**Unity and Diversity in the Local Church**

*Class 2: How God Builds Unity and Diversity*

**I. Introduction**

Last week Jamie taught us about God’s purposes for unity and diversity in the church. ***Can anyone remind us why God cares about unity in diversity in the local church?***

Imagine that you buy a vase for your living room. You bring it home, fill it with water, put fresh flowers in it—but a few hours later, much to your dismay, the water’s dripping out of the vase and onto the floor. What happened? Turns out the vase had a crack in it but the dishonest vendor just glazed it over so it looked like a perfectly fine vase [Jamie’s story of buying such a vase from a shop in Moscow when he was a teenager].

There was a unity there that was artificial. And so once the truth was out, the vase hardly served as a testimony to the craftsman’s ability. No: it advertised his incompetence.

It’s that distinction between real and artificial unity in the church that we want to look at this morning.

**II. Unity in Diversity is God’s Work**

To do that, we’re going to spend much of our time in Ephesians 2-4 that we started talking about last week. If you have a Bible, open up to Ephesians 2.

Paul gives us the gospel in the first 10 verses of chapter 2, and then he moves to a primary implication: unity in the diversity of Jew and Gentile. As in, if you were planting a church in 1st century Ephesus, the most natural strategy would be to start a church of Jews over here, and a church of Gentiles over there—so Jewish Christians feel free to invite their Jewish friends, and Gentiles likewise—and eventually maybe the two churches work more closely together as they mature in Christ. But that’s not what we saw last week, is it? This church is Jew-Gentile from day one. And precisely because its difficulty, that unity between natural enemies testifies to the wisdom of God. OK. That’s last week. Now here’s what I want you to see in this passage that we *didn’t* cover last week. We’ll do a little grammar lesson. ***Can someone find a verb in this section that runs from 2:11 to 3:21?*** What is it? And another? OK. Anyone able to find a third?

[point out that all these verbs are descriptive. The only imperative verb in the whole section is 2:11, “remember.”]

This is a huge task: build a church out of converted Jews and Gentiles—and just that one imperative verb. “Remember.” This is not about what *we* need to accomplish in the local church. It’s not about what *we* need to do. No: it’s about what God has *done*. Praise God!

Now, does this principle apply no further than the Jew-Gentile divide that’s in view here in Ephesians 2 and 3? That is, when our church covenant quotes Ephesians 4:3 that we should be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”—should we only have Jews and Gentiles in mind? No. These principles apply to all kinds of separations in a church. In the parallel passage in Colossians (you’ll find that much of Colossians is condensed sections of Ephesians), Paul does this explicitly. “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Col. 3:11).

And again, that unity—between Christians the world would keep apart—that unity is something God *has done* in Christ. If you haven’t noticed yet, that’s my main point today. Unity in diversity isn’t something we create; it’s something God has done. And how has he done that? Two ways in particular:

First, by giving us a new identity. That’s primarily what Paul has in mind in Ephesians 2-3 with all his “you are” statements: you are fellow citizens, you the household of God, you are a new humanity, you are a new temple (2:19-22). The gospel creates fashions for every Christian a new identity in Christ that is more profound than ethnicity, education, class, or ability.

And second, implicit in this passage but explicit elsewhere, God’s created unity by giving us new desires to love. Your forgiveness from Christ creates in you a love for the one who forgave you (Luke 7:47)—and we love him in part by loving his children, even those we’d otherwise see as very difficult to love. John 13:34 – “just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” It’s not merely that becoming a Christian obligates you to love—though it does—it’s that becoming a Christian gives you new desires to love.

Gospel identity and gospel love generate not just unit but diversity. They generate diversity because Christians are attracted to the preaching of the gospel even if their differences with that church make them feel less-than-comfortable. Like Margaret Roy, our church’s first black member said about joining an all-white church: “they had the best preaching in town. Where else was I supposed to go?” God love that dear sister for showing us all what it looks like to act like a Christian. She acted according to her new identity and new desires[[1]](#footnote-1).

