

THE GOSPEL AND UNITY

Redeemer Leeds, 24 June 2018

A. The Big Picture

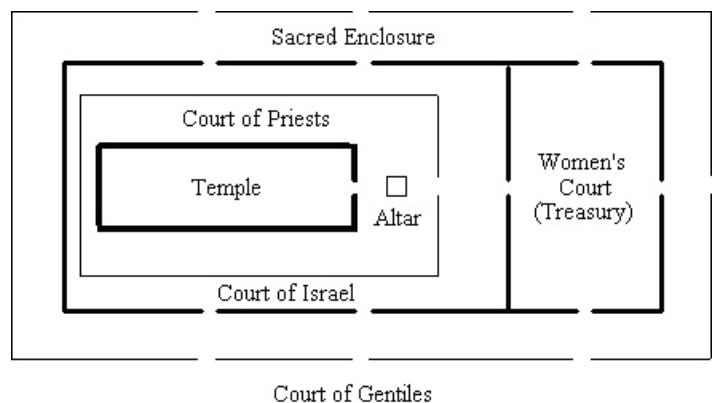
After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (**Revelation 7:9**)

Ephesians 2:11-22: how Christ creates unity

The context: **Ephesians 2:1-10** – individuals are saved through being made ‘alive together with Christ’ (v5). But being united to Christ has dramatic effect on our relationships with each other too.

Deep enmity existed between Jew and Gentile – yet Paul teaches that all God’s people have a **fundamental unity**. How?

- The death of Christ **deconstructs** – Christ ‘has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility’ (v14) – all religious, cultural and racial barriers between Jews and Gentiles that had previously been used to judge and exclude are removed forever: with Christ and because of his sacrifice, we can all walk with open access into the Holy of Holies (v18).



- The death of Christ **reconstructs** – ‘that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two’ (v15) – not homogenisation but a new and better entity – a ‘new man’, a ‘new temple.’ The words ‘with’ and ‘together’ in vv19-22 emphasise that we have **not only been united to Christ, but also to each other**.

The oneness of the church is a gift. The church is not one because of an achievement but because of the oneness of Jesus Christ himself. Because Christ is one, all who are in Christ are one – given one inheritance and one Spirit to enables Christians to grow in this unity in Christ. The indicative ‘you are one in Christ’ leads to the imperative to ‘live into that oneness’ by walking by the Spirit, practicing love and forgiveness in the body of Christ, and bearing witness to Christ, the Head, the source of unity.¹

Implication: God’s design for his new community in Christ means we should become:

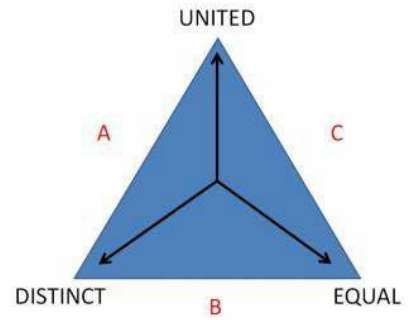
- **Less conscious of our difference** – regardless of our religious heritage, ethnicity, class, moral record and any other social distinction, our most fundamental reality is that we have been made one with Christ and one with each other.
- **More conscious of our difference** – particularly when it comes to differing levels of challenge that we face in life. For instance, I should not use the fact that I am one in Christ with others to close my eyes to the hardships and injustice that they may face that I do not.

¹ Todd Billings, *Union with Christ*.

John 17:20-24: the kind of relational unity that Christ wills for his people

The church has consistently battled three heresies around the Trinity:

- A. **Arianism** says that there are three persons who are united and distinct, but not equal
- B. **Tri-theism** says that there are three persons who are distinct and equal, but who are not united
- C. **Modalism** says that there are three persons who are united and equal, but who are not distinct.



There are massive impacts of these heretical understandings for salvation... but what would they look like transferred to Christian community?

A

B

C

How does discussing these false understandings of Christian community better clarify what authentic trinitarian Christian unity should look and feel like?

The cross has removed the barriers that exist between people. Jesus didn't break down the wall so that we could say 'hi' across the divide and continue to live with barriers and walls between us. He broke down the wall and brought people together and made us family, fellow-citizens, members of his household. He removed the barriers so that we might love and serve one another as he encouraged his disciples to do; so that we might be one, just as he is one; and so the world may know he came from God.... The gospel of Jesus has always had the potential to make friends out of enemies, fellow-citizens out of aliens, sons and daughters out of orphans. It has always had the power to bring the extremes together: Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, Palestinian and Jew, and young and old.²

1 Timothy 2:1-7: how Christ's sacrifice and God's purpose compels us to prayerful mission

Notice the 'alls' in this passage!

- There are no categorical boundaries to the people of God (v7)
- The gospel's universal call is based in (a) the desire of God – vv. 3-4 (b) the scope of Jesus' saving work – vv. 5-6
- As we pray for and witness to 'all people', we work towards and demonstrate the plan of God – vv. 1-2.

² Owen Hylton, *Crossing the Divide*.

B. Working it out in the Local Church

		Is diversity of membership within the church actively pursued?	
		Yes	No
Does the local church deliberately stratify its ministry according to sociological categories (age, language, nationality etc.)?	Yes	Christian unity is primarily expressed between the various gatherings and ministries of the same local church. Individuals mainly associate with sociological contemporaries but have looser connections with others within the church. Often the overall church leadership is from the majority culture.	Christian unity is primarily expressed between different local churches. The given local church is deliberately placed to reach and disciple a certain sociological group very effectively and specifically. Those from other groups may (gently) be encouraged to find a church elsewhere.
	No	Christian unity is vividly expressed in the gathered local church, on Sundays and through the week. The cultural majority actively encourage cultural minorities to contribute to shaping church life (including in its leadership). Minority involvement is more than tokenistic.	Christian unity is expressed in the gathered local church, though cultural minorities who are part of the church are implicitly expected to secede their preferences to the cultural majority, both on Sundays and through the week.

