

Does Unity really exist in Diversity? – part 1

Reading: Ephesians 4:11-13 “...till we all come to the unity of the faith...”

Introduction:

Often we hear the phrase in the religious world, “*We are all following the one God, heading for the same place, but are getting there in different ways*”.¹ A term that is sometimes used to justify these differences (within “Christendom”) is that there is “unity in diversity”, *i.e.* “regardless of what any might believe, teach and practice, we are to consider them as faithful Christians and extend to them the right hand of fellowship”².

But is this a Biblical approach? Does the Bible teach that we can have diversity in the church, and at the same time retain true unity?

Or is the above statement just a reflection of the world today that rejects the notion of a divine definitive standard, one absolute truth, for godly living?

Due to the quantity of material to present, this topic will be covered over two separate lessons. This lesson will look at the topic of “Diversity”. The second lesson will look at “Unity”.

LESSON

1) Areas where diversity existed in the New Testament church

a) People came from diverse nations

While the Old Covenant was directed primarily at the Jews (**Deuteronomy 5:1-3**), no such national boundaries exist for the New Testament church. In the “Great Commission”, Jesus instructed His disciples to “.....*make disciples of all the nations.....*”³ (**Matthew 28:19**) – they were to go and “...*witness to Me (Jesus) in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*” (**Acts 1:8**). In other words, the gospel message was to be preached to all of the people in all of the nations on earth.

When the apostle Peter preached the first gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost, there were people present from the many nations located around the Mediterranean area (**Acts 2:7-11**)⁴.

- most of those present would have been Jews who lived abroad, but there were also non-Jews who worshipped the Living God – see the Ethiopian eunuch in **Acts 8:26 f.f.**

Later in the book of **Acts**, we see specific accounts of where the Gentiles were also taught the gospel;

¹ Consider **Matthew 7:13-14; John 14:6**

² The Spiritual Sword, Volume 12, July 1981, Number 4, page 33

³ All Biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible (NKJV)

⁴ Each year, all the male Jews were to attend three annual feasts at the place of God's choosing (ultimately Jerusalem – **1 Kings 8:29; 9:3**), no matter where they lived (**Deuteronomy 16:16**). The three feasts were the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles.

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- **Acts 10:1 – 11:18** The Roman centurion, Cornelius, with his relatives and friends.
- **Acts 13:46-48; 14:1, 20-21** The Gentiles at Antioch, Iconium and Derby in Pisidia.
- **Acts 16:27-33** The Philippian jailer and his family at Philippi.
- **Acts 17:1-4** The Greeks at Thessalonica.
- **Acts 18:8** Many of the Corinthians.

Therefore, the church in the first century consisted of believers from various nations, both Jews and Gentiles.

b) People came from diverse cultural backgrounds

With the above New Testament Christians coming from a variety of nations, we can also see that they came from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. The Jews had a background in the One, True, Living God (**Romans 2:17-18**). But the Gentile nations mostly followed idols and other false gods (**Acts 17:22-23; Romans 1:23; 1 Corinthians 12:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:9**). These differences sometimes caused problems in the early church, particularly with the issue of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (**Romans 14:1-23; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**).

The individuals themselves came from a variety of moral and immoral backgrounds. Some of the Corinthians had been previously engaged in very immoral practices (**1 Corinthians 6:9-11a**). Simon from Samaria, and some of the Ephesians, had been engaged in sorcery and magic (**Acts 8:9-13; 19:18-19**). While others had a more noble background;

- Cornelius is described as being a “*devout man*” (**Acts 10:1-2**).
- Many of those converted at Antioch (Pisidia) were “*devout proselytes*” (**Acts 13:43**).
- And at Thessalonica, many of the Greeks are described as being “*devout*” (**Acts 17:4**).

These people, with their diverse backgrounds in culture and morality, believed and obeyed the gospel, and made up the Lord’s church⁵.

c) People had diverse talents and abilities

Just as people do today, the early Christians had a diversity of gifts and talents. Some were “...*apostles, some were prophets, some were evangelists, some were teachers...*” (**Ephesians 4:11**). Others had the ability of ministry (serving others), some were very generous with their giving, others were good at showing mercy (**Romans 12:6-8**). As you read the Books of the New Testament, you start to see snippets of information here and there that show how people used their talents and abilities to contribute to the work of the church;

- There were those who travelled across countries to preach the Word to the world (**Colossians 1:5b-6, 23**).
- Christians from the church at Philippi sent aid to assist in this work (**Philippians 4:16-18**).

⁵ It should be noted that, while they may have come from immoral backgrounds, they were taught not to continue in such practices (e.g. **Ephesians 4:17-24; Romans 12:1-2**).

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- There were those who oversaw the work of providing for the Hellenist widows (**Acts 6:1-6**).
- Some brethren offered their houses as places for the church to meet (**1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15**).
- Epaphras was one who prayed fervently for the spiritual welfare of his brethren (**Colossians 4:12**).
- Stephanas and his family had devoted themselves to serving and ministering to the saints in their area (**1 Corinthians 16:15**).
- Gaius was one who showed hospitality to brethren and strangers (**3 John 1-6**).

This type of diversity was, and is, a good thing. Paul taught, on more than one occasion, that all of these various talents and abilities help the church to function as it should (**Ephesians 4:11-16**). In **1 Corinthians 12**, Paul used the example of a human body to show that each part, no matter how big or small, no matter how important or insignificant it may seem, has a role to play. And when they all work together in unity, it “...causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love..” (**Ephesians 4:16**).

d) People had diverse levels of faith and maturity

If a church is growing as it should, there will always be members who have different levels of faith and maturity – from those who are strong and mature in the faith, to those who are just babes in Christ.