Of course, living this out can take some hard work. More on that later when we talk about *cultivating* unity. But let’s not jump immediately to our responsibility and forget this amazing truth. Unity and diversity are *God’s* doing. Too often churches cultivate these virtues by doing things that, frankly, would probably attract a diverse crowd even if the people coming weren’t Christians. Just like universities and corporations might pursue diversity. Or we just try to muscle our way into this: we grit our teeth and decide “OK, I’ll love these people because I’m supposed to” – which falls way short of the “love with brotherly affection” standard of Romans 12. No: we need to remember that for Christians, what’s going on isn’t just the natural laws of social dynamics or human effort! God is working a unity and diversity wherever the gospel is believed that is evidently *super*natural.

***Any questions?***

**III. How Does God-Built Unity Change Us?**

So again, it’s not your job to create unity; God’s already done that. But that’s probably feeling a bit hypothetical. Makes sense, I see it in Scripture—no imperative verbs there in Ephesians 2-3 and all that. But how does that change things when I’m feeling annoyed or angry or offended because of another church member?

I have a one word answer: hope. That’s how this changes things. Look there at Ephesians 3:13—after God has described who we are in Christ—not strangers but family (2:18)—and after he’s described the *glory* of this unity—turning heads even in the spiritual realm because of what happens in this little church in Ephesus (3:10)—look at what he says in 3:13. “So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.” *This* – this God-honoring unity between Jew and Gentile through the gospel—this is the fruit of Paul’s suffering, and it is to *their* glory. So do not lose heart.

The fact that God *has* created unity turns our quest to live out that unity into a quest of guaranteed discovery. Think about the difference between solving a math problem in class and working on the frontier of mathematics. The problem in class is guaranteed to have an answer. Not so for the frontier mathematician. Unity in the church is like the problem in class. It may be hard. It may be frustrating. It may take a long time. But you know you can get there. You know in that particularly challenging friendship that there is unity, because God’s built it. And so we have hope to persevere in love.

Our world, of course, is telling us the same thing about our common humanity. If we can just realize that we are fundamentally the same, that we all bleed the same, then surely we can live as one. Sometimes, that’s true. For the sake of humanity, I hope that’s often true. But the Bible does not *promise* us that our common humanity is sufficient for unity. And I’d suggest that our history as a world in conflict, and Jesus’ promise that conflict will continue (“wars and rumors of wars”)—suggests that the innate unity of humanity is no match for the power of our sin.

And yet such pessimism has no place in the church because here our sin is matched by the gospel, and our pessimism by God’s promise. So that brother or sister who drives you up the wall, who makes you so angry—God has given you unity with them, and *you will find it* if you do not give up[[2]](#footnote-2).

***So a question for you all: help us make this practical. What are some ways in which the hope of God-built unity changes how you relate to others in this church?***

**IV. When God-Built Unity and Diversity go Missing**

I’ve said that the church needs *God-*built unity and diversity—unity and diversity around the gospel. But why? What goes wrong when they’re missing? Two things, both here in Ephesians:

1. Confirmation of the gospel

First is what we already saw in Ephesians 3:10. What is it that makes the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places wonder at the wisdom of God? That proves out the power of the gospel? Christian unity between Jew and Gentile[[3]](#footnote-3).

It’s interesting: in the book of Acts, in nearly every place where the gospel is preached, it’s accompanied by what Luke calls “wonders and signs.” Miraculous healings, speaking in tongues—wonders that confirm the truth of the message. But in every case, when the narrative revisits those places, we hear of no more wonders and signs. Instead, Luke focuses on the strengthening of the *church*. Now, the book of Acts doesn’t explain that pattern. But I don’t think it is too far of a leap to see a connection. Miraculous healings and such were God’s temporary confirmation of the gospel—but only temporary—until his *normal* means of confirmation was up and running: the unity of the local church. As Jesus had prayed to the Father, “that they may be one even as we are one…*so that* the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:23).

But that confirmation of the gospel is not the only things that depends on unity in our diversity. Second:

2. Preservation of the gospel

Skip ahead to Ephesians 4. Having spent a chapter and a half describing how both Jew and Gentile are together in the church, Paul calls them “one body”—verse 4. It’s interesting: elsewhere in Scripture (say, Romans 12), Paul uses the body of Christ analogy to describe the importance of different gifts in the church. Here, he uses it not about gifts but about backgrounds. One body composed of Jews *and* Gentiles.

