



+ This Sunday at Magdalen Road Church we started a new topical series thinking about diversity and how that should affect church.

We began by considering that when the early church started, as historic enemies were now united, there will have been a fair bit of readjusting necessary as they worked out what it meant to be one family. For example as Paul wrote to the Ephesian church the letter again and again and again encourages the Christian is to be united to forgive each other and to be a community of love

Often there are two big dangers or dead ends that people can get lost down as they consider how to 'do' church in a diverse community.

+ 1) Superiority

Essentially one group gets to call the shots. Perhaps this group has more people, or a louder voice, or were there first, but essentially things are done their way. They are the dominant culture and, rather than adapting a shaping how stuff is done, everyone else has to like it or lump it.

+ 2) Splintering

Rather than people staying around and working at it essentially we simply start new churches where we feel comfortable. We get to pick and choose and find a church that suits us and all our desires. Perhaps we only sing the songs that we like, or have the sermons that we like, or the building or the chairs. And before you know it we end up with hundreds of little churches each catering for a particular type of person or preference.

But Paul didn't tell the Ephesians to start 2 churches but rather for the Gentile background Christians and the Jewish background Christians to work at it and be reconciled.

Churches ought to represent the communities in which they are based Jesus - came for all kinds of people, people like us but also people not like us. East Oxford and Oxford

more broadly are diverse areas (whether ethnically economically or educationally), however our churches don't necessarily reflect that diversity.

(As a slight aside we considered how as you look at church history you can see that as new cultures encounter the gospel so theology is enriched. As truths are translated and communicated, so blindspots are exposed, nuances developed and so the resulting message of Christ is richer and more beautiful. Theology flourishes when different systems and worldviews engage and understand the beauty and depth of Christ. We can learn from each other and all benefit.)

Why does this matter? Look at our world now. Look at the diversity of people living in the west. Look at the balance and shape of the Global church - God is doing amazing things in the global south. Look at the refugees and asylum seekers bringing their worldviews, experiences and traditions into our neighbourhoods. Look at the variety of people and peoples in Oxford. There are all kinds of questions but to be faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to be asking about how we do church. Whether to accommodate and celebrate Christians from different cultures or indeed to better reach an increasing diversity of people who don't know Christ but who are moving into our neighbourhoods. They might be hard questions and make us feel uncomfortable, they might reveal wrong thinking or blindspots. Some have even said that this point in history - these decades in which we are living - are crucial as we come to terms with how the gospel affects our churches In an increasingly diverse world. Will we, like the Ephesians work hard at unity despite diversity? Or will we splinter and form many homogenous churches instead?

So what we did on Sunday morning was launch this series with a broad brief birds eye view of ethnicity and diversity in the Bible. We began in **Genesis 1v26-28**:

We considered what it meant for mankind to be made in God's image. And noted that it particularly meant **relationships** - man and woman, male and female together and made in God's image. There is a diversity yet unity that reflect something of the community, at the heart of the identity of our Trinitarian God. As well as relationships it also means **responsibility** - Male and female together are called to rule over and care for Gods creation in his place. There is no comment in the text regarding ethnicity, language, class, education level, skin colour, economic level. We are all made in God's image. However far too easily we can imagine that 'someone like me' is made in God's image and forget that everyone else is. We can have cultural blindspots in this. One tendency of racism, xenophobia or ethnocentrism is the denigration of 'the other'. That people who are not like us are somehow less than human. Maybe they look different from us or sound different, or vote in a different way than we do, but we are all made in the image of God.

Another aspect of this mandate from God is that we are not meant to stay put. Mankind is to fill the Earth and subdue it. So when we reach Genesis 11 we realise that something has gone very wrong.

Genesis 11. The problem with humanity building a tower is at least twofold firstly v4 why are they seeking to make a name for themselves? They are made in God's image and to reflect and glorify him rather than themselves! However this tower is a testimony to their greatness - they make a physical and metaphorical assault upon Him. Secondly, why have they stopped scattering? Once again the people of God stop listening to his word and think they know best, building a tower in their honour.

As God scatters the people so his judgement comes with grace as they are sent out around the world doing what they were meant to do in the first place. God's blessing will go with them as in the very next chapter he makes a promise to a man called Abram (**Genesis 12**).

God chooses Abram for the nations, one from his family will bless the Earth. This is fully and finally fulfilled in Christ as he died for the sins of his diverse people, ascended to the fathers right-hand ruling overall and so his disciples are sent with this news to the nations - from Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the Earth.

One aspect or category of the sin for which He dies is horizontal discrimination and prejudice. Just as sin tends to corrupt every good gift of the creator so ethnicity is compromised by human rebellion. However - as we are reconciled to God on a horizontal plane so this is necessarily accompanied by horizontal restoration of human community that finds expression in the church. As we are united to him so we are united to one another again.

Pentecost (**Acts 2**) is a fascinating study of this. As God sends his Spirit upon his brand-new baby church they speak in different languages. Where God confused the tongues at Babel to scatter the people, so he multiplies tongues at Pentecost to unite people. God's plan in the gospel is for all the world.

However how we communicate this gospel to all the world is complicated. For example in **1 Corinthians 9**v19 to 23 Paul gives us his method for reaching a diverse community of people. He becomes like them. He puts aside secondary cultural differences and preferences that the primary gospel message may be heard and accepted. Then when this gospel message takes root he plants new churches which end up being very different and contextualised. Following Jesus is to be expressed in the particularities of each group that Paul encounters.

But it's hard! The new Testament is full of local churches getting this wrong for example different ethnicities or backgrounds - **Ephesians or Romans** - or else different economic strata - **James**-. There is something fundamentally fleshly so that we easily struggle with people not like us. Again and again the writers will remind the recipients to love forgive and be unified. To remember that our vertical reconciliation with God necessarily results in horizontal reconciliation with them. To often we simply focus on self and doing things the way we want.

The Bible all ends up with a glimpse of diverse eternity as God's people sing praise to him in **Revelation 7** v9 to 12. Once again there is a diversity of the people there but the unity as they stand before the throne wearing white robes singing praise to God.

There is much more that we could say as we introduced this topic but that should be sufficient for now. Here are some questions for us as we begin to wrestle with some of these ideas.

Do you think Magdalen Road church is a diverse church? Why or why not?

Do you care? Why or why not?

What happens when you encounter someone who is not like you, or with whom you strongly disagree?

Who are the people in our lives who are not like us? Do you consider reaching out to them? Why or why not?

In future weeks will consider something of the make up of East Oxford and beyond. But for now brainstorm some of the different groupings that you are aware of in your community.

Why do you think the New Testament is full of churches struggling with disunity?

What might mean for us to be more careful and considerate in the way that we do church? Or in the way that we reach out to the local area?

Have a look at the 1 Cor 9 passage above - why does Paul minister in this way?