

The Sermon - In 10 Sentences Or Less

Ancient Future Church 4 - Unprecedented Diversity and Unity



- 1) Colossians 3.9-11, and other texts like it in the New Testament, reveal a chief reason the earliest church grew so fast: its unified diversity represented a sociological anomaly, the likes of which existed nowhere else in the Roman Empire.
- 2) This gaggle of polarized opposites was both a fragile cohesion that often teetered on the edge of unraveling, made clear in many N.T. epistles, and yet an unmistakable, undeniable witness to the otherworldly power of Christ.
- 3) As Col. 3.9b states, honesty is required for this kind of extraordinary Christian community to be achieved: its disjunctive groups would have had to reveal hurts, fears, and prejudices about each other, admit ignorance about other cultures and customs, and value the distinct background and perspective that others brought to the table, etc.
- 4) Here's the rub: in regard to unified diversity, American churches of the last 120 years look far more like our divided nation than the N.T. church, having the tendency to splinter along the same political, racial, socioeconomic, and generational lines as the culture at large.
- 5) In a recent interview, the great New Testament scholar of our day, N. T. Wright, was asked, "If Paul could come back and vocalize one concern to the American church, what would it be?"; he answered without hesitation: "That you are so divided, and that you don't care that you're so divided."
- 6) If a major catalyst for the growth of the N.T. church was its unified diversity, then perhaps this tendency toward schism, discord, and division explains the sharp decline experienced by the American church over the last 50 years, and especially the last 20?
- 7) The last phrase of Col. 3.9-11 is undoubtedly the most important: the Colossian church is this cohesion of normally-incongruent groups because, in the words of the great apostle, "Christ is all and in all."
- 8) Whatever the differences among the first Christians (and they were numerous and substantial), their common ground was their commitment to Christ; they were in effect saying, "If you're with Christ, then we're with you, and you have a place here with us."
- 9) Without Christ, and our individual responsiveness to Him, church in its most variegated form isn't possible; only He can motivate each part of the wildly-diverse whole to stay after it, and keep loving those you may not understand or trust or with whom you clash.

10) Jesus is the world's best bonding agent, a contact cement that fuses all tribes into one, and in so doing makes seemingly-impossible community, kinship, and mutual understanding a reality.

A Prayer for the Week

From St. Cyprian (200s A.D.; North Africa) -

"Lord, we pray for the unity of Your church. Help us see all Christians as rays from one sun, branches from a single tree, and streams flowing from one river.

"Help us remain united to You and to each other, because You are our common source of life. May the light of Christ shine through us, and may His love flow through us to all the earth, amen."

Two Citations to Consider

From "A House United," by Allen Hilton:

"Our 21st-century American cities, neighborhoods, states, and society at large need help. Deep and painful divisions have them to the brink of a cultural disaster...And no one is stepping up to lead them back toward one another.

"I nominate the Christian church for that job...People need someone to teach them how to find things they can do together well, how to stay in the same room when they disagree on important issues, and how to talk to one another about those important issues long enough to make something better than either person could have done alone...

"The time for redemptive Christian unity is now...If Christ's church wakes to the glories God has in store for those who stay engaged across our differences, maybe a century from now, someone will write a book chronicling the societal bridge that religion became in the 21st-century."

From "Disunity in Christ," by Christena Cleveland -

"To embrace our identity in this new common family called church, we must engage in the difficult process of lessening our grip on the identities that we have idolized and clung to far too long, things like politics, vocation, class, race, and culture. In many ways, this process will jar our souls, wrenching us from the safe homogenous existence we so easily seek.

"At first, it will feel painfully unnatural because we have lived outside of our shared identity in Christ for so long. Intentional unity will feel wrong to us initially, enough so that the best of us will want to quit...However, never forget – not only is Jesus serious about crossing impossible boundaries to pursue us, but He's also equally serious about His followers crossing the same boundaries in order to be the church together. He has led the way; we follow in His footsteps. As the great industrialist Henry Ford said it, 'Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.'"