

“Christian Generosity and Bringing the Nations Together (Part 3)”

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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 Ephesians 3...

If you are a guest with us, let me catch you up. A few weeks ago we began looking at the nature of Christian generosity as Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Then we have looked for a few weeks at the results of such generosity, which he describes in the second of those chapters. One of the results he hints at is that generosity can lead to unity, particularly unity between groups that have historically been hostile toward one another.¹

Historically, the Jews did not like the Gentiles (i.e., the nations). The Jews recognized the idolatry and immorality of the nations and didn't want to get caught up in it so they kept as separate as possible in the first century. There was hostility between Jew and Gentile, hostility that was reinforced for generations. Every kind of division you can imagine is caught up in their division. It was racial, ethnic, social, cultural, nutritional, etc. So when Paul suggests, as he does in 2 Corinthians 9:14, that the offering that he is collecting from Gentiles will lead these Jewish Christians to “*long for*” these Gentile Christians, he is saying something quite radical.

In order to understand how radical, we looked at the way God overcame the early church's prejudices against Gentiles. God's plan always involved bringing the nations together under the Lordship of Christ and creating one new people—the Church—as diverse as the nations themselves. The earliest Christians had to be taught this. It was a slow process. But eventually that unity between Jew and Gentile materialized, not just in an abstract, spiritual, or conceptual way, but in a physical way within local churches where the nations were brought together as equals, brothers and sisters, redeemed sinners.

We looked at passage after passage in the New Testament last week trying to see the Gospel's power to bring together people who you would never expect to be together. Paul touches on the unity of Jew and Gentile issue with every church he addresses in the New Testament, in one way or another, and I labored to show you that. Some of you were probably surprised just how central this topic is to the Biblical teaching. The diversity that God creates in a local church is actually a part of its witness to the world. The world sees something different in the church. They see a place that brings together people that are kept apart in the world and that leads to questions that require Gospel answers and therefore the mission of God advances. We should labor to be a “Gospel-revealing” community, which consists of many relationships that would never exist apart from the truth and power of the Gospel.² That is part of our witness to the world. That's how we are a light on a hill and salt in our community.³

But it doesn't *just* witness to the world, it witnesses in another direction too. And such diversity is not *just* a cool idea for some churches, it's relevant for us as well. You may have been thinking along the way, “Pastor, are you trying to change our church?” That's the wrong question. The question we should be asking is more serious—Is God trying to change us? To understand that we have to understand something of God's purpose for the local church, which brings us to Ephesians 3. This is Paul writing again. He's addressing Christians in Asia Minor, to the churches in and around the city of Ephesus (modern day Turkey). In chapter 3, Paul is describing his calling to preach the Gospel to Gentile people groups. Let's pick things up in verse 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,¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.” (Ephesians 3:7-12).

This paragraph is packed full of awesome. There is too much for us to explore in a sermon, but I want us to get the main idea of what Paul just said. According to these verses, what is God’s “*eternal purpose*” (3:11)? The answer he gives here is for the church to display “*the manifold wisdom of God...to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*” (3:10). So last week we considered how the community in the church should display God’s power and purposes *to the world*. Now Paul is saying that the Church should put a similar show on for the heavenly “*rulers and authorities*”, which is to say, the spiritual beings. Paul is speaking of the cosmic purpose of the church.

That’s an incredible thought, isn’t it? The spiritual beings are looking at the church to see God’s wisdom.⁴ The church is the curriculum in the graduate school of the angels.⁵ As one commentator put it, “In the classroom of God’s universe, He is the Teacher, the angels are the students, the church is the illustration, and the subject is the manifold wisdom of God.”⁶ Or, switching metaphors, John Stott offered this vivid description:

“...as the gospel spreads throughout the world, this new and variegated Christian community develops. It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who is the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, *the principalities and powers in the heavenly places*. We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation.”⁷

And this is why, friends, Jesus told us that there is rejoicing among the angels of God “*over one sinner who repents*” (Luke 15:10). They are watching.⁸ As new sinners are saved through Christ, God’s wisdom is manifested in the growing Christian community and the praises of the angels are ignited.⁹