- there will be those who have studied the scriptures for a long time and have allowed it to bear much fruit in their lives,
- there will be those who have only recently been converted from an immoral lifestyle and are just starting their spiritual walk, and,
- there will be those who are at some point in between.

The various New Testament letters show us that in the congregations that existed in the first century, there was this mixture of spiritual maturity and understanding;

- There were those who were strong, and those who were weak.
 - **Romans 15:1** the strong were exhorted to “...bear with the scruples of the weak...”⁶
 - **1 Thessalonians 5:14** brethren were encouraged to “...uphold the weak...”
 - **1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9** Elders were to be chosen from among those who were strong in the faith, not novices.
 - **Hebrews 5:12** Some had not grown spiritually as they should.
- There were those who had different levels of understanding.

⁶ This does not mean that the strong were to condone or turn a blind eye to any sin or error committed by the “weaker” person. It basically means that they are to be long-suffering and allow the weaker person time to grow (**1 Corinthians 13:4-7**), while at the same time teaching them the truth and exhorting them not to sin.

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- **Romans 14:14; 1 Corinthians 8:7-13** Some felt that eating meat sacrificed to idols was wrong. Others knew that, in and of itself, there was nothing wrong about eating the meat.
- There were those who were fighting, and those who were growing and working together.
 - **1 Thessalonians 1:2-7** “...*your work of faith.....you became examples to all in Macedonia...*”
 - **James 4:2** “...*you fight and war....*”

Therefore, we can see that there were areas where diversity existed in the early church;

- some of it good (the various talents and abilities),
- some of it bad (the fighting and division), and,
- some of it simply a natural consequence of converting the lost from all nations and backgrounds.

2) Areas where diversity was condemned in the New Testament church

a) Diversity in doctrine

One area where diversity was condemned in the early church was in the area of (religious) doctrine and practice. The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one faith (**Ephesians 4:5**). Given that “...*faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*” (**Romans 10:17**), there is, therefore, only one Word of God; there is only one gospel; there is only one doctrine or teaching. And it was this one doctrine that was to be taught and followed everywhere, and handed down to others – **Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Timothy 2:2**⁷.

However, there would always be those who would teach something different. During His earthly ministry, Jesus had warned His disciples that false prophets (teachers) would come who would deceive even the elect⁸ (**Matthew 24:24**). Paul warned the elders from the church at Ephesus that false teachers would arise, even from among themselves (**Acts 20:29-30**). And the apostle John warned those to whom he wrote that they should not to be gullible and accept just any teaching, Rather, they were to test what was taught to ensure that it was the truth (**1 John 4:1**).

But some fell prey to these false teachers. In his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul rebuked the brethren who had turned to follow a different gospel (**Galatians 1:6-9**). One of the great dangers in people choosing to follow error is that, if they don't repent, God will eventually allow them to believe in the error, leading to their condemnation (**2 Thessalonians 2:9-12**).

Therefore, diverse doctrines that are not in accord with the one Truth have no place in the Lord's church (**1 Timothy 1:3-4**).

⁷ In **1 Corinthians 4:17**, Paul stated that he taught the same thing in every church, *i.e.* every church received the same doctrine/teaching.

⁸ The “*elect*” = those in the church – *e.g.* **Colossians 1:2; 3:12; 1 Peter 1:1-2**

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b) Diversity in who to follow

Another area where we see diversity condemned was the practice of following different people, and associating with them instead of with Christ. It would appear that in the church at Corinth, various parts of the congregation were following different men. Some said, “*I am of Paul*”, others said, “*I am of Apollos*”, or “*I am of Cephas*” (**1 Corinthians 1:12**).

- fortunately, some said, “*I am of Christ*”.

What was the problem here? It was not that these men were teaching different doctrines – Apollos was “...*mighty in the scriptures...*” (**Acts 18:24-28**), Peter/Cephas and Paul were inspired apostles. The problem was that people were aligning themselves with the teachers, rather than with Christ. While it is fine to acknowledge someone’s teaching ability⁹, etc, (e.g. **Acts 18:24**), at the end of the day, teachers and preachers are merely the Lord’s servants doing His Will (**1 Corinthians 3:5-6; Romans 12:3**). None of those great workers in the first century died so that people could have forgiveness of sins – only Christ could do that (because He was sinless – **Hebrews 4:15**); and only Christ did do that.

Therefore, the real focus of Christians needs to be on Christ and His Word (doctrine). Jesus is the head of the church (**Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18**). He is our saviour (**Titus 1:4**). He is our Lord and Master (**John 13:13; Acts 2:36**). We belong to Him.

Therefore, it is wrong to have a diversity of people in whom we give our first (spiritual) allegiance. Yes, we can learn from the good examples that others in the church set for us (**1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17**). But ultimately, there is only one who we follow – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

In this part of the lesson, we have seen that there are areas where diversity can exist in the church. A lot of this diversity will be the result of the church growing and maturing as it should. In fact, some of this diversity is good for the church. However, we have also seen where there are areas of diversity that have no place in the kingdom.

In part 2 of this lesson, we will look at what is meant by “unity”, and where diversity does and does not have a place within it.

- - - - - to be continued - - - - -

⁹ It is also OK to point out and compliment people who do good things – e.g. **Romans 16:3-4; Colossians 4:7-13; 2 Timothy 1:16-18**