

## Unity in Our Diversity

### I Corinthians 12:1-31

Diversity is a term we hear a lot these days, especially in the work place. Diversity training is now mandatory for many companies during new hire orientation and also have refresher courses periodically for all employees no matter how long their tenure. Diversity training is fast filtering down into the educational system and being taught to our students.

The dictionary simply defines diversity as the state of being diverse or different, unlikeness, variety. Workplace diversity has been defined as the variety of differences between people in an organization. It encompasses race, gender, age, ethnicity which is a subgroup within a particular race, personality, tenure, cognitive style which has to do with knowledge or the ability to process information or how we learn; it includes organizational style, education, background, socio-economic status, and more.

Absent in that description of diversity within an organization is religious background and political beliefs and special needs or disabilities. Those are certainly just as much a part of the diversity in an organization as are gender or ethnicity.

How we see ourselves in the context of all the things that have gone into what shape us or make us tick mold how we interact with others who may be different either a little or a lot. Based on how we see ourselves coupled with our beliefs will greatly impact how we see others. We might call it profiling where we have a certain perception about someone based on skin color or dress or religious beliefs or the language they speak.

The diversity statement of one university states that it encompasses acceptance and respect. It understands that each person is unique and recognizes individual differences, abilities and

contributions. Diversity not only understands each other, it moves past those understandings to embrace each other's uniqueness and contributions.

I emailed Hannah Kremhelmer to ask her how the class she is required to take on diversity defines that term. Here is the response from the professor:

Diversity is the umbrella term used to describe the multiple aspects or variety of variables that describe us (i.e., humans) and the groups/cultures to which we belong. Everybody is diverse and there are multiple characteristics of diversity ...

The rest is academic blah-blah-blah.

While I think there is a lot wrong with diversity training today, I don't want to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water. The Bible has some important things to say about the need for diversity that is essential for unity.

I invite you to take your Bibles and turn to the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians that we have in our New Testament. **I Corinthians 12**

Chapter 12 is a rather lengthy discussion about spiritual gifts. My aim this morning is not to tackle and discuss the various spiritual gifts outlined here by the Apostle, but rather to help us understand that within the context of the church and the local congregation God has a design for diversity and we see it through the use of spiritual gifts. From this passage we'll look at three thoughts about diversity.

Diversity was planned with a design for unity  
Diversity has a purpose that develops unity  
Diversity has a problem that disrupts unity

## I. DIVERSITY WAS PLANNED WITH A DESIGN FOR UNITY

Watch *National Geographic* on television or travel to various countries around the world and it doesn't take you long to figure out that the world is a diverse place.

You can step outside the doors of our church and notice diversity in the variety of trees and plants from elm, oak, and spruce trees to peonies, lilies and tulips to grass, dandelions, and poison ivy.

Gaze around and you can watch any number of grey squirrels, chipmunks, or ground hogs scurrying about the lawn.

Watch carefully and you will notice cardinals, robins, and wood peckers.

From the dark skinned people of central Africa to the fair skinned people of Europe, from thatched huts to palatial homes, from English to Spanish to French or to any other spoken language this world is diverse. It is diverse in how we speak, how we dress, how we live, and in what we eat.

We are that way because that is how God has made the world. From the early description of creation itself we see diversity in what God made.

To begin with we must understand that God exists in unity. While God is one in essence we see through both the Old and New Testaments that God is diverse in nature – three members in one. Each member of the Godhead or what we call the Trinity is One, yet there is uniqueness and diverse purpose for each in their respective natures.

There is God the Father.

There is God the Son.

There is God the Spirit.

The Old Testament emphasizes divine unity, but even in that unity **Deuteronomy 6:4** describes a Divine plurality seen in the Hebrew word *Elohim*. This is not polytheism.

Author and theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer defines it as “a plurality of persons and unity of essence.”

The New Testament emphasizes the individual Persons of the Trinity and what Chafer calls their “individual Persons of the Trinity and their separate

responsibilities for the purpose of redemption.” But Chafer goes on to say though that even in the New Testament “there are occasional references to divine oneness of essence (cf. Matt. 28:19).”