So according to Ephesians 3, God’s “*eternal purpose*” is for the church to display His “*manifold wisdom*” to all the spiritual beings. But, next question, how, according to Ephesians 3, does the church accomplish these purposes? Preaching the Gospel, of course. Preaching to the Gentiles (the nations) “*the unsearchable riches of Christ.*” But look at what Paul says in verse 9 and 10. As he preaches he is bringing “*to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for the ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known...*” So how then does God’s eternal purpose of making His wisdom known get accomplished? By bringing to light the “*mystery*” for all to see.

Now we’ve come to the million-dollar question—what does Paul have in mind when he speaks of this “*mystery*”? This is a technical term in the writings of Paul. I once took a doctoral seminar that was on the use of this one word in the New Testament, so if you’re having trouble sleeping at night and want to read 60 pages or so on the use of this word in two verses just let me know (and you’ll quickly regret it). In any case, what is this “*mystery*”? Well, as it turns out, it is not all that mysterious any longer because Paul has already told us in verse 6. Take a look.

“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.” (Ephesians 3:6)

In Greek Paul is showing his great alliteration skills, because the three adjectives he uses to describe the Gentiles all begin with the same sound because they all begin with a prefix that means “with.” Paul is stressing the “withness” of the Gentiles—they are “fellow-heirs *with*,” “one body *with*,” and “joint partakers of the promise *with*” Christians of Jewish decent.¹⁰ So the “mystery” involves the fact that God has brought Jews and Gentiles together “*in Christ*”.

But actually the “*mystery*” is even bigger than this when the rest of Ephesians is taken into account. Ephesians is sometimes called “the epistle of mystery” because even though Paul explores the subject elsewhere in the New Testament, nowhere does he go into greater detail than in Ephesians. Six of his twenty-seven uses of the word occur in this short letter.¹¹

The widest lens is in place in chapter 1, where Paul says about Christ,

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1:7-10)

So the “*mystery*” here is described as all things being brought together in unity through Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. What does that mean? It means that God is bringing together in Christ all things that were torn apart through sin. He’s fixing through the work of Christ that which sin has wrecked. Christ is restoring that which sin had destroyed.¹²

So when you get to chapter 3, Paul is giving an illustration of God “*uniting all things in him.*” He united Jew and Gentile together with one another in the church. But his logic is important. God doesn’t bring Jew and Gentile together by making the Jew become like a Gentile or a Gentile become like the Jew. Instead, He brings both Jew and Gentile to Christ and “*in Christ*” and thereby together. They become “*fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*” (3:6).

Another illustration is given in chapter 5. Just like God brings a husband and wife together in a glorious and mysterious union, so also does He bring Christ and His bride, the Church, together. He quotes Genesis 2:24, where the paradigm of marriage is established—“*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*” But then the next line shows that even marriage was meant to foreshadow the union of Christ with His Church. Paul writes,

“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” (Ephesians 5:32).

So taken on the whole, we might say that the “*mystery*” Paul is describing to the Ephesians involves what God’s purposes, through the work of Christ, to restore all things that sin has torn apart by uniting them together in Christ and this is seen especially in the way God unites Christ and His Church and the way He unites Jew and Gentile within His Church. And all of this is at the heart of the Gospel, which explains why Paul sums it all up as “*the mystery of the Gospel*” (6:19).

Still, when Paul talks about His cosmic purposes being displayed to the angels, he specifically points to the illustration concerning the diversity within the Church. In bringing such a diverse group together in the Church, God is displaying His “*manifold wisdom*” according to His “*eternal purpose.*”¹³ So diversity

among God's people is not just some cool afterthought in God's design, it's not some incidental by-product, it's part and parcel with God's purpose for His Church. It's the display of His wisdom. It's what the angels long to see.