So how does this preserve the gospel? Verse 13: this body attains to the unity of the faith and maturity. Verse 14: “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” Verse 15: “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Let’s dive a little deeper to see how that works. How exactly does a church protect the gospel? Is it mainly having a good statement of faith? Or solid preaching? Well, those things are helpful. Even necessary. But that’s not what Paul points to. Being tossed to and fro by false doctrine is contrasted with this body of many parts “speaking the truth in love” to each other. We hold onto the gospel through thousands of different conversations that happen between members each week about their walk with Christ. An encouraging conversation helps me return to faith after a moment of temptation. Do that a thousand times and you’ve got a typical week in the life of CHBC. Do it a million times and we’ve held onto that faith for the next generation. At the most granular level, *that’s* how we hold onto the gospel.

Again, as Paul says, unity in diversity as the body of Christ is a key piece of that. That’s certainly been my experience. Because counterintuitively, the less you have in common with a friend at church, the more grounded in Christ your with them relationship is likely to be. So for example, let’s say I’m good friends with [name of someone in the class]. We’re both Christians and we’re both big into the Nats. So what are we going to talk about when we get together? [Wait for answer: probably “baseball”]. *Jesus*. Because we’re both Christian. But yes, baseball. A lot about baseball. Why are we friends? Well, Jesus to be sure—but probably a bunch of other things as well.

On the other hand, contrast that with my friendship with [another name in the class]. We really have to scratch our heads to think of much we can talk about…other than Jesus. We probably don’t *just* talk about our shared faith, but faith is a big part of how we build our friendship because there’s not much we share in common other than Jesus.

Now, which is better ground for a friendship…baseball or Jesus? [wait for an answer]. Of course. Jesus. That’s a friendship centered on faith. That’s a friendship that’s especially well-equipped to be a little piece of this church holding onto the gospel for the next generation.

Let me point something out here. These two things—preservation of the gospel, confirmation of the gospel—are the Great Commission, aren’t they? “Go and make disciples of all nations” (John 17:23, as our love confirms the gospel) and “teach them to obey everything I have commanded you” (preserve the gospel).

And what matters here is that this is *God*-built unity in diversity. If our unity and diversity stem from anything else, that’s no bad thing—but it doesn’t accomplish what we’ve been talking about. When we look at the local church, we need to see a unity in diversity that is a giant sign pointing to the gospel. That’s what protects the gospel. That’s what proclaims the truth of the gospel.

***Any questions?***

**IV. What’s Our Role?**

God’s the one who builds our unity. So what role to we play?

A few verses after Paul establishes that it’s God alone who unites Jew and Gentile in the Ephesian church, he says in Eph 4:3 as I quoted earlier: “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (NIV)[[4]](#footnote-4). Make every effort. Hardly sounds like sitting back with no part to play, does it? 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.”

And we see this seeming paradox all through Scripture. 1 Corinthians 3:6, speaking about a church, Paul writes, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” God uses us to nurture what he causes to grow. Or 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” OK. God’s gonna do it! Easy peesy, right? Nope, verse 4: “that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.” Oh. We all know the effort *that* takes. The Christian life is inherently paradoxical; it’s one of resting *and* working.

When God creates something *within* us, he is glorified as we fight to nurture what he’s created. I’ll give you an analogy. Let’s say that you’re a drug addict when you become a Christian. And the moment you come to faith, all those desires and habits and addictions God just takes away. Amazing! That really shows off the power God has to transform, doesn’t it? On the other hand, let’s say you become a Christian and God *doesn’t* do that. Instead, you have to fight to submit everything to the lordship of Christ and to not be controlled by anything. You have to fight, and over the course of five or six years there are literally 10,000 times when you have to say to yourself, “I really want to go this way, but I trust what Jesus says and I’m going to go that way instead.” And slowly, bit by bit through a struggle of faith, over five or six years, your desires and appetites gradually change and you are free from that addiction. Do you see how God gets glory every time you turn toward him and away from addiction? Do you see how that proves out not just his power but his goodness, through your faith?

Just like God gives the addict freedom *and* it takes work to live that freedom out, he gives us unity in Christ *and* it takes effort to, quoting Ephesians 4:1 “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

Let me leave you with two basic categories for what this looks like.

