

Healthy church 2: Unity and diversity

Introduction

Two questions to discuss while waiting to begin:

- Why is unity important to the local church?
- Why is unity hard to achieve?

Our Sunday School programme this term is considering the Bible's marks of a Healthy Church. It's critical that individually and corporately we grow in our understanding of God's blueprint of the church, so that Immanuel becomes an increasingly healthy body of Christ.

Last week we learned that the "church", simply, is the GATHERING together of God's people. The Lord's gathered people congregate supremely in the universal and invisible church – that great gathering of all the elect from across the world and down the ages: by faith, though not yet by sight, we worship in that gathering even now. And it is the will of God for all Christian people that they gather together in local churches. The church is most "churchly" when she gathers.

This week we're going to consider how Christ builds one united church out of diverse and sinful people – all to His praise and glory. Mostly we'll be in the book of Ephesians. In my preparation for this session I've been greatly helped by a book called "Compelling community: where God's power makes a church attractive" (by Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop), and by some of Capitol Hill Baptist Church's "Core Seminars."

We'll PRAY as we begin. And then READ from Ephesians 2:11-22

Ephesians 2:11-22, "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-- ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

1. God's plan is to unite DIVERSE people within the local church

It's hard for us to imagine how first century Jews and Gentiles viewed one another – in spiritual and in sociological terms. Ephesians 2:14 speaks of "the dividing wall of hostility." *Objectively*, the Gentiles (that is, people not descended from the family of Abraham) found themselves outside of the covenant promises of the Old Testament. *Subjectively*, they were often made to feel like that: they were outsiders to God and outsiders to the Christian community, "separated" and "alienated" (v12).

And yet, it was God's plan to bring unity. Christ himself "is" our peace, who "has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (v14). Through the Cross, that hostility has been "killed" (v16).

We are well-used to divisions among human beings, leading to rivalries, enmities and separation. There are fault-lines on so many different fronts: race, age, politics, economics and wealth, class, personality and personal preferences, culture and background. The division between Jew and Gentile exceeded them all. Their union in Christ illustrates how deeply committed God is to uniting a diverse people within the local church.

Consider some of those differences – in which the world keeps barriers up, but where the church of Christ should be characterised by unity and fellowship. The local church should be a united people, made up brothers and sisters...

- Of different races and ethnicities
- Different ages
- Different economic situations (rich and poor)
- Different classes (the English class system – what a minefield to negotiate!)
- Different personalities and personal preferences
- Different cultures and backgrounds

2. God's plan is for a DEEP unity among diverse people

It is possible for neighbours to co-exist in suspicion or for different groups to tolerate one another. (Perhaps like North Korea and South Korea: shots are rarely fired, but it's close to being a non-relationship). The unity which God creates in His church is far greater than mere toleration.

First, He has created in himself "one new man in place of the two" (verse 15). In the church of Jesus Christ we form a new human race. We are a new united humanity.

Second, we are "fellow citizens" in the kingdom of God (v19). Together, we are children of our heavenly King.

Third, and most wonderfully of all, we are members of God's new family. Together, we "access in one Spirit to the Father" (v18). Together, we are "members of the household of God" (v19).

It is not just a BROAD unity among diverse people. It is a DEEP unity – climaxing in our shared adoption as sons of the same heavenly Father.

So consider those areas in which the world erects and maintains barriers... and consider what they should look like within the church of Christ:

(a) Boundaries of ethnicity:

We're increasingly realising that racism isn't merely a haunting memory, but a present reality for many. So, we're to have a concern for love in Christian churches that crosses ethnic lines.

The Gospel is true no matter the colour of your skin. The gospel does not erase the colour of your skin. But our primary identity is not White, Black, British, French, India, Nigerian, etc. First, we are "in Christ."

(It's worth noting that worldly racism is sinful because it denies the image of God in others. But worldly pluralism is also faulty, because it pursues unity with something else at the centre which is not Christ.)

It'll be worth our considering how it is that we can make our church more racially diverse. Are there things we are or do that make it a difficult place for non-whites or non-British folk to join?

(b) Boundaries of age:

We saw in the last session that the Old Testament church gathering was marked by an extraordinary diversity of age (e.g. Deuteronomy 31:12-13, Joshua 8:35, Joel 2:15-16). With God's help we need to pursue unity across boundaries of age. It is very unusual in the world to find deep friendships across age groups (almost from school upwards we're encouraged into age-specific relationships). It should not be unusual in the church of Jesus Christ to have friendships across ages

(c) Boundaries of economics:

Our world is familiar with rich people doing kind things for poor people. But when those rich people go home to their neighbourhoods, 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. Favouritism reeks to God.