Concerning this, Mark Dever writes,

“What is it about unity in God's family that makes even the ‘rulers and authorities in the heavenly places’ take notice? It is the degree of separation between Jew and Gentile before Christ—a separation that Paul in Ephesians 2:14 calls a ‘dividing wall of hostility.’ It's not simply that these two groups were of different ethnicity (though they were), or that they were culturally distinct (though they were), or that for theological reasons they were kept apart (though they were)—it is that all of this separation was openly hostile. And yet in one moment, as Christ utters his last breath and the curtain separating man from God tears from top to bottom, he destroys the barrier dividing Jew from Gentile. Because of the extremity of their prior separation, God gets glory in their unity. ‘But,’ a first-century reader might object, ‘that kind of unity is impossible! That would take a miracle!’ Precisely.”¹⁴

It took a miracle. The miracle of the Gospel. And when the evidence of that miracle is seen within a church, the onlooker is seeing a “Gospel-revealing community.”

This has implications for every local church. If part of God's purpose for His universal Church is diversity, then to resist bringing into our local church communities people who are different than us but desire to follow Christ is literally to resist the eternal purpose of God for His Church. It would be to resist the very means through which He desires to put on display His wisdom, not just to the world, but also to the heavenly beings.

But, of course, therein lies the irony. The diversity that Paul says displays God's wisdom is the same diversity that many churches see as unwise for the health and stability of the church. So many churches, not surprisingly, remain quite segregated and quite narrow in the kinds of people they attract and welcome in. Meanwhile the voice of God echoes off the pages of God's Word reminding us over and over again that all of God's people should have a place in any of His churches. That's divine wisdom for you. That's intricately linked with God's purpose for His Church.

Think about it in terms of our mission statement. We say “we exist to glorify God through Gospel-transformed lives.” Well, how does God glorify Himself in Ephesians 3? By the Gospel transforming the community of faith into this diverse display of God's wisdom. He glorifies Himself by creating this sort of community among the people of God. So Ephesians 3 is helping us understand our mission statement by helping us understand how the Gospel transforms the church and how this brings glory to God.

The second half of our mission statement has to do with how we pursue such things—“We do this by actively embracing Gospel-centrality, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandments.” Let's consider them in reverse order for a moment.

As a church we can't say that we embrace the Great Commandments—to love God with our whole being and love our neighbor as ourselves—while at the same time not welcoming in certain neighbors. To keep our neighbor at arms length just shows that either we don't yet understand the Great Commandments or we don't truly embrace them.

We can't say we embrace the Great Commission—the call of the Lord Jesus to make disciples of all nations—and then avoid welcoming in the nations around us. That doesn't make sense. Do you really think God would have us invite people from all the nations into the Kingdom of God but not into the local

church? That's hypocritical. That shows either we don't really understand the Great Commission or we don't really embrace it, even if we raise \$11,000 this month for Annie Armstrong.

And no church should pretend to be Gospel-centered, if it sees the picture that Paul paints in Ephesians of "the mystery of the Gospel" and yet would hate to see that materialize in greater measure within their local church. That just doesn't make sense. They either don't understand the implications of the Gospel or worse don't really embrace the Gospel.

On the other hand, the last couple of years, I think you would agree (at least those of you who predate me) that we have really emphasized the Gospel and the importance of keeping the Gospel at the center of all we do as a local church. We certainly have room to grow in this area. But I don't think it is a coincidence that through this, by God's grace, we have seen our church grow and grow in areas of economic diversity, social diversity, generational diversity, and even racial diversity. That's not a coincidence. That's a consequence. Why? Because when the Gospel is heralded it transforms us and our community into the very thing that Ephesians 3 is describing. And to God alone be the glory!

But if, by God's grace, that happens increasingly among us in the months and years ahead, it is going to require sacrifice from all of us. You can't have this kind of diversity in a church in any great measure without the people of that community sacrificing for one another. It's just that simple. Diversity leads to some uncomfortable situations from time to time. It leads to an environment where your preferences don't always win the day. It can lead to challenges that a church has never before had to face. And that is precisely why, whenever God bestows it in any large measure, some people get out of dodge. Why? Because you can always find a church full of people just like you and therefore a church that doesn't require the same sacrifices from you. But the tragic reality is that the very thing they are running from—the sacrifice required to make it work—is one of the very things that makes the church so beautiful and compelling to the world because it's one of the purest ways we display the character of Christ.