From the very opening pages of Scripture beginning with Genesis 1 and throughout we see the three members of the Godhead working in unity with each other. It begins with creation where each member of the Trinity had a unique role in the design and then the formation of creation all working with the same end goal.

We see the Godhead working together in unity through their unique natures in redemption.

We will see the Godhead working together in unity through their unique natures in the final judgment.

While God Himself is diverse with three separate natures existing in Father, Son and Spirit, He exists in unity. With His diversity He brings to His creation a diversity that exists in unity.

Now as it relates to the church and to our passage notice the diversity that was planned for the church by God. We begin to see this in **verses 4-6**.

**v. 4 – “There are different kinds of gifts.”**

**v. 5 – “There are different kinds of service.”**

**v. 6 – “There are different kinds of working.”**

Let’s quickly define spiritual gifts as a whole without wrestling with the parts. Suffice it to say that spiritual gifts are a manifestation of the Holy Spirit enabling a person to minister to the needs that are within the body of Christ or what we also call the church. It specifically has reference to the local church or any given congregation.

Spiritual gifts are like fingerprints, unique to every person in the body. We all have fingerprints, but there are no two alike. We all have spiritual gifts, but there are no too alike. While there may be any

number of individuals in the body who have the gift of teaching no two people with that gift have the same qualities or use it in the same way. That's what Paul is saying in these verses. The likeness between any two with the gift of teaching departs after the name of the gift. They use their gift uniquely as planned by the Designer and Giver of that gift. It is the same with any of the other gifts. Even though there are multiple people in a family or a community or a culture, there are no two people with the same unique characteristics. I'm a twin, but similarities depart with the last name. He ran sprints. I ran distance. He has brown hair. I have well... He's a teacher of physical anatomy and physiology. I teach about spiritual anatomy and physiology. We may have the same last name, but we are uniquely different. God planned it that way.

Notice as well in this section that the Trinity is involved.

There are different kinds of gifts but there is only one Spirit who is the source of those gifts.

There are different kinds of service within the church, but we all serve the same Lord as we serve the church.

There are different ways in which we serve the church, but it is the same God who works through all of us.

We will see in a moment that Paul uses the analogy of the diversity of the physical body to speak about the diversity that is within the church. God planned that diversity. It's evident in **verses 11, 18, and 28.**

**v. 11 "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He gives them to each one, just as He determines."**

**v. 18 "But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be."**

**v. 28 "And in the church God has appointed..."**

**NLT "Here is a list of some of the members that God has placed in the body of Christ..."**

Just as He determines

Just as He wanted

God has appointed

It was His plan from the beginning. We don't get to choose the spiritual gifts God gives us and we don't choose the gifts needed in the church. We can't tell someone who has the spiritual gift of serving that we already have an overload of serving gifts, but if you have the gift of administration or the gift of encouragement, we could use more of those.

God arranges the parts in the church as He determines necessary, just as He wants them to be.

If you come into my office and take a close look at my bookshelves you will notice something. In one bookcase I have all my commentaries. If I have a complete set of commentaries from one author in both Old and New Testaments they are first. After that are the complete sets of Old Testament commentaries followed by any individual commentaries on Old Testament books in order by book. The New Testament is set up the same way.

In another bookcase I have my language and theology studies. Language studies are first, with Hebrew and then Greek. Then theology, whole sets that cover the major Bible doctrines and then individual books such as any books on the Bible, then books about God, then about Christ and so on.

The other book shelves contain authors who have written about Christian living and are arranged alphabetically. All my books are arranged according to how I want them to be. God has arranged spiritual gifts within the body just as He wanted them to be.

Folks let's never forget that God has put us in this local congregation for a purpose. He has endowed

each of us with a spiritual gift not just because He likes diversity like a gardener who plants a dozen different types of flowers for the variety, but He has put us in this body for a purpose. **In Robyn's English garden she has planted flowers with a plan. Some bloom in the spring, some bloom in the early summer, some bloom in the late summer, and some bloom in the fall so that there is something always in bloom.** God has planted each of you here with a purpose.

