

“Christian Generosity and Bringing the Nations Together (Part 2)”

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take a Bible and let's meet in Acts 15...

For a few weeks we have looked at the nature of Christian generosity as it is described in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Then for a few weeks we have looked at the results of Christian generosity as described in the second of those chapters. We've framed these results in harvest language—a harvest of sufficiency, a harvest of righteousness, and a harvest of unity. This last one—a harvest of unity—we introduced last Sunday and we are still dealing with today.

Essentially last week we reminded ourselves that Paul was talking to the Corinthians about generosity because he wanted them to contribute to an offering that he was collecting for the church in Jerusalem, which was suffering in dire poverty. One of the interesting outcomes of this offering Paul anticipates at the end of chapter 9. He tells the Corinthians that the Jerusalem church will “*long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you*” (9:14). That statement is more radical than you might expect at first glance and that is what I labored to show last week by way of biblical background, especially from the Old Testament.

We have to remember who is on both ends of this offering that Paul is facilitating. You have Gentile Christians (like those in Corinth) giving to the Christians in Jerusalem (who were predominantly Jewish). Gentile Christians supporting Jewish Christians. Remember, when the Bible refers to “Gentiles” it is referring to the “nations,” meaning any nation that is not the Jewish nation. The Jewish nation did not “*long for*” the other nations by any stretch of the imagination in the first century. So when Paul says that these Jewish Christians will “*long for*” these Gentiles, he is saying something that may never have been said (not to mention experienced) until this point in history when the Holy Spirit was doing His work, building God's Church.

This is radical. This is unheard of. Why? Because, as we began to explore last week, the Jews for generations had been brought up to keep separate from Gentiles (like us) as much as humanly possible. They wanted nothing to do with Gentiles. So when God starts saving Gentiles (and not just Jews), who placed their faith in Christ Jesus, the Jewish Christians are taken off guard. They didn't understand it. They resisted it. Even the Apostles. They weren't prepared for what God was doing, but in some ways that was their own fault.

What do I mean? Well, they were familiar with what the Scriptures (the Old Testament) said about keeping separate from Gentiles so that they would not be drawn away into idolatry and immorality. But they had forgotten or overlooked what these same Scriptures said about God's purposes to bring people from all nations into the people of God. They fixated on the separation texts and missed all the texts that anticipated what God was doing in the early Church, namely, bringing the nations into the His people. They became prejudiced and they were blind to their prejudice all because they didn't know what the Bible actually taught. This biblical illiteracy, ignorance, or oversight (whether it was purposeful or inadvertent) left the first Christians, these Jewish Christians, ill equipped to understand what God was

doing in the Church to the point that they actually resisted it for a season by trying to keep out who God was bringing in.

Along the way, we considered some parallels to that progression in the modern age. When we overlook what the Bible actually teaches, it can have (and has had) devastating consequences, including ungodly prejudices. This led us into some of the modern oversights related to race in the Bible. We explored the racial makeup of Israel, which (spoiler alert) was not White. We saw how there were actually some very prominent Black figures in the Bible, some of which were among the most important leaders of God's people. We explored how biblical oversight has led some to wrongly condemn interracial marriages, when the Bible never does. We even saw that Moses married a Black woman and Jesus' genealogy contains three famous examples of mixed marriages. And the truth is, we didn't even scratch the surface of what we could have explored regarding these subjects, because of the time constraints. But trust me, there is more where that came from. Actually, don't trust me. Read your Bible.

But the point of all that was to show that we do the same thing that the early church did. We can overlook what the Scripture actually teach, this can leave space for prejudices to emerge, these prejudices can lead us to resist the purposes of God for His church. It may be accidental. But it happens. So how did God overcome that in the early Church? Well, it was a process. Most of the New Testament is describing that process actually. The book of Acts certainly does.

In a nutshell this is what happened...It started with the Jewish Christians wanting nothing to do with Gentiles. Then God started saving Gentiles and pouring out His Spirit on them too. When the Jewish Christians could no longer deny this, they realized that God's redemption was not just for the Jews. It was for the nations too. So the logical implication was that Gentiles were part of the people of God as well.

