

## **Unity and Diversity in the Church**

### *Class 5: Counsel for Christians in the Minority*

#### **Introduction**

Good morning, everybody! Last week we talked about God's purposes for similarity in the church, and we thought about how similarity is a good though potentially dangerous stewardship. And we were also honest about the fact that many people in this church have more in common with each other than others do.

So what about those of us in the minority, whatever that minority group may be? For the next two weeks of this class, we're going to look at things through the lens of the minority—that's this week—and then the majority next week. How can we love each other well coming from those two backgrounds? For both weeks, the passage we'll work from is Romans 12:9-13. It's a wonderful gem of Scripture on how we relate to each other as Christians. It's on the front of your handout, and it says:

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Well worth memorizing. Let me pick out a few descriptive words that I think will be useful for the rest of our time together. What should characterize our love for each other in the church?

1. **Genuine.** That's how Paul opens these verses. We'll will talk more about this next week, but our goal isn't just to love each other, but to like each other. But it's really hard to like someone you rub shoulders with, if you're not honest with them. So we're going to think about how honesty helps us to genuinely love one another.
2. [Our love should be] **Self-forgetting.** That's another way of saying, "Outdo one another in showing honor." We'll see how considering Jesus' service encourages us in the minority to keep putting others before ourselves.
3. **Zealous.** How can those in the minority zealously love their brothers and sisters in the majority? We'll talk about that.
4. **Constant.** When two people get married—they promise, they covenant to constantly love each other—in sickness and in health. Local church members aren't necessarily stuck together forever, but while we are stuck together for however long, we covenant to constantly love one another—in happiness and sorrow. That's what we promise each other every time we take the Lord's Supper as we will this morning. Lastly, our love should be...
5. **Sacrificial.** We'll see how sacrificial love is a powerful platform for those in the minority to love those in the majority.

But first, we need to think through what it means to be "the minority."

We often use that phrase: majority culture, minority culture; what do we mean? Let me see a quick show of hands: which of you are in the

minority in this church. If there's one thing we need to keep in mind before we apply Romans 12 to the minority and majority, it's that "majority" and "minority" don't break into clean categories. Think back to those ten dimensions of diversity we talked about in the first class. Age, life-stage, personality, ethnicity, education, and the list goes on. You might be in the majority for some, minority for others, and kind of a confusing in-between for others. **(Describe yourself: how are you majority, how are you minority)**. So if we think, "I'm only in the minority in this church," I think we run the risk of narrowing in too much on one thing about us. And I think we run the risk of thinking we don't need to hear what we will teach on next week. But we *all* need to hear what I'm teaching this week, and we *all* need to hear what Jamie will be teaching next week.

And yet, with that said, I appreciate when we learned about the majority last year, we highlighted how just because we might fall into different categories of being in the minority or majority, that doesn't mean we're all minorities to the same degree—for example, given the history of this country and the weight racial issues carry (as we discussed in the image of God class), being a minority in terms of ethnicity is different than being a minority in terms of whether or not

your left-handed. Being a widow in the church is different than being a renter of an English-basement. And if we're going to make progress, we should be *honest* about different degrees in which people experience being a minority, however flexible those differences may be. Which leads to our first word: **Genuine**. And I'm now on the inside, left-hand side of your handout.

For those in the minority, what does it look like to love genuinely? Well honestly, it looks like...being honest! We should be honest with ourselves and with others about who God has made us. Earlier in Romans 12, Paul says the body of Christ has different parts. Some of us are elbows, others of us are ankles, others of us are eyes, fingers, and so on. The point is that we're all made different. But Paul emphasizes that we're still part of *the same* body. And we're not only all *valued* in the body of Christ, we're all *useful* in the body of Christ. To be clear: we're not valuable because we are useful; we're valuable because God has made us and saved us; we talked about that in the image of God class.

But at the same time, it's our differences that make us able to love one another in uniquely useful ways. So because [Jamie Dunlop] and I are different, he can love you in ways that I just can't. We often talk

about a married couple in this way, right? Husband and wife are made different. And that means they can love each other in complementing ways. And so the power of their marriage is rooted in those differences.

But if we are *honest*, as a minority, we don't always feel that power to love others, right? It's easy to feel like the body works just fine without us. Ya know, "We're a couple of ankles in a church full of elbows." So we might feel like, "none of the elbows care about us." And what's worse is we can start believing what we are feeling. Satan wants us to believe that we are not valuable or loved by others. And one way we apply that false belief is that we try to be something we're not. Ya know, we hide those things that make us ankles. And we just try to be elbows. But brothers and sisters, that hinders God's purposes for the church. No other part of the body can do the job the ankles can do! Being someone we're not works against the God who made us. It lies about his work. And when we're working against God, it's really hard to do the work of God. It's really hard to love others and even harder to like them. How many of us actually liked the people in high school we were trying to be like?