Similar to the Trinity who is one in essence but diverse in nature, so the church, planned by God is one in essence and diverse in nature. The essence of the church is that we are all part of one body, the body of Christ. The diversity comes in the variety of spiritual gifts bestowed on the individual members that make up that body. Notice **vs. 12-13**.

Each of us regardless of when we were saved or how old we are, were given a spiritual gift, different from any natural abilities we may. This was given to us at salvation. It is ours to discover and to use. This gift came from God and is not something that we seek. God is the one who gives the gift and who places the gift within the body.

That gift won't diminish over time or with use because the Holy Spirit who has unlimited power, who gave us that gift, gives us the power to use it. Diversity was planned by God with a design for unity.

Diversity has a purpose that develops unity.

## **II. DIVERSITY HAS A PURPOSE THAT DEVELOPS UNITY**

**v. 7 "Now to each one the manifestation or the Spirit is given for the common good."**

That simply means that the purpose of spiritual gifts is for the benefit of others within the church. The spiritual gift I was given, the spiritual gift you were

given are not meant for our private benefit, they are given for the good of the church, the good of the body of Christ. Paul is saying that spiritual gifts when used for the benefit of the church will produce obvious results. They are given to build up the body. They are given to be used for the common good. That speaks of what is mutually advantageous or beneficial. What I mean by mutually advantageous is that when you use your gift whatever it is, it encourages others to use their gift and people who have need of those gifts benefit.

**Ephesians 4:10-13**

**I Peter 4:10a "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others..."**

God created diversity for a purpose.

I'm going to say something very bold here. You have a spiritual gift. I believe that if you are not using your spiritual gift you are sinning. It was given for a purpose to benefit the church.

**Matthew Henry writes that spiritual gifts "were not given for show but for service."**

Spiritual gifts have been given to every member of the body of Christ as an evidence of the Spirit's work both in the individual and in the body of the church as the individual exercises or uses that gift for others. Spiritual gifts are always about others and never about us. They should never be used to bring attention to us but growth for the church and glory to God. They are not to be used for selfish reasons as was the case in Corinth.

The employment of our spiritual gift for the common good of the church develops unity in the body as we develop cohesiveness within the body. When we don't use our spiritual gift we deny aid to others where some need is going unmet and it disrupts unity because we have elected to refrain from using it.

In addition, let's say there's someone who needs

someone with the gift of service to come alongside them and help them out. But the person with the gift of service either doesn't see the need or decides not to meet the need maybe because they're too busy or just don't want to. So along comes a person with the gift of say teaching and she sees that no one is helping this other person so she decides to step in and help. Now it's not wrong for her to help but notice what can happen. She can get really frustrated by a couple of things. She can get frustrated and even upset with the person who has the gift of service and didn't do anything. She can get frustrated with herself because she doesn't have what the person needs and so sometimes will help in her own power. She can get frustrated because she is exhausted doing something outside her giftedness and it may take her time and energy away from doing what is her spiritual gift. Again, it's not wrong for her to help, but she should be helping alongside someone who has that gift. That's why God brought diversity of gifts to the church.

Peter makes it very clear that the purpose of our gifts is to serve others. Regardless of what gift we have, it's about service. Don't ever forget that. Paul adds to that by noting that some spiritual gifts employed by gifted teachers prepares God's people for works of service in order to build up the body of Christ, to help it reach spiritual maturity.

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### III. DIVERSITY HAS A PROBLEM THAT DISRUPTS UNITY

Turn to **I Corinthians 1:4-7 (v. 7)**.

Notice in verse 7 that Paul tells them they aren't lacking in any spiritual gift.

**NLT "Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

Now turn back to **12:1**. Notice what Paul has to say.

The KJV says he didn't want them to be unaware. Here in the NIV it's the word ignorant.

