

Forging Unity in a Culturally Diverse Church
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- Introduction

- Acts 6:1-7 = “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”

- Overview:

- Here we see the unity of the early church is threatened by a serious internal problem: one culturally distinct group is being discriminated against by another culturally distinct group.
 - One commentator explains: “The ‘Hebraic Jews’ were those Jews who were more inclined to embrace Jewish culture and were mostly from Judea. The ‘Hellenistic Jews’ (or ‘Grecian Jews’ - people who were Greek in language, outlook, and way of life) were those Jews who were more inclined to embrace Greek culture and were mostly from the Diaspora (all over the Roman Empire). For the most part, [the Hebraic Jews] tended to regard [the Grecian Jews] as unspiritual compromisers with Greek culture, and [Grecian Jews] regarded [Hebraic Jews] as holier-than-thou traditionalists. There was already a natural suspicion between the two groups, and Satan tried to take advantage of that standing suspicion.” (David Guzik)
 - This discrimination issue had the potential to fracture and divide the early church.
 - But the church handled it spiritually, and as a result, the Bible says in verse 7 = “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly...”

- In other words, they averted a crisis by addressing the problem sufficiently, so that the unity of the church was preserved, and it continued to grow and thrive.
- Q: What's happening specifically here? Let's break this down.
 - The early church apparently distributed food on a daily basis to the widows who were in need among them.
 - The 'Grecian Jews', who were in the minority in the church and in leadership, complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food by the majority "Hebraic Jews".
 - The Apostles:
 - acknowledge the problem
 - and facilitate a plan to address the problem
 - but don't allow the problem to sidetrack them from their central job of prayer and the ministry of the Word.
 - Seven men are selected to figure out how to disperse the food more fairly.
 - They are:
 - "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (vs. 3)
 - In other words, both spiritually minded and practically minded enough to handle the situation well.
 - And all seven of the men appointed have Greek names, indicating that they are probably 'Grecian Jews' themselves.
 - This shows great sensitivity to the offended party and probably helped to restore unity.
- Here's how one commentator summarizes the situation: (adapted from David Guzik)
 - Considering all that could have gone wrong when Satan tried to attack through division, everyone involved deserves much credit:
 - Those with the complaint, [the Grecian Jews], did the right thing:
 - They made the need known (instead of harboring bitterness and resentment).
 - They educated the majority group as to:
 - what the problem was
 - and probably how the problem felt to those of their group.
 - Then they trusted the solution of the church and the leadership and moved on; not allowing the issue to cause further division.

- Those of the other party, [the Hebraic Jews], did the right thing as well:
 - They recognized that [the Grecian Jews] had a legitimate need and they empathized with them.
 - They allowed themselves to be educated about:
 - both the problem
 - and probably how it felt to be overlooked in that way.
 - They agreed that there was a need to raise up more leaders among the minority group, and they supported the leadership's efforts to do so.
 - The apostles did the right thing:
 - They responded to the need without distracting themselves from their central task.
 - They neither:
 - ignored or downplayed the issue
 - nor did they focus on the issue so much that it caused further division and distraction from the mission of the church.
 - By addressing it spiritually, they facilitated greater love and understanding within the group.
 - The result?
 - The word of God spread!
 - Satan's strategy failed:
 - He tried to divide and distract the church, and it did not work.
 - Instead, the church emerged more unified and fruitful than ever!
- Transition => Q: How does all this apply to us today?
- One: We are affected by what's going on around us.
 - America is being pulled apart right now by issues of racism, prejudice and retaliation.
 - It's all over the news.
 - It's the hot topic many are discussing, debating, and dividing over.
 - It's a subject that many feel very deeply and personally about – on all sides of the issue.
 - As a church, we certainly don't want to take sides or take a political stance that will only alienate some part of our fellowship and do more harm than good.
 - But neither should we bury our heads in the sand and pretend this issue doesn't affect us.
 - We think: "It's not here in the church."