So it's really easy to feel left out because you're not a certain age. Or because you're not friends with a certain pastor. Or because you're

not being asked out, or because you're not socially savvy, or because of your gender or for whatever reason you might be a minority. It's easy to feel like our church doesn't need you. But let me just make clear: We need you! If our church only has one type of person, we're going to be more of a cult of personality and less of a church of Jesus Christ. But if the church is the body of Christ, honesty is like Calcium. It strengthens our relationships so they don't easily break. So be honest with yourself and with others about the different, good ways that God has made you. Genuine love is impossible without honesty.

Let's move on to our second word: **2. Self-forgetting.**

It's been said that, "humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less often." Next week, we'll talk about how one way to think of yourself less is to be more aware of your own culture. But we still live in a fallen world. And sometimes as those in the majority, we don't even notice how our culture is affecting others. But as those in minority, we always notice the culture of the majority. Now, we just talked about how one bad reaction to the majority culture is to completely conform or assimilate—thinking: "God made me an ankle, but I'm gonna be an elbow!"

But brothers and sisters, there is another danger we must avoid and that is clinging too tightly to whatever makes you a minority. So instead of thinking too little about what makes you different, you think too highly of it. When Paul talks about being a Hebrew of Hebrews in Philippians 3, he means it in a negative sense—he means to be saying I put too much confidence in this ethnic background. And when we begin to think this way, we can begin to only prefer people who share or appreciate our differences. We begin to think that only those people could ever understand us. So if you're a democrat maybe you begin to only trust the democrats, even on non-political matters. If you're a childless couple maybe you begin to think families think less of you.

Without even realizing it, we can let our differences define us. And because being a minority by definition means our differences are obvious, it's easy to hold them too tightly. And if I can be frank, I think this is a *particular* temptation for those in the ethnic minority; while diversity is a multi-faceted diamond, we've talked in this class about how ethnicity is a particularly obvious, contentious, and necessary area to focus on when considering unity and diversity. If we're not careful, our ethnicities can define us. For me being defined by ethnicity could sound like me saying *or thinking*, "My name is Isaac Adams, and I'm

black. My blackness comes before my Christness. Blackness is what defines me, and it effects how I see and evaluate everyone, every thing—including this church.”

So, my sister or brother in the minority (any kind of minority) what should we do when we realize we’re letting our differences define us? We remember that Jesus defines us first and foremost. And that he defines all other Christians. One practical way I do this is on my phone, the background has a couple simple sentences. One of them says Jesus is my brother. The other says, “Every other Christian is my brother too. After all, did you notice in verse 10 on the front of your handout how Paul describes our affection for one another? He says it should be *brotherly*. Why would he use a family metaphor? It’s because Christians are one family.

Understanding that we share a new identity with others in Jesus reminds us that we are all a part of this family. Equally valued and equally loved. This is why I appreciated last week us talking about the value of similarity. The fact is that as fallen sinners wrestling with temptation, we all have similarities because no temptation faces us except what’s common to man. So though you may be a minority in our church, you are not a minority in Jesus. Therefore, we should fight to not

think, “I’m just the Chinese brother,” or “I’m just the single mom” or “I’m just the laid back person and everyone else is Type-A.” It doesn’t mean we stop being those things or that those things aren’t good; they just don’t wholly define us. So, who are you? First and foremost: A Christian. And that means you lay down your preferences, your differences so that Jesus can be exalted. We don’t necessarily focus on who is or is not laying down their preferences or differences because we know that we are called to lay ours down for the sake of unity. For the sake of Christ. With that said here are some good things for the minority to keep in mind:

1. *There are many types of minorities.*
2. *Remember that whatever makes you a minority does not completely define you; Jesus does.* So if you’re a minority in any regard, remember what the hymn writer says: “Hallelujah: Jesus is my life.”
3. *Remember: Jesus was a minority, too (Heb. 4:15-16).* Jesus was the only God-man on the planet. He was lonely. He was misunderstood unto death. That’s not to say that your loneliness or hurt as a minority isn’t legitimate. Ya know, “buck up. Jesus could handle being a minority.” No, it’s to say that you’re dying to

yourself to love those in the majority is a little picture of what Jesus did for you. That glorifies God. And Scripture promises that Jesus is able to sympathize with you in every way, and that includes being a minority.

Let's move on to our next word: **Zealous**

So I want this third point to layer over the others we've already discussed. We should be genuine. We should be self-forgetful. And we should be zealous in being those things. "OK," you say. "I get that, but what should I actually *do* zealously? Are there tangible applications?" Thank you for asking. I can't give you an exhaustive list because I don't know everything about your situation. That said, here are some thoughts for what they're worth. I think zealously loving, as a minority, looks like...

- ***Creating solutions, not just criticizing them.*** (Philippians 2:14)

We talked about this a few weeks ago, but a particular temptation for those in the minority is to complain with other minorities without any tangible changes in mind. Well, though you can criticize in a godly way, devote much of your energy to coming up with a solution, too. I would actually say you should be devoting more energy to coming up with a

solution to the problem, than just criticizing the problem. A former member was a good example of this: He felt isolated as a new member so...he started a welcoming ministry to new members that our church still benefits from. His different experiences gave him different insights to serve our church in a unique way. So remember, it's so much easier to criticize than create.

