourself on the back if you’ve got a lot of letters next to names or be discouraged if you don’t? No. I want you to observe three things: (1) are there letters missing on your sheet that should be there given who’s in our church. Why is that, do you think?; (2) Having thought through this, can you find one name on the page where you’re really only friends because of your shared love for Christ? Circle that name. That’s an important friendship for you. And (3) are there names with no letters at all? That’s a different kind of important friendship—where you need to pay special attention to steward all that similarity for God’s purposes, not just the comfort of the friendship.

***Which categories of diversity do you think you've seen God's grace especially in work at CHBC? Which are places where we need to pray God would do still more work?***

**Conclusion**

Let me finish our time together with an analogy from marriage that I think is useful. I mentioned at the very beginning of our class how in marriage the husband and wife are different by design. Let me make clear again: they’re equal in dignity and worth, different in role. They are designed to complement each other. In fact, their strength is in their difference from each other. If they're exactly the same, what's the point? Remember, that's why God makes a fit for Adam. (Gen. 2:18). As anyone who's married knows full well, those differences can drive us crazy at times. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, right? Our temptation is to think, "if only he/she was more like me, then we wouldn't have to deal with this mess." And we all know how short-sighted that is.

And yet it's not all about difference, is it? The paradox of Genesis 2 is that verse 18--the strength in difference--must fit with verse 24--that they be one flesh. All the husband and wife’s differences are only conflict and chaos if there's not also committed unity. If we don't feel like we're one. And so marriage is a quest to do both those things well. To protect and cherish and value the difference, and to pursue unity. When we can do both, it's a beautiful thing. And we can only do both by God’s grace.

So how much more grace do we need for our church!? We are a body of a thousand different parts — and each part is necessary. Our job is to thank God for that diversity, and to prayerfully work toward the unity God's given us through his Spirit. So let's finish our time by praying for that together, and let me encourage you this week to commit to praying for those areas of growth we talked about earlier.