1. We need to stop getting in the way. Sadly, we sometimes get in the way of the unity God has built. In international missions, the “homogeneous growth” principle long held sway—and even does today. It argues that different castes in India, or different ethnicities in Laos, for example, should separate into different churches since similarity breeds growth. How dreadful. What more powerful witness could there be in early twentieth-century India than for believers to show through their diversity that Christ means more than their caste level!

And we often do the same. For example, churches segment along demographic lines to build community. A singles group for the singles, a moms of preschool group, a contemporary and traditional service…ministry by similarity tells Christians that community is to be built on the natural things they share in common instead of the supernatural gospel. Or entire churches for young professionals, artists, bikers, and so forth.

Or someone picks a church, or a small group, based primarily on how comfortable they feel. Which often translates into, “are most of the people just like me?”

How much Christian nominalism have we built into the modern evangelical church by insisting on this ministry by similarity instead of ministry by Jesus?! At CHBC, our main women’s ministry is our Sunday service. Our main youth ministry is our Sunday service. Our main seniors ministry is our Sunday service. We may at times have ministries directed at particular segments of the congregation, but they should never receive such an emphasis that community at this church would ever be confused to be those ministries. We are one church.

1. Cultivate unity in diversity

But we need to do more than simply stop doing unhelpful things. Like Paul’s image of a farmer, we must *cultivate* unity in diversity. To guard it. To nurture it. To sacrifice for it. We’ll take several more weeks to flesh this out, but let me lay a foundation for those classes by returning to Ephesians to see two main categories of what this looks like: growing in our understanding of what God has done, those elements of gospel identity and gospel love we talked about earlier.

1. Work to see our identity as Jesus defines it. That’s exactly where Paul goes in Ephesians 4. “Walk in a manner worthy of your calling,” he says in verse 1, so he reminds us who we are, verse 4: one body from one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Your identity is not defined by your past or your personality, your sexuality or your struggles, your ethnicity or your education. It is defined by new birth in Christ. But of course, none of us live with that crisply in view. As you grow in Christ, you will act more and more in line with your true identity—not putting confidence in those other labels. And as that happens, you will grow in your ability to build real friendships with others who share that same identity, regardless of their differences from you.

1. Work to understand Christ’s love. That’s where Paul goes at the end of chapter 3. What is his prayer for this Jew-Gentile congregation? That, verse 18, they “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” The power of your love for others depends on the power of Christ’s love for you. Now, his love never changes but your understanding of his love grows. As you discover how forgiven you really are; as you discover how good his plans are for you; as you discover how glorious and exalted he is—as you discover all these things you will begin to mine the riches of Christ’s love for you. The more you know his love for you, the more you will love others—and the riches of that mine, my friends, are inexhaustible.

**Conclusion**

Interview about living in the minority in a church (someone from a different country and culture)

* Tell us about yourself (where did you grow up, when did you come to DC, why did you move here?)
* Why did you come here instead of to a Chinese church?
* What were some of the things that were least comfortable about CHBC when you first came here? What sacrifices did you need to make to be a fully-functioning member of our church?
* What are ways in which you think the average church member doesn’t realize what it’s like to be a CHBC member from China? What do you think they overlook?
* What are ways that we can be more considerate to our brothers and sisters from China?
* How has God used the diversity of CHBC to his glory in your life?

1. Removed: So through gospel identity and gospel love, God builds unity and diversity in his church. Another way to put this is that when Jesus prays in John 17:21 that “they may all be one,” we can have absolute confidence that God is answering Jesus’ prayer! This unity between those who believe the gospel is an accomplished fact, and the bond we feel with true believers we’ve never met is testimony to that. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Removed: That’s the hope of Ephesians 3:20 – “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.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Removed: Relationships form around a shared bond, a commonality. When relationships form in the church without any obvious shared bond, it doesn’t mean that there’s no bond there. What it means is that the bond is Christ. He is the X-factor that explains the church when nothing else can. And when that shared bond runs deep—as deep as family, as deep as tribe, and deeper—that shows that what’s happening in the church truly is supernatural. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ESV: “eager to maintain the unity…” But the word translated “eager” or “making every effort” has the sense of zeal and diligence to accomplish a task that doesn’t quite come out in the word “eager”—at least not without its fuller context. Thus the NIV is used. CSB and NASB (“making every effort”, “being diligent to”) carry the same sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)