Listen to what Paul tells the Philippians.

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 3:1-8).

So Paul is saying that Christians should have the mindset of Christ and that mindset should govern how they relate in the community. Jesus sacrificed for us. We should do that for each other. Jesus laid down His life for us. We should do that for one another. Jesus did nothing out of selfish ambition and vain conceit, but in humility considered others better than Himself. So should it be among God's people. Jesus looked after the interests of others not just His own. May the same be said of Christians in the church. Do you see?

Living like that isn't easy, but it's Christ-like. It requires something of us, but it gives a local church the aroma of Christ. It makes a church compelling. It ensures a church will be Gospel-revealing. So we should count the cost and embrace such challenges as they present themselves for the glory of God and the good of the nations.

The early church eventually figured this out. They went from the Jewish Christians keeping out the Gentiles, to accepting them conditionally when they became like Jews, to accepting them fully as equals because the Gospel changed their hearts. Not surprisingly, that unity led to a more effective witness and the Gospel spread like a wildfire through the nations in the years and decades that followed. My prayer for our church is that we too would likewise see the power in God's wisdom materialize increasingly among us, along with the same result—the salvation of souls through the advance of the Gospel.

To that end, we have to keep the Gospel at the center. Gospel-centrality is not an option. It's a necessity. But the Gospel will work in us a few applications, which I'll close our time with. First,

The Gospel Leads to Repentance

As I said the last couple of weeks, we all have prejudices. That's part of our fallen condition and why we often fail to love our neighbor as we ought. When God helps us to discern those prejudices, however, we have to pursue repentance. That's what the Christian does. The Christian is not the kind of person who hears God's Word correct their behavior or thinking and says, "I can see that in God's Word, but I don't really care what God's Word says on this one. I'm going to do things my way." That's not what the Christian says. That's what the unrepentant lost person says.

"Oh how can you say that, pastor?" I didn't. God's Word did (repeatedly). For example, John writes, "*If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother*" (1 John 4:20-21). You tell me, how is racism or any kind of discrimination compatible with that statement? They're not. There is no place for that in the church. So we are called to repent because John also says, "*Whoever says, 'I know [Jesus]' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him*" (2:4).

Since, as I said, we all have prejudices, then we are all called to repent when God helps us see them. They may be hard to lay aside, of course, and they may rear their ugly head down the road periodically. But the road to repentance is the road we must travel. Repentance is not perfection and it's not the absence of sin or relapse or seasons of backsliding or the presence of major failures. But repentance is the absence of settled defiance. Our disposition toward sin and God has changed.

We may struggle, but the repentant person never says, "I don't really care what God's Word says on this one." That's what conditional loyalty entails. That's what fans of Jesus say, not what followers of Jesus say. That's what settled defiance looks like. And settled defiance in the face of God's Word suggests that a person is not repentant. And if you're not repentant, you're not a Christian. Find me one Christian in the Bible who was exempt from the Lord's call to repentance. If you search, you'll search in vain. So repent. With the rest of us, humble yourself and repent. See your sin, hate your sin, and prayerfully seek to reject your sin and walk with God.¹⁵

Second...

The Gospel Leads to Reconciliation

Reconciliation is about bringing peace to parties that were hostile against one another. The Bible says that we were God's enemies prior to the experience of our salvation through faith in Christ (Romans 5:10). We were children of wrath before He made us children of God (Ephesians 2:1-3). But God made peace between us and Him by sending His Son to die on the cross for our sins, as our saving Substitute, and to resurrect from the dead to allow us to share in His victory. He forgives our sins and fills our account with

Christ's perfect righteousness by grace, through faith. This is the Gospel. This is the good news of Christ has done to save us. In short, Christ reconciles us to God.

