

Understanding diversity in the church, part 1

Diversity is a challenge and a blessing, demanding clear biblical thinking and responsible action. To function as a church in a God-honoring manner, you need to understand well and respond properly to the varied types of diversity which exist.

I. *An overview of the challenge*

The wide variety of diversity in the church requires asking about each type of diversity such questions as its exact nature, the proper response to it, and how it relates to unity. The child of God is equipped for the challenge because of a changed heart, the presence of the Spirit, and God's Word.

II. *Ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity*

1. *This diversity (and more) is illustrated and commented on in Revelation 5:9–10, Galatians 3:28, and Colossians 3:11.*

It is not the diversity itself which is praise-worthy, but (1) Christ's saving work despite this diversity and (2) the union of all true, but diverse believers in Christ.

2. *Conclusions to be drawn to help understand diversity in the church:*

- 1) The analysis of diversity should be from a divine, eternal perspective.
- 2) It is possible to err either by celebrating this diversity for itself and neglecting the divine perspective or by avoiding the diversity and failing to display God's transformative power.
- 3) Cultures are not morally neutral; sinners are ransomed out of them.

Celebrate diversity of culture and ethnicity and nationality because God in Christ has redeemed people from all groups and united all true believers in Christ.

III. *Moral diversity*

1. *The church at Corinth is an example of wrongly accepting moral diversity (1 Corinthians 5).*

The church tolerated immorality and boasted of their tolerance. The apostle Paul condemned both actions, calling them to mourn rather than boast and to remove the repentant sinner from their church. True believers leave such unrighteousness behind (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

2. *Conclusions to be drawn*

Again, our behavior needs to be seen from a divine, eternal perspective. God determines what is morally acceptable and what is not. He determines how believers are to respond. Believers and churches belong to Him. Moral "diversity" arises because of sin, but believers repent and mature believers help restore the sinner without tolerating immorality.

IV. *Background and preference diversity*

1. *Paul's background as blameless under the law (Philippians 3:6) was radically different than some of the Corinthians.*

Such differing backgrounds lead to different temptations and shape the conscience differently. Convictions can differ about amoral issues such as the freedom to eat anything versus eating only vegetables (Romans 14:2). The proper response is to neither despise nor judge, not cause another to stumble, but pursue peace and mutual edification (Romans 14:3, 13, 19).

Rather than praising the diversity, believers praise God for welcoming the weak, enabling them to stand, and for belonging to God (14:3, 4, 8). Believers can praise God when others honor the Lord by acting out of conscience, when they offer service to Christ, and that we ultimately give account to God and not people (14:6, 18–19, 12).

2. *Conclusions to be drawn*

This diversity as well is evaluated from a divine, eternal perspective. God determines what is moral or amoral; He prescribes how to deal with our differing preferences. Believers can rejoice that God welcomes all who come by faith in Christ and should consider others more highly than themselves.

All actions and choices have consequences, not the least of which is the evaluation which every believer will receive when we meet Jesus face-to-face. Will it be "well-done, good and faithful servant"? Asking this gives a divine, eternal perspective to understanding and responding to diversity. It is wise to remember Paul's admonition: "each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12).

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- As a fellowship we enjoy the contribution of cultural diversity. What would help us remember better the heavenly perspective of a single ransomed people for God?
- Even sexual immorality is tolerated in some churches today. Why? How do we guard against becoming tolerant of that which God says should be removed from our midst?
- Eating meat or not because of a connection with idolatry is not an issue for us. What issues for us could fall into an "amoral preference" category in which we must guard against judging or despising?