Even still, their upbringing led to some resistance among these Jewish Christians. They began welcoming the Gentiles in *but* only if they met certain conditions. They had to eat like Jews. They had to embrace the customs of Jews. They had to lay aside certain aspects of their culture that didn't quite fit Jewish sensibilities. They had to get circumcised like Jews. In short, many of the earliest Christians were saying, "You Gentiles can come into the church and we will accept you, but you need to become like us first." The problem with that is clear. That's legalism. Those were manmade conditions. God didn't have those conditions.

Commercial. Don't churches do that today as well? There are many churches that consist almost entirely of a certain kind of person. Maybe they are filled with people of certain race, a certain political leaning, a certain age group, a certain musical preference, economic distinctions, whatever... In time God may help them realize that He wants to bring people into His church that are not like them in these ways. If they embrace that, what often happens is they set up spoken or unspoken manmade conditions. It's as if they are saying, "Okay fine, we agree, Jesus is for those people too and they should be welcome among us, but they have to become more like us if they are going to be members of our church. They have to dress like us. Sing like us. Frequent the places we frequent. Hang out with the people we hang out with and not with the people we don't. Adopt the culture we are comfortable with." And so on. While they may not say that, that's the environment that they have created.

But that's the same kind of conditional unity that the early church had to repent of and God would say the same thing to us as He did to the early church—"No they don't!" They don't need to be like us in every way to be with us. Indeed, if they were just like us something powerful would be lost, from God's perspective (which we'll get to in a moment). The goal is for them to be like Jesus, not us.

So how did God impress that lesson on the early church? Again, it was a process. A major first step was a vision Peter had, which helped him understand that Christ fulfilled the Old Covenant Law and therefore things like the Jewish dietary laws were no longer required for the Christians (Acts 10). Peter, a Jewish Christian, and any Gentile Christians were free to eat various foods that were previously forbidden. In other words, the Gentiles don't need to embrace Peter's Jewish preferences on that matter to be part of God's Church.

Something similar is at work in Acts 15. This time the question on the floor has to do with circumcision. Some Jewish Christians were saying that the Gentile Christians would have to be circumcised like the Jews in order to be part of the Church. Look at verses 1 and 2....

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.” (Acts 15:1-2)

So Paul, the other Apostles, and various church leaders come to Jerusalem to discuss this issue. Look at verse 6 and following...

“The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.” (Acts 15:6-12)

They then issued a statement that basically summarized this conclusion—that the Gentiles do not need to become like Jews by being circumcised in order to be saved. This was a major step toward the Gentiles being accepted as equals in the Church and unity between Jew and Gentile materializing in the local churches.

The question you may have in your mind if you've been with us in previous weeks is: “What does this have to do with the offering that Paul was collecting from the Corinthians?” To understand that we need to turn to Galatians 2, where we see Paul reflecting back on the events that occurred in Acts 15. Meet me there. It's actually debated if Paul is reflecting on the events of Acts 11 or Acts 15, but they relate to the same principles in either case—the idea that the Gentiles didn't have to become like Jews in order to be saved. He and the other Apostles agreed on this.

We don't have time to read all of what Paul says in Galatians 2, but after he reminisces a bit he writes, in verse 9 and following...

“...when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.¹⁰ Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” (Galatians 2:9-10)

That, friends, is the origin of the offering that Paul was collecting in 2 Corinthians. He took seriously the request of these other Apostles for Paul to “*remember the poor*” in Jerusalem. So he starts asking various churches on his missionary journey to give money to help these poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

But here’s the thing. The offering was not merely for the sake of helping the poor. It flows out of these conversations about the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ. Paul, thus, had a larger aim of using the offering to foster unity in the Church between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Though they have been avoiding each other for ages, Paul wants them to be brought together. The Gospel that has saved them is the basis of that unity, but the Gospel is reflected in this offering. It would be a tangible demonstration that the Gentile Christians loved the Jewish Christians and the response of the Jewish Christians will testify to their love for the Gentile brothers and sister. Unity!