But He did more than that. He didn't just reconcile us to God, He reconciles us to one another. The church is a reconciled community and a reconciling community.¹⁶ Listen to Paul's words to the Corinthians...

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

We, God's people, have been given "*the ministry of reconciliation*", whereby we call sinners to repentance and faith in Christ by proclaiming the saving message of the Gospel. And when they believe they become one with us, members of the family of God. We cannot contradict and undermine the calling God has placed on our lives by putting up barriers to keep the "other" out of our "us." As Klyne Snodgrass put it, "To maintain divisions is to deny what Christ has accomplished."¹⁷ That's so true. It is to forget that we were once the "other" that the people of God tried so hard to keep out. To forget that is to lose our empathy and that, if we are not careful, can lead us to become the very thing we once hated.

Furthermore, I would argue that it is not just to the church's detriment, but to the world's detriment as well when we fail to walk "*in step with the truth of the Gospel*" (Galatians 2:14). For example, think about all the racial tension that we see in our society these days. It's not new, but it seems to have hit a boiling point in many settings. Everyone wants to blame someone else—the politicians or the police or the pundits. But if the church is designed to be the place where such divisions are healed, then perhaps, to our shame, it is the failure of God's people that we should really fixate on. Perhaps we need a mirror more than some dank meme on racial reconciliation.

Are our churches a light on a hill or are they just as characterized by the dark cloud of racism as the world? Are our churches filled with salt or have they lost their saltiness and with it their ability to counteract the moral decay in our society? Do they provide a needed counter-culture or are they simply *the* culture convened under some lofty steeple?

The church should be different. People should notice that difference. They should ponder that difference. Some will be drawn to Christ because of that difference. But only if that difference exists. Only if it's on display in the local church. And not until our churches welcome every kind of sinners into the fold to be shepherded by the Chief Shepherd, King Jesus (1 Peter 5:4). And not just so we can minister *to* them, but so that we can be ministered to *by* them. It's not just to help them, it's because we need their help. So we have to be willing to not just engage one another, but empower one another.

The early church modeled this really well. When the Gospel began to spread and the numbers and diversity of believers increased, there were new challenges that the church faced (as I alluded to earlier). But how they handled it is instructive. For instance, one of the earliest challenges related to the benevolence ministry of the church and out of this challenge the office of deacon was created. (Deacons, listen up!). Acts 6 begins with these words, "*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.*" So this new problem existed precisely because the church was growing in diversity. Scott Sauls offers some helpful reflections on the situation and how the early church responded.

But before I read you an excerpt of what he wrote, let me first read you the final set of questions from the youth Sunday School lesson today.

“What are some ways that the church may unintentionally communicate that the gospel is only for certain kinds of people? How can we demonstrate the beauty of God’s love for those who are pushed to the side in our society? We may unintentionally communicate this by only reaching out to a certain social class (those who are financially stable versus the poor) or even ethnic group, and so on.”¹⁸

Isn’t it cool how our Sunday school lessons have lined up so nicely with the sermons the past few weeks. We didn’t plan that. But I have to assume God did, because those questions are right in line with what we are talking about. And Scott Saul’s reflections on Acts 6 provide one great answer to those very questions, so let me read you a page or so...

“The pain associated with cultural inequality, and also with minority versus majority dynamics, is not new. In fact, an overlooked minority was one of the earliest problems in the New Testament church.

The Christian church began with an all-Hebrew (Aramaic-speaking) leadership. However, it didn’t take long before a complaint arose from Hellenist (Greek-speaking) minorities against the Hebrew majority, because the all-Hebrew leaders were not hearing the cries of the suffering, underserved, and overlooked Hellenist widows.

With all the privileges and power in their favor, the Hebrews had the luxury of not being required to respond. As the majority, they could have simply dismissed the concerns of the Hellenist minority rather than going through the trouble, inconvenience, costliness, and awkwardness of addressing their complaint. They could have easily responded to their Hellenist brothers and sisters, ‘Can’t you just be grateful that we are allowing you to be part of our community? Don’t you realize that it’s not a very “Christian” thing to complain? Why can’t you just appreciate what you *do* have?’