- But it is.
 - Some of it is due to ignorance.
 - We all have prejudices – even if we’re not aware of them.
 - Some of it is due to sin.
 - Galatians 5 says it’s our nature to have:
 - “hatred, discord...fits of rage...dissensions...and factions.”
 - Q: But do we confess these sins?
 - Q: Do we confess the temptations?
 - We don’t even want to say those words because we’re too embarrassed to admit them.
 - The more we have indignation about these sins, like any other sin, the more we raise our level of sensitivity to each other and love each other.
 - None of us are perfect, but we’ve got to fight to be like Jesus in this.
- Transition => Q: How does God want us to view and deal with the issues of racism, prejudice and discrimination?
 - Let’s turn to John 17...
- Two: We must strive for complete unity in the church
 - John 17:13-19 = (Jesus praying to the Father just days before the end) “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. 14 I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.”

“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. 19 For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.”

 - As Disciples of Jesus, we are “in the world, but not of it”...
 - We’re sent into the world, but must be protected from “the evil one”, so that we don’t conform to the values and practices of the world.
 - We’ve been born again. So, we’re citizens of the Kingdom of God first, and Americans second.
 - Therefore:
 - it’s fine to be political, but our deepest convictions are to be spiritual, not political.
 - our daily reading must be the Bible more than the news media or talk radio.
 - our emotional loyalties must be to God and his church more than family and ethnicity.

- Share:
 - I became a Christian in spite of the objections of my family.
 - I chose Christ over family.
 - I now have a spiritual family that is not just brown, but:
 - black
 - white
 - yellow
 - and all shades in between.
- Q: Where are your loyalties? What are your values?
- Don't let Satan blur your vision!
 - Let the truth of God's Word sanctify you every day!
- Vs. 20-23 = "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – 23 I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."
 - God's standard for our unity in here is "oneness", "complete unity" ...
 - The same oneness that Jesus had with the Father!
 - Q: So, what does it mean to be that unified?
 - A: It means:
 - we stand with each other in the face of divisive forces.
 - We assume the best about each other.
 - When we see a problem, we address it:
 - directly
 - personally
 - lovingly
 - with curiosity, not condemnation
 - with empathy, not judgement
 - with confidentiality – protecting the other's reputation
 - When we are confronted, we respond with:
 - humility, not pride
 - openness, not defensiveness
 - seeking to understand, not defend
 - Example: two disciples who worked things out recently...
 - Mutual vulnerability...
 - M.P. = It takes work to be unified!
 - But this is what spiritual people do...
- We don't have time to preach all these scriptures, but just listen as I read some other passages of scripture that give us God's perspective on racism, prejudice and discrimination:

- Leviticus 19:33-34 = “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. 34 The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”
 - Ephesians 2:14-16 = “For he himself (Jesus Christ) is our peace, who has made the two groups one (Jew and Gentile) and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”
 - 1 John 2:9-11 = “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. 10 Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. 11 But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.”
 - Galatians 3:28 = “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
 - Galatians 2:11-13 = “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. 12 Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.”
 - Romans 12:17-21 = “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:
 - “If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
 - if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
 - In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”
 - 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”
 - Colossians 3:12-15 = “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.
 - 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”
- Main Point = Let God’s Word sanctify you.

- Q: Is there racism or prejudice of any kind in your heart?
 - Repent.
 - Q: Is there resentment, bitterness or lack of forgiveness in your heart?
 - Repent.
 - Let's be spiritual, and show the world how to forge true unity.
- Three: Q: Practically speaking, how can we build this kind of unity among us?
 - A: I believe three things will help immensely:
 - mutual empathy (understanding)
 - mutual compassion
 - mutual sensitivity
 - A. Mutual Empathy
 - "Empathy" =
 - Google Dictionary: "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another."
 - Wikipedia: "Empathy is the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing from within the other person's frame of reference, i.e., the capacity to place oneself in another's shoes."
 - James 1:19-20 = "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."
 - We are so quick to speak:
 - to give our opinions
 - to make sure we are heard
 - And so slow to listen:
 - to actually find out what others (unlike ourselves) are feeling and saying.
 - As a result, people tend to talk "at" each other, instead of "to" each other about race relations.
 - My suggestions to you:
 - Ask a black brother or sister in here:
 - about their experiences growing up as a minority
 - what it feels like to have someone make assumptions about you or your family or friends based on stereotypes and generalities.
 - Ask Carlos Oquendo (a police officer in our fellowship):
 - about his experiences as a police officer
 - what it feels like to have some people make assumptions about you based on stereotypes and generalities.
 - Ask a white brother or sister in here:
 - about their experiences as part of a group that is retaliated against.