This is so important to Paul, as you know, if you are familiar with his writings. He touches on it in most, if not all, of his letters. We don’t have time to read all that, so let’s just settle for a handful of passages. To the Galatians he said,

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:28-29; cf. 5:6)

He told the Gentiles in Ephesus,

“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.” (Ephesians 2:12-16)

To the Colossians, he wrote,

“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:11)

To the Romans, he declared,

“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:12-13; cf. 9:22-30)

To the Corinthians,

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

And again,

“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:13)

We could keep going, but you get the idea.

This is a huge deal in the New Testament. It’s everywhere in the New Testament. God is saving people from all walks of life, all nations (and, therefore, every kind of diversity you can imagine), and those people are every bit a part of God’s people as any other follower of Christ. As one writer put it:

*“The cross is the place where barriers are destroyed. Before the cross we know our sin, and we cannot stand there without realizing all of us are without defense and have no claim on God. No one has higher value than anyone else. The ground at the cross is level. Any standing we have is God-given, not something that inherently makes us better than others.”*¹

Do you see? If that’s true, then local churches should be places where the only hint of those barriers that remains is the dust of their demise. Local churches should strive to display the beautiful diversity that God is bringing into His church through the power of the Gospel.

Now some push back at this point. “Well, pastor, isn’t this unity a ‘spiritual’ reality and more about what it’s going to be like in heaven but not necessarily what it needs to be like now in our local churches?” No! It *is* a spiritual reality and it *is* what it will be like in eternity, sure, but local churches should be a place where we strive to put those realities on display here and now, not perfectly, but purposefully. We should give the world a foretaste of what is to come in Christ’s ultimate kingdom.² That will mean not just celebrating a future hope of God bringing people together one day, but actually sitting at the table and breaking bread together now.

In fact, if you just look at the next verses in Galatians you see how imperative this is. Look at the story Paul relays in Galatians 2:11 and following:

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” (Galatians 2:11-14)

What just happened? Peter (= Cephas), stopped practicing what he preached in Acts 15. He fell back into some of his old prejudices and he started separating from the Christian Gentiles and associating instead only with the Christian Jews, who from a worldly perspective he had more in common with. Why did he do this? The text says it had to do with fear. He was afraid of what those who were like him would think of him. So he drew back from those who were not like him.

When Paul sees this, he corrects Peter because *“he stood condemned.”* But notice how Paul describes the conduct of Peter. He says it *“was not in step with the truth of the gospel”* (2:14). Peter had a Gospel problem. He was drifting from the Gospel. If the Gospel brings the nations together in Christ, then Peter shouldn’t live as though those divisions between Jew and Gentile still existed. To do so is to fail to live out the implications of the Gospel. It’s not just some future and “spiritual” unity that the Gospel creates. It’s a unity that should be demonstrated in how we identify with and associate with other Christians, even

those who we have nothing in common with *but* Christ. To avoid that is to engage in conduct not in step with the Gospel. The local church is not just some place that puts on weekly services and activities. The local church should be the place “where the purposes of God are embodied and the unity God seeks is practiced.”³ Make sense? [P.s. I preached a sermon on this passage January of last year called, “The Peril of a Central Gospel Drifting to the Margins.” You can find it on our website]

I hope though that you are seeing that this is not some minor issue in Scripture. This issue of diverse people being brought together in Christ and therefore in the church is a subject that most of the New Testament deals with. And this really gets us into an important topic—the nature of Christian community.

I like the way Mark Dever defines the community God desires for the local church as “a togetherness and commitment we experience that transcends all natural bonds—because of our commonality in Jesus Christ.”⁴ Think about that for a second. It transcends natural bonds. The concern Dever articulates, which I share, is that local churches tend to build community on things other than the Gospel. If we are not careful, our communities in our churches can be built on things that we have in common but are not the Gospel—things like the experiences we have in common, similar interests, certain causes, shared needs, social backgrounds, people our age, and so on. Is there anything wrong with those things we have in common or even being drawn to people we have things in common with? No. Not necessarily. “It’s entirely natural and can be spiritual beneficial”, writes Dever. “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 did not.”⁵

So what should be the goal for the local church community? We should strive for what he calls a “Gospel-revealing” community.