Or they could have simply showed the offended Hellenists the door, sending them down the street, perhaps, to start a community of their own. ‘Since you’re not happy here, since you don’t seem to like our culture or the way that we are running things, then why don’t you just go somewhere else and start your own church?’

In multiple ways, the Hebrew majority could have dismissed the minority complaint. But that’s not what they did. Rather than responding defensively, rather than writing off the concerns of the minority, the all-Hebrew leaders handed the entire widow-care system over to the offended minority. Seven people were chosen to correct the issue of racial inequality in the church—Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus—*all of whom were Hellenists*.

...A first step toward true diversity—whether cultural, economic, political, ethnic, or otherwise—is to recognize that charity toward minorities by itself is not enough. Charity, to be truly charitable and biblical, must also result in empowerment, where the majority humbles and positions itself to *follow* the minority voice regularly. Especially where injustice and inequality exist, the majority must proactively seek out ways to surrender microphone and gavel rights to the minority. Invitations to give ‘input’ must be replaced with opportunities to *lead*. Crumbs from the table must be replaced with a *seat* at the table. Otherwise, we remain stuck with an anemic, counterfeit diversity.”¹⁹

Man, that is spot on. It’s exactly what we see in the early church when they were facing the challenges that accompany growth in diversity. It’s the reason the office of deacon was created. Deacons weren’t created to resist diversity. They were created to make it work. And, not surprisingly, it’s the reason one of the qualifications for a deacon, according to 1 Timothy 3:9, is that “*They must hold the mystery of the faith*

with a clear conscience.” When Paul sent that letter to Timothy, guess where Timothy was serving? Ephesus! So when he tells the church that the deacons should “*hold the mystery of the faith*” they are going to interpret that through the lens of the letter they received a year or so before, which we refer to as “Ephesians.” Therefore, a deacon, according to Paul, must grasp the mystery of the Gospel as it is described in Ephesians, the same Gospel that creates this kind of community. That’s good food for thought as we strive to be a Gospel-revealing community, a place that displays the reconciling power of the Gospel. And that leads us to a third application...

The Gospel Leads to Generosity

And now we’ve come to exactly the place where we started two weeks ago, full circle as they say. The offering Paul was collecting from the Greek churches (which is what prompted all our sermons on generosity), was aimed in part at unity. He expected the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to “*long for*” the Gentile Christians in Corinth who helped supply their need. It wasn’t the offering itself that produced unity. It was the Gospel that stood behind it, prompted it, and could be seen in it. That’s the power of Christian generosity.

So it stands to reason that one of the ways we can seek to foster a compelling community in our church, one that pleases the Lord and reveals the Gospel, is through Christian generosity. Not just among ourselves, but to our community. And not just to some in our community, but to all kinds of people in our community. When we do this well, we will see a more diverse community emerge in our church and a more potent display of the Gospel’s power because of it.²⁰

That’s our hope. That’s our prayer. And that’s a powerful reason to engage in generosity. But the goal, in the end, is not generosity. It can’t end with generosity. It must end with community.

Let’s pray...

¹ The generosity conversation was prompted by the fact that the Apostle Paul was collecting an offering of money for the needy Christians in the city of Jerusalem. These Christians in need were primarily Jewish Christians, Jewish people who followed Jesus. Interestingly though Paul is collecting these resources from predominantly Gentile Christians—meaning they were from non-Jewish nations. The word “Gentile” simply means “nation” and it’s used in the Bible to refer to those nations that are not Israel and the word “Gentiles” is used for non-Israelites, non-Jews.

² Mark Dever, *The Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 23-24.