What might be the pressures on unity in each of these four models?

What are the opportunities and challenges for evangelism in each model?

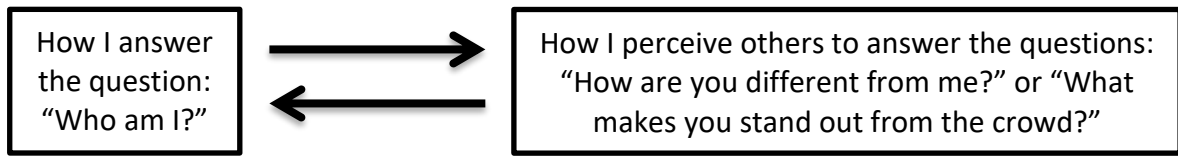
What are the opportunities and challenges for discipleship, Christian growth and healthy Christian relationships in each model?

My own position...

Whilst there may occasionally be good reasons for holding the other models for a temporary period, both Jesus' teaching in John 17 and the relational emphasis throughout Ephesians seems to suggest that we should strive for reflective diversity within single local churches wherever possible – what Francis Schaeffer called 'a seeable oneness' – even if that apparently makes our evangelism and discipleship 'less effective.' So it's worth making every effort to maintain this unity... even at times if it feels costly and exhausting.

C. The 1 Corinthians 12:22 Principle: Bestowing Special Favour on Minorities

Other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves.³



- We imagine how we must appear to others (i.e. what makes us stand out)
- We imagine the judgement of others on this appearance
- We develop our sense of self through these (imagined) judgements of others

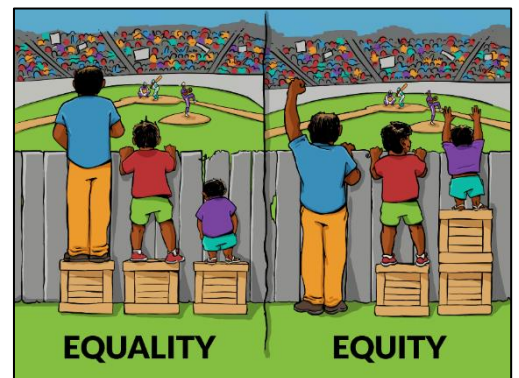
This process is **heightened** when we perceive ourselves to be part of a minority.

Describe a personal situation where you felt an aspect of your identity to be in the minority. How did you feel? Of what do you find yourself to be fearful?

**What would it feel like to walk into each of the four church models above:
(a) as part of the cultural majority (b) as part of a cultural minority?**

When there is a situation of cultural minorities and cultural majorities:

- **Cultural minorities** tend to assume that all aspects of discomfort or difficulty are due to their difference in identity.
- **Cultural majorities** tend to underestimate how difficult it is being part of a cultural minority, and tend to underestimate the difference between their perception and that of minority groups.



To what extent are you part of a cultural minority or cultural majority group at Redeemer? What are the implications for you?

³ Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*.

Which of these situations would require you to 'make most effort' to maintain unity?

Singing cheesy 1980s choruses every Sunday

Drinking instant coffee after the Sunday service

Taking your shoes off when arriving at the Sunday gathering

Singing songs in different languages from time to time

Shifting your City Group to start and end earlier so that a person with cataracts can drive home

No band but worship music from a CD or the Internet

Being the only person in church from your age demographic

Meeting for dinner each week before or after church

A change in preaching style to be friendlier to those who can't read

Different patterns of hospitality – going out for a fry up instead of having people in your home

Going to McDonald's instead of the pub after the service

D. The need for cultural sensitivity

Our culture affects the way that we:

- (a) Interpret the gospel
- (b) Communicate the gospel
- (c) Apply the gospel in our culture

If we are to be those who want share the gospel with those who are culturally different to us in some way, we need to be able to share and speak the gospel into a range of cultural settings.

	Under-adapted gospel communication	Sweet spot	Over-adapted gospel communication
Your relationship to the culture	You enter but don't challenge the culture	You enter and challenge the culture	You enter but don't challenge the culture
Presentation of the gospel	Your gospel message is unnecessarily confusing or offensive	Your gospel is only necessarily offensive, but is not unnecessarily confusing or offensive	Your gospel is inoffensive where it should have been necessarily offensive
The evangelist's communication	You leave the hearer uninformed (or underinformed) of gospel truth	You bring gospel truth to the hearer	You leave the hearer misinformed of gospel truth
The call to the hearer	You call them to do what they don't have to do, and call them to give up what they don't need to give up	You call them to do what they have to do and give up only what they have to give up	You don't call them to do what they have to do or ask them to give up what they have to give up
The hearer's perception of the gospel	They can't understand you	They understand you	They understand what you're saying, but are caused to misunderstand the gospel
Result	Legalism, cultural imperialism	Contextualised gospel	Syncretism

An exercise:

Deep down, I believe that I'm not _____ enough.

I like to think of myself as a _____ person.

Christianity isn't really worth looking into because _____.

What we can do is enter and challenge their storyline and then show how only Jesus can give them the happy ending that they are looking for. The way we do this is by listening and trying to understand and emphasising with their cultural storyline. Then we can think about how to show that they cannot have their happy ending the way they want by the way they are living. Finally, we communicate to them how Jesus gives them that happy ending. We can show them how Jesus gives them a far better ending than what they were wishing for – whatever the earthly cost.⁴

⁴ Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*.