(d) Boundaries of class:

I've often wondered what an extra-terrestrial alien would make of the English class system! It's not primarily about wealth, but about social and educational background. Its influence is probably less than it was, but it remains. And it's a beautiful thing when, in our relationships, class is transcended by union with Christ.

(e) Boundaries of personality:

Introverts are as necessary to the functioning of the body of Christ as extroverts.

(f) Boundaries of cultural background and preferences:

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 and Pentecostal traditions; Anglican and non-conformist. 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 a certain kind of simple musical accompaniment, with songs largely from the British-American Reformed 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.

But do you see the point?...

These boundaries are deep and significant. And yet, in the body of Christ, there is to be a deep unity (one humanity, fellow-citizens, all adopted children) which transcends every one of those boundaries.

At Immanuel we've progress to make (not least, because – as we grow numerically larger – true relational unity will become harder to maintain). But we do want to give God thanks and praise for the diversity he's already worked in the midst of these divisions.

And here's an encouragement not to lose heart in praying and working for the unity of the body of Christ here at Immanuel: 1 John 3:14 reminds us, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers."

3. The foundation of Christian unity-in-diversity: ONLY THE CROSS OF CHRIST

From where does unity and diversity come? What must we DO to see unity and diversity co-exist in our own church? In the most important sense the answer is: NOTHING. Christ has done it. It is a given. He has achieved it by means of His death on the Cross. It is a fruit of the Gospel.

In Ephesians 2 we're told that...

- Verse 13: those who are far off are brought near by the blood of Christ.
- Verse 14: in his flesh he has broken down that dividing wall of hostility.
- Verse 16: through the cross he has killed that hostility.
- Verse 18: through Christ we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.
- Verse 20: the church of Jesus is being built on Christ the cornerstone, and upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, where together we are growing into a holy temple in the Lord.

It is a given. Christ has done it.

4. God's purpose: that through the united local church the GOSPEL WILL BE REVEALED

Look on to Ephesians 3:6-11...

Ephesians 3:6-11, "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. ⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ 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. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord..."

What is God's plan (previously hidden, but now revealed in the Gospel)? It is his plan to create this united saved people, from people who previously hated God and hated each other. His plan is that "through the church" the power of God's gospel be revealed.

The "rulers and authorities" are demonic forces opposed to Christ and to Christian people. The church in Ephesus – with its background in the occult and in pagan worship – knew well the reality of evil spiritual forces. (See Acts 19-20).

What is it that signals to Satan and his minions that they have been defeated utterly by the Cross of Christ? God's surprising answer: it is the local church – a united assembly of Christian people where there are real differences (race, age, money class, personality, culture), yet whose very existence reveals the power of the Gospel.

This is God's "eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11). And He has committed Himself to achieving His purpose. At the heart of all that God is doing in His world is forming local churches – to His own praise and glory. Hence the doxology of Ephesians 3:20-21...

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, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Why does Paul ascribe to God "glory in the church"? Because it is in the church that God has seen fit to be glorified, in His one diverse-but-united people.

5. How do we CULTIVATE unity in diversity?

The fact that God establishes our unity does not mean that we should lazily sit back and expect people with different personalities, backgrounds and cultures to love another automatically. Why?

- The terrible truth is, that the church is full of sinful people! Sinfully, we can resist the unity which God has created.

- Also, historical realities and unspoken assumptions can hurt the unity of a local church (perhaps assumptions about ethnicity or class or culture which need to be identified and corrected by the truth of Scripture).

So, with the Lord's help we're to embrace and cultivate the unity which God has created within Immanuel. That's why Ephesians chapter 4 begins as it does:

Ephesians 4:1-3, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Like so many of Paul's letters, the first half (chapters 1-3) says "This is who you are in Christ," before the second half (chapters 4-6) then exhorts "So, live as who you are in Christ."

Total or ultimate diversity will not be found in any earthly congregation, not least because we speak different languages. Every local church is local, and so their diversity will be limited by their location and certainly by language. And that's fine.

But does it mean for us to cultivate unity-in-diversity? What does it mean eagerly to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

(a) It doesn't mean organisational unity at the expense of truth.

This is a counterfeit form of unity. Sometimes it's said that different churches need to get over their differences and unite together. Isn't the existence of multiple denominations wrong? Aren't significant disagreements within our own denomination evidence of wrongful disunity?

How do we respond?