“In gospel-revealing community, many relationships would never exist but for the truth and 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. While affinity-based relationships also thrive in a church, they’re not the focus. Instead, church leaders focus on helping people out of their comfort zones to cultivate relationships that would not be possible apart from the supernatural. And so this community *reveals* the power of the gospel.”⁶

In other words, if the kind of community we experience is the kind that would still exist even if the Gospel was a lie and God didn’t exist, then we may have community in some sense but we don’t have distinctly Christian community. Christian community involves something supernatural. The kind of thing that can make Jewish Christians “*long for*” Gentile Christians, when formerly there was nothing but hostility between them. The kind of thing that can bring Black people and White people and every shade in between together, or rich people and poor people together, or Democrats and Republicans together, or young people and the elderly together, or enemy and enemy together, every brand of forgiven sinner together, in the local church, into the family of God, as equals, brothers and sisters, in a unity that is not seen in any other place in all the world. Why? Because it’s supernatural. It’s Gospel-formed. It “gathers around the character of Christ, not the characteristics of the people.”⁷

And because it seems so different than anything else in the world it looks refreshing and attractive to the lost world. It raises questions that only have Gospel answers. They look and say, “Wow! How is that possible for all those people—with all their diversity and so little in common by all appearances—to come together so willingly, loving each other so fully, and embracing each other so sincerely? How is it that every kind of sinner is welcomed in that place? They’re not just together. They are laying down their lives for one another. How do you explain this?”

You can't, apart from the Gospel (and if you can, then it's probably not *Christian* community). Because Christian community makes no sense, until you realize that Jesus saved us freely by substituting Himself on the cross in our place and experiencing the punishment we deserved for our sin. He rose from the dead and extends grace and forgiveness to all who would believe in Him alone to save them. All of us needed that equally. None of us was more deserving. By grace, through faith, He saves us apart from our works, but He doesn't *just* save us. He brings us into His people, His family, His Church. And it is there, in Christ, that every forgiven sinner has a place at the table and therefore in the Church. So the barriers that divided us in the world are destroyed in God's Church. A different kind of community emerges. And it's amazing, beautiful, and attractive. It's diverse. That's what Christian community should be.

And, like I said, when the lost world sees that, it raises questions that require the Gospel to answer. We talk about this idea of living "questionable lives" all the time.⁸ When Peter says that we should be ready "to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15), he presupposes that they will ask. But people don't ask questions about things they think they can explain, they ask questions about things they cannot. So if all they see in Christians or in Christian community is what they see regularly in the world, then it makes sense to them. It's predictable. It doesn't spark any questions and Christian witness suffers. As Michael Frost has said, "When predictability is high, impact is low."⁹ When the church just looks like another country club akin to those that they see in the world, it loses its impact. Its saltiness. But when the world sees something different, something surprising, in the Christian and the Christian community, then conversations are generated that allow us to communicate the Gospel as the only sensible explanation.¹⁰

Periodically, I give you examples of this from our personal lives to try to get you to see obstacles as opportunities. For example, you go to lunch today and the waiter does everything wrong. The drinks are mixed up. You're served the other tables food. You have to wait another half-hour for the mix up to be corrected. In the meantime, you get covered in soup when the waiter loses his footing. What do you think that waiter is expecting? It's easy to imagine. He expects you to give him the stink eye, maybe talk to the manager, put some nasty note on the receipt, and turn the zero on the tip line into a frowny face. That's the expectation. Yet because that's the expectation, the Christian has an opportunity.

What if you surprise him with grace, compassion, and huge tip? It's going to raise some questions and he may even ask for an explanation. "Why would you do this?" That's when the "show" becomes "show and tell."¹¹ What if you said, "Hey man, I've been there. We all have. In fact I was sitting in church today just thinking about all the times I have blown it before God and then I remembered that Jesus forgave me and didn't hold it against me. What a gift, huh? So don't worry about it. He's changed my life and He loves me even when I have days that I can't seem to get anything right, He can do the same for you." What is that? That's seeing the inconvenience as an opportunity to surprise the world. That's living in such a way that demands a Gospel explanation. They'll ask "why?" and you can say, "Jesus."