³ But there were four caveats that we concluded with last week and they are worth keeping in mind today. First, when we talk about diversity our churches we are talking about all kinds of diversity—generational diversity (young and old),

economic diversity (rich and poor), political diversity (Democrat and Republican), social diversity (the popular and outcast), racial diversity, cultural diversity, and any other 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” (Dever, 75). Second, we have to remember that this diversity does not include diversity of core beliefs related to the Gospel. Such truths should not be compromised and it is precisely our mutual embrace of these Gospel truths that establishes us as God’s people. Third, not every kind of diversity is possible in every setting, but every church should strive to display as much diversity as God would allow. And, finally, not all *possible* diversity will materialize in every church. God will use certain churches to reach certain communities more effectively and that diversity among different churches can be a beautiful thing, so long as the larger unity and cooperation between churches is not neglected. But we should strive to be at least as diverse as the community that God has called us to engage precisely because we are reaching out to every kind of person we find in that community. And when God creates that we will find that the fellowship we experience in the church is a compelling witness to the world.

⁴ As John MacArthur writes, “The church does not exist simply for the purpose of saving souls, though that is a marvelous and important work. The supreme purpose of the church, as Paul makes explicit here, is to glorify God by manifesting His wisdom before the angels, who can then offer greater praise to God... The church is not an end in itself but a means to an end, the end of glorifying God. The real drama of redemption can only be understood when we realize that the glory of God is the supreme goal of creation. Holy angels are especially made and confirmed in purity and praise as creatures who will forever give glory to God (Ps. 148:2; Heb. 1:6), and the redemption of fallen men enriches their praise. Redeemed people, then, are to enhance angelic praise and some day in heaven to join in it (Rev. 4:8-11; 5:8-14; 7:9-12; 14:1-3; 19:1-8).” John MacArthur, *Ephesians* (MNTC; Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 96.

⁵ John A. Mackay, *God’s Order: The Ephesian Letter and the Present Time* (the 1948 Croall Lectures; Nisbit and Macmillan, 1953), 84, (as cited in John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* [BST; Downers Grove: InnterVarsity Press, 1979], 124).

⁶ MacArthur, 97.

⁷ Stott, 123-124.

⁸ Cf. 1 Peter 1:12.

⁹ As John MacArthur explains, “Every sinner who repents and turns to Christ adds another spiritual stone to God’s temple, and another member to His Body, and becomes another forgiven and cleansed sinner who is made eternally one with every other forgiven and cleansed sinner.” MacArthur, 97.

¹⁰ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 161-162.

¹¹ No two scholars in my mind have done a better job in exploring the content of the “mystery” than G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd. They have both written extensively on the matter, but I would recommend their most accessible treatment titled, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014). I also have about 60 pages or so that I have written in my prior schooling on the word as it is used in Ephesians 3 and Revelation 10, which I would happily pass along to any curious reader.

¹² Cf. Colossians 1:16-20.

¹³ “But above all they see His manifold [multi-colored, multi-faceted] wisdom that is made know through the church. They see Him taking Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female—who together murdered the Messiah and were worthy only of hell—and making them, by the very cross of murder, one spiritual Body in Jesus Christ. They see Him breaking down ever barrier, every wall that divides and making all believers one in an indivisible, intimate, and eternal union with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and every other believer from every other age and circumstance.” MacArthur, 97.

¹⁴ Dever, 71-72.

¹⁵ Joe Thorn, *The Heart of the Church: The Gospel’s History, Message, and Meaning* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017), 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁷ Snodgrass, 150. He goes on to say, “Application requires a change of mind. The markers that define us must give way to the *one* determining marker that says who we are—Christ himself. The other markers may be real, but they neither define us nor divide us from other people in Christ. All people stand with the same value before God, and we belong to the same family with other believers.” *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Michael Card, *The Gospel Project Chronological: The Rescue Begins* (Spring 2017: Student Leader’s Guide; Nashville: Lifeway Christian Resources, 2016), 33.

¹⁹ Scott Sauls, *Befriend: Create Belonging in an Age of Judgment, Isolation, and Fear* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2016), 127-128.

²⁰ For an interesting historical example of the power of Christian generosity transforming the Roman world during Emperor Julian’s reign, see Michael Frost, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016), 1-16.