- what it feels like to have some people make assumptions about you based on stereotypes and generalities.
- And on and on... (we've got Hispanics, Asians, Haitians, Filipinos, etc. in here.)
 - Ask a sister in Christ in here what it's like to feel inequality in the workplace
 - Ask a handicapped brother or sister in here what it's like to be handicapped
 - Ask a senior citizen in here what it's like to be cast aside by society because you're seen as irrelevant.
- Q: What's the point?
- A: Ask; care; find out.
 - Because if we don't know each other, then we can't truly love each other.
 - The point is listening and appreciating the other person's feelings and perspective.
- M.P. = The first step toward true, biblical unity and love is empathy and understanding.
- B. Mutual Compassion
 - The next step is compassion.
 - "Compassion" =
 - Dictionary.com = "a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering."
 - Wikipedia = "Compassion is the response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help."
 - Empathy and understanding is important – but it's not enough.
 - We've got to be moved with compassion for each other.
 - We've got to feel the hurt and pain of each other and deeply desire to alleviate that pain and suffering.
 - That's how God treats us – and how he expects us to treat each other.
 - Share re: a conversation I had with an African American couple in our church this week that I'm very close to:
 - I interviewed them... "What's it like?"....
 - I listened to them...
 - and by the end I was in tears...
 - We held hands and cried together.
 - I was moved with compassion for them in an area I could not fully relate to, but now understood much better in a very personal way.
 - I told my wife, Lisa, that afternoon about our conversation, and she cried as well... (tears of compassion...)

- Compassion moves us to do something:
 - For me, I decided:
 - to preach on it today (not a political talk, but a spiritual one)
 - to host a “Round Table Discussion” this week with a few close friends of various ethnic backgrounds
 - to encourage further constructive conversations one on one.
- Application:
 - Q: Do you know?
 - Q: Do you care?
 - Q: Are you willing to see someone else’s perspective – or are you blinded by the force of your own opinions?
- One author wrote this: “Jesus said that one of the most important things we can do is to love our neighbors. When pressed with the question, “Who is our neighbor?” he told the story of love across the razor wire of racial and religious enmity when a Samaritan man helped a wounded Jew. The strong lesson here is that love and compassion should always trump the divisions between us.
 The cure for racism is humility and compassion. The wounds of racism will only begin to heal as people, of all races, seek to understand one another.” (Excerpt from “Racism and the Bible”, by Robert L. Briggs, Huffington Post)
- C. Mutual Sensitivity
 - Be careful with your words! (in person and especially on social media)
 - Quote:
 - Proverbs 12:18 = “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”
 - Proverbs 17:27 = “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.”
 - Proverbs 15:1 = “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
 - It’s fine to share your opinions.
 - But when you share them strongly, it can feel like a personal attack – even though it’s unintentional.
 - Be careful that your comments aren’t divisive – even though you don’t mean them to be.
 - And if you have an issue with someone, you should not post that on Facebook, but talk with them directly and privately.
 - The key = “think before you speak (or write)”.

- Luke 6:31 = “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”
- Close:
 - Q: So, how should we view this issue, and what should we do about it?
 - One: Don’t be naïve: prejudice affects all of us.
 - Two: Don’t be insensitive: prejudice hurts deeply (even when it’s unintentional).
 - Three: Don’t be humanistic: there is no political solution to prejudice.
 - Some people think the church ought to do something to correct the social ills of America.
 - But there are many injustices in our world today and the church’s mission is not to correct all the injustices of the world.
 - What we can do is address racism and prejudice *in the church* – because that’s something we can (and must) do something about.
 - And as we grow in this area, we will be a shining light to the world and do our part in that way.
 - Q: What are the practical, spiritual solutions for us in here?
 - A. It starts with empathy and understanding: learning what it’s like to walk in another person’s shoes. Feeling with them.
 - B. Empathy leads to compassion: hurting with those who hurt; allowing our hearts to be moved with compassion when we realize the depth and prevalence of pain associated with discrimination – both by the minority group, as well as the reverse discrimination suffered by the majority group – that can be very painful as well.
 - C. Compassion leads to sensitivity: we ALL need to be more sensitive in what we say to each other and how we say it.
 - Sensitivity is loving.
 - And love leads to Christ-like unity.
 - And Christ-like unity in the church is a light to the world – a beacon of hope in a world of darkness.
 - May God help us to be “the light of the world”.