Or here's another example. This past week we had a child who was having a behavioral issue. Our instinct was to start charting a course of punishment so that this child of ours would learn a lesson. But as Allison and I talked about it, we reminded ourselves that the ultimate goal of parenting is not disciplining our kids, but discipling our kids. This particular child was one I had just had a pretty involved conversation with about grace a couple days before, but it hadn't seemed to sink in just yet. We knew our child was expecting mom and dad to drop the hammer, so we started brainstorming ways we could leverage the situation, as frustrating as the behavior was to us as parents, as an opportunity to teach our child a lesson about grace. We pursued that course. At the end of it all it doesn't matter if I have the best-behaved kids in the world, if they don't know Jesus. So we shepherd their souls. We don't just try to curb their behavior. Our kid was expecting judgment, but received grace. That raised questions in our child's mind, which funneled us into more Gospel conversations.

Here's another example. I was reading a book that one of the small groups is about to start called *Gospel Fluency* and the author gives another illustration of this from his personal life. He had a bunch of neighbors over to socialize, but discovered that the conversation turned to one neighbor who wasn't there. It was the stereotypical disgruntled old man, the "get off my yard" kind of guy. And all these people were just piling on about how rotten this man was. The author eventually interjected and said, "Hey, everyone, I think that's probably enough... Since he's not here to defend himself, it might be better that we stop." And they did. It was a bit awkward after that, but they moved on.

However, one of the neighbors couldn't get passed why this man would stand up for such a mean man, so after the gathering she asked him to explain. And in that moment, he got to point her to Jesus. He said something like, "I don't think what he is doing is good, it's wrong. I don't like it either. In fact, I'm praying that one day he might ask us for forgiveness. But he's not here to talk to, so we probably shouldn't bad-mouth him behind his back." But notice what's happening in that conversation. The man became an advocate for the mean neighbor who wasn't there to advocate for himself. He became the advocate for the man who deserved judgment. Sound familiar? It should. The author went on, "Jesus is our Advocate. He is currently advocating for me in a place I cannot be—before God the Father. And though I deserve condemnation for my sin, he speaks a better word of commendation over me as a son of God." Do you see? In advocating for the man, he put on display the character of God and a Gospel reality.¹² It looked shocking to one of his neighbors, so she asked a question that occasioned a Gospel explanation.

So Christians have to live "questionable lives"—lives that raise questions that require Gospel answers—in order to impact the world. We don't do that when we live just like the world. That's predictable. That's what the world expects. We do that when we live like Jesus. That's shocking. That generates evangelistic opportunities.

But that's not just true for our personal lives. That's true for our corporate life, in the local church. The church should look different than the world. It should shock the world. And one of the most shocking things about Christian community should be its diversity—the way it brings together people who the world keeps apart, the way it breaks down barriers and unites all kinds of people in Christ. That's what the Gospel creates. And that what Christian community, therefore, should put on display.

Now let me offer a few points of clarification. First, when you hear me say that Christian community should contain diversity, we are not simply talking about racial diversity. It could be any kind of diversity that shocks the world. Generational diversity (young and old). Economic diversity (rich and poor). Political diversity (Democrat and Republican). Social diversity (the popular and socially awkward). Racial diversity. Cultural diversity. Any number of forms of diversity that shows the power of the Gospel to unite a people in Christ. Diversity that shows the "boundary-crossing love of the Gospel that perplexes the world".¹³

Second, we should remember that this Christian unity, while it consists of a vast diversity, we are not referring to a diversity of belief on core matters related to the Gospel. The unity is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ. It brings together starkly different people, but those people have in common the Christian Gospel and Jesus as Lord. So it's not an "anything goes" kind of unity. It's a unity that forms because all have submitted their lives to the Lordship of Jesus, their Savior. Some differentiation and definition is always needed for identity and those exclusive claims of Christ are prime examples.¹⁴ Reasons for separation do exist when those truth claims are ignored. The believers in a local church are unique, but they are moving in the same direction—the direction of Jesus and His mission.