- ***Starting the conversation*** (*Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-5*)

So we've said that culture may be invisible to the majority, but hardly to the minority. And I think this means that those in the minority have an opportunity to speak up when they see something that might be a blind spot for others, and again that is a part of our church covenant— to watch over one another with affectionate care. So if someone says something offensive, you should, at an appropriate time, say something to them. In love. With gentleness. Saying something is serving that brother or sister. And it's ultimately serving God! Paul says, "be fervent...serve *the Lord*." It's not necessarily weakness to be hurt by a sinful comment, though pride might have us think it is. Yes, this may mean correcting someone, which can be hard. But God gives us good counsel on how to do that (see Matthew 18, Galatians 6. )To be clear,

you don't always need to correct. But as we have said in the past, if what someone said or did is hindering your relationship with them, you should say something. And I know, that can feel like more humility on your part when you think you're always the humble one given that you're a minority. But beware of the temptation to feel like you're always giving more than you're receiving. We all often feel like that, and that mentality doesn't seem to be the self-forgetting one we talked about.

- *[Zealously loving looks like] **Continuing the conversation***  
*(James 1:19)*

So as a black man, one thing I've been encouraged by is how many white brothers and sisters have asked me questions about my experience with the police in light of shootings and the surge of racial conversations at the national level over these last few years. These brothers and sisters were seeking to be slow to speak, quick to listen. But if those in the majority are trying to listen, those in the minority...need to speak! A conversation goes two ways: someone has to speak. So continue conversations. And let me just say, I think the zealous minority is going to continue the conversation with those in the majority *and* their fellow minorities. So, I can't just be on the lookout for when a white brother

says something insensitive. If a black brother says something insensitive, I should correct him, too. So to be clear, we are saying that those in the minority bear an obligation to be a part of reconciliation, and the maintaining of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Sidebar: If you want a good book at least in terms of race about the mutual obligations we all bear, check out *Beyond Racial Gridlock*. I listed it in your handout.

When a majority person humbles themselves and asks you something, even if they do it in a blundering fashion, don't be so proud that you refuse answering. Help them. Love them. Help them to ask a better question. And ask them questions; it's not like they have nothing to offer. They're made in God's image; they have a brain to critically think with. Ask them questions. We ought to learn from one another.

- ***Assuming the best and accepting help (1 Cor. 13:7)***

And that brings me to my last point: loving zealously looks like assuming the best of others. That's what mature Christians do. In this class we've seen some great examples of minorities assuming the best of those in the majority: We will teach more on this in a couple weeks, but in Acts 6 the Hellenistic Jews genuinely believed their Hebraic brothers were trying to help. So they accepted their help! They didn't assume the

Jews were pitying them. Likewise, we should love people zealously by giving them the benefit of the doubt, even if as a minority, you feel like you're always doing that. If you believe ignorance is always malicious, you're likely going to always be on the defensive. But if you realize the truth, that ignorance is rarely malicious in our church—you will sweeten your relationships with those in the majority. And you will be happier. Let's move on; our love for one another should also be:

### **Constant**

Paul says we should be in constant prayer. But did you notice what he says right before that? He says be patient in tribulation. It is so easy as a minority to feel like some things, some trials may never change. And honestly, they might not. But if you're only expecting a big change in a little amount of time, I think you're going to miss the little steps of progress that God is making. So pray to God, yes ask him for change. But also praise God in prayer for the little works you see him doing. As it's been said, "don't overestimate what can change in one year and underestimate what can change in 10." The hardest part about being zealous is being zealous for a long time. But zeal doesn't just sound like loud passion. It can be quiet; it can be constant. The mother who loves her kids from day one until her last breath knows exactly

what I mean. And we can constantly love others because God's Spirit is constantly with us. The person who is patient in tribulation is often the one who is constant in prayer, even if they don't see the results. We walk by faith not by sight.

Let's look at our last word: **Sacrificial**

So we want to be genuine, self-forgetting, and zealous. But *where* can we be genuine, self-forgetting, and zealous? We constantly pray about these things as we're being patient in our trials. But where can we live these things out? Well I think Paul gives us at least one location in verse 13. He basically encourages us to be sacrificial. And in light of that he says, "be hospitable." In other words, invite others into your home! Brothers and sisters in the minority, sometimes those in the majority are going to need an invitation to do just that. After all, who likes inviting themselves over to someone else's house?

You'd be astonished at the number of people who haven't even had a meal in the home of someone of a different ethnicity. You'd be astonished at how rarely young people invite older members over. Being hospitable is an incredible platform for sacrifice. When you invite someone into your house, you invite them into your life. That does require more of your time, budget, and energy. But we can sacrifice in

great ways because Jesus sacrificed in the greatest way for us. Just like we sacrifice by continually giving financially to the church, we sacrifice by continually inviting others into our experiences as minorities. And we can do that by inviting them into our homes.