Firstly, it is *within* the local church that Ephesians envisages unity-in-diversity being worked out. Later on he's exhort a particular group of believers to speak the truth in love to one another (4:15), to speak the truth to fellow church members (4:25), to be kind to one another (4:32), etc. It may seem mundane or frustrating, but it is the local body of believers that chiefly reveals the Gospel through their daily relationships.

Secondly, Paul's clear in Ephesians that the church is founded on Christ and on the teaching of the apostles and prophets (2:20, 4:11ff). There is truth in which the church is to grow up, and there is false doctrine from which the church must be guarded. There are brethren who disagree about relatively minor matters not touching on eternal salvation – for example to do with baptism, or eschatology – and we want to pursue as close relations as we can. (A trailer for our next session: there is a place for partnerships and denominations beyond the sphere of the local church). But some disagreements are so serious that the unity of the faith can only be maintained by godly separation.

(b) It doesn't mean unity in the Gospel *and* in something else.

This is really important. It's much more subtle, and we are vulnerable to it.

Suppose a teacher joins Immanuel. Who might they most naturally build friendships with? Who's naturally going to understand him best? Other teachers, of course. So I introduce him to other teachers, and maybe what emerges is an informal small group for teachers. He integrates into that community and thrives. Do we conclude that unity is created? Not quite...

What occurred is more a demographic phenomenon than a gospel phenomenon. Teachers gravitate to teachers regardless of whether or not they're Christians. Young parents gravitate together regardless of whether or not they're Christians. And there's nothing wrong with wanting to be with people of similar life

experience. It's entirely natural and can be spiritually beneficial. But if this is the sum total of what we call "church community," I'm afraid we've *built something that would exist even if God didn't*.

This is not the unity of Ephesians. This is unity founded in the Gospel *and* in something else. Here, we use *similarity to build community*. Instead...

(c) Pursue "gospel-revealing" community.

Here, many relationships would never exist except for the power of the gospel—either because of the depth of care for each other or because two people in relationship have little in common but Christ. Of course, similarity-based relationships can also thrive in this church—but they shouldn't be the focus. They happen naturally. Instead, we ought to *focus* on helping people out of their comfort zones to build relationships that wouldn't be possible apart from the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. When such relationships grow, they reveal the power of the Gospel.

I can think of a few brothers and sisters in my life who I would never have rubbed shoulders with in the world. But because we're both in Christ we love and care for each other! And that makes the Gospel visible to the world.

That doesn't mean we should flee all friendships where we share something else in addition to Christ. And we need to say that every church – Immanuel included – has a certain feel and culture.

But it is really important that we do not let differences become a barrier to fellowship. Will we insist on ministry by similarity, which feels natural? Or, while recognizing our tendency toward similarity, will we set our aspiration on community where dissimilar people enjoy remarkable fellowship only because of the supernatural bond of the gospel?

A very specific question and encouragement: do you have Christian friends who are not like you? How can you spend more time with Christian brethren who are not like you?

(It's a joy to hear of one young mum and one older lady realising they don't really naturally gravitate to each other, and they want to do something about it. So they've got a date to go to the park together! They'll have fun with the kids, get to know each other, and seek to speak the truth in love to each other).

One thing we can do is ask thoughtful questions to learn about someone else's experience of the Christian life and how it differs from ours. If you're a white Christian like me you could ask a non-white brother or sister, "Is there anything that I should know or understand better?"

Unity that matters—that accomplishes God's purposes for it—is demonstrably supernatural. It's not unity built around the gospel plus some other bond of similarity. It's unity that reveals the gospel.

(d) Make sacrifices for the sake of unity.

Unity in diversity is much easier in theory than in practice! It is easy to fall prey to sins of selfishness, consumerism and an idolatrous guarding of time.

We need to sacrifice our comfort – reaching out to brethren to whom we're different. We can sacrifice our preferences in all manner of areas – both in public church life and in relationships. We need to sacrifice time to serve church members in need. Maybe if you're a super-planned person, be willing to spontaneously go to lunch with someone who does life differently.

We don't do it for the sake of diversity. But in order to build the kind of church Christ wants us to be. Ephesians 4:11-16 paints a marvellous vision of Christ at the centre, the scriptures at the foundation, with church members speaking to and serving one another. The result? It's in 4:13, "the unity of the faith."

And that's our future too. Revelation 7:9-12 paints a vision of the invisible and universal church, of which the local church is a little glimpse:

Revelation 7:9-12, "After this I looked, and behold, 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,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.""