Third, not every kind of diversity is possible in every setting. We wouldn't expect racial diversity in places where everyone is the same race, for instance. Or generational diversity in a church that meets in a nursing home. So the contextual setting determines what kinds of diversity can exist within a church. But every church should pursue as much diversity as possible so as to show the world the Gospel's power to break down barriers the world has erected between people. So a church must look at the community in which the Lord has planted it and strive to be at least as diverse as that community. Why? Because we are striving to reach every kind of person in our community with the saving Gospel of Christ, irrespective of race, creed, social standing, or brand of sin. When a local church doesn't exhibit the diversity of the community, it is often because they are not reaching out to or welcoming in all kinds of people. They may be inadvertently attracting only their own kind for a reason. A tragic reason.

Having said all that, I should add, fourth, that not every *possible* diversity will materialize in every local church. Why? Any number of reasons that aren't all sinful. Some churches have the means to conduct certain kinds of ministries that other churches cannot and therefore we might find a certain kind of person, ministered to through those ministries, disproportionately present in their churches. In as much as Paul's missional strategy of being all things to all people is our guide, we would expect some churches to be better equipped to engage some people than we are and vice versa based on how God has distributed the saints among His churches. Worship style is also culturally expressed, so it shouldn't surprise us that certain cultures find the worship in some churches more accessible than in others. And that's not wrong. In fact, it's beautiful to see the diverse expressions of worship offered up to King Jesus.

I get all that. But that is no excuse not to pursue Gospel-shaped diversity, as much as God allows, by reaching out to every person we can. Why? Because, first, the church's witness suffers when we don't. And, second, because those differences in culture are not more potent than the culture that should be present in the local church—the Gospel culture! That's the dominant culture in the local church. Gospel culture. It transcends all others. And that's why you can walk into a church in Rwanda or a church in Equator and you are going to stand out like a sore thumb, but you are welcomed in as a part of the family...because that is what you are. It doesn't negate your differences. But it shows the world that Christ is better than them! That the Gospel is more unifying than our differences are dividing! And that's the kind of community we should strive for, by God's grace. A place where all the people of God have a seat at the table as equals. The kind of community that stands out in the world. The kind of community that is not cosmetic, but real. Not recreational, but relational. Not token, but authentic.¹⁵

Maybe you're thinking, "Okay pastor, we get it. Diversity is pretty cool in a local church. But how important is it really for our church?" I'm glad you asked. But we will have to save that for next week. We are going to look at what Paul says about God's purpose for the Church. It may surprise you. We will explore how generosity plays a huge role in these purposes, which will get us into some practical applications of all of this. Be here. Bring a friend. We got some great stuff ahead of us. Love you guys.

Let's pray...

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 145.

² *Ibid.*, 152.

³ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴ Mark Dever, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁷ Snodgrass, 155.

⁸ I have picked up this language from Michael Frost, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016), 5.

⁹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁰ “Our challenge is to find what similarly questionable lives look like in the twenty-first century. When predictability is high, impact is low... On the other hand, when an audience is surprised and intrigued, they will think long and hard about what they have heard. The same goes for Christian outreach. Remember that one of the primary acts of the evangelistic believer is the arousal of curiosity among unbelievers, leading to questions and faith sharing. Acts of philanthropy by Christians today are relatively commonplace, so they don’t surprise the world. If we hear that a Christian business owner has donated money to a cause, or that a church has opened a feeding program or a hospice, we aren’t intrigued. Such things are expected. I’m not suggesting Christian philanthropy shouldn’t continue as an expression of the grace offered to us in Christ, but it doesn’t evoke questions the way it might have in the fourth century. Neither does living a fine, upstanding, middle-class lifestyle in the suburbs, for what it’s worth.” Ibid., 12-13.

¹¹ Jeff Vanderstelt, *Gospel Fluency: Speaking the Truths of Jesus into the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 187.

¹² Ibid., 189-190.

¹³ Dever, 75.

¹⁴ Snodgrass writes, “Differentiation is necessary for identity, but the human tendency to create barriers is a distortion and a sin. Distinction and uniqueness do not have to lead to division. The erection of barriers results from the ways we attribute value, that is, by devaluing those who are different.” Snodgrass, 150, cf. 173.

¹⁵ The language in the last sentences comes from Scott Sauls, *Befriend: Create Belonging in an Age of Judgment, Isolation, and Fear* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2016), 123.