In the NLT he says he **"must correct your misunderstandings about them."**

The word unaware or ignorant does not mean stupid but literally means to escape notice. It can mean to have little knowledge or education about something or to be inexperienced.

Paul acknowledged that they had lots of spiritual gifts, but he also told them that they had a lot of misinformation about them that was actually causing more harm than help to the body of Christ. Their view of spiritual gifts was actually causing disunity in the body.

One problem is that some were uninformed. It's possible that some may not even have known that they had a spiritual gift. No one told them. Others may have known they had a spiritual gift but didn't know the purpose for it, they didn't understand the impact on the body for not using it. Still others were unaware about the nature of spiritual gifts or how they are given. Some thought spiritual gifts were something you developed like a talent or skill, that you used your own power or ability. Others thought you sought after which one you wanted.

### **Exodus 31:1-3**

Let's never forget that when it comes to spiritual gifts God is Giver, the energizer and the motivator to use that gift. It was His design and it is for His purpose – to benefit and build the church. In other words, without God's help in the use of our spiritual we become nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. It is worthless. When we exercise our spiritual gift in any other way than its original intent or in our own power or for selfish reasons we seriously hinder the unity of the church.

Look at our passage again. **vs. 14-26**



In this passage Paul points out two more problems that can disrupt unity. They are the problems of inferiority and superiority.

Some people were looking at their spiritual gift and saying to themselves, “my spiritual gift doesn’t amount to much. Nobody notices me, I don’t seem to have a very prominent role like other gifts in the church therefore I must not be very important, what’s the use of using my gift.”

Others in the church were promoting their spiritual gift. They felt they were superior. They didn’t feel like they needed the other inferior gifts and made them feel even more inferior. Some of them were also saying that if you didn’t have certain gifts like the showy, sign gifts then you were a second rate Christian.

That’s why Paul stresses the plan of God’s design for spiritual gifts that they originated with Him and were all put in the body by His careful, watchful eye. And Paul stresses the purpose that spiritual gifts weren’t for the benefit of the individual but were for the benefit of the body. When we get it wrong like that the whole thing is turned upside down and unity is disrupted.

Instead, Paul says, we need to look at the church as a body. A body has many parts, some we see and appear to have high function or purpose, others we don’t see and appear to have little value to the body. We may reason that therefore they must not be important when in fact just the opposite is the case.

I’ve noticed quite a few dead deer along the road, sometimes they are all mangled and their insides are on the outside. I’m glad God put them on the inside because let’s face it intestines and the liver and other organs are ugly. I wouldn’t want mine hanging out on the outside. So God sewed them up inside this frame and surrounded it with skin.

The point is obvious. Every part has a unique

function that serves the body. They all work together in harmony. You won’t ever see me come into church one day without my head. You may wonder sometimes if I’ve lost my mind, but you won’t ever see me without my head. I won’t ever tell you that I gave my head the day off so I left it at home. The moment my body and head are severed, well that’s it. They need each other. My body needs my legs and so on, you get the point. The moment you take a part and separate it from the rest of the body it dies. Now you can remove some parts and the body can get by, but other parts have to compensate for the loss. When my gall bladder was taken out my body has for the most part adjusted. But I know my gall bladder was removed when I have too much fatty foods in a meal, the rest of the body suffers a little at the loss of that part.

Every part works together for the benefit of the body. As we saw in verse 18, diversity is essential in creating unity. It cannot be effective otherwise.

We can never say that the body of Christ doesn’t need me and neither can we say that we don’t need the body of Christ. That’s why it troubles me when someone who says they are a Christian but don’t attend church. The church of Christ needs them just as much as they need the body. They are denying someone the benefit of their spiritual gift either as a giver or receiver.

It’s the same way with the church. The whole body needs the individual members all doing what they have been gifted to do. Understand that we are dependent on each other.

God in His sovereignty planned for and placed each spiritual gift carefully in the body for the purpose of benefitting the church, so that through our diversity we can exhibit unity. When in selfishness or misunderstanding we either use our gift in a wrong way or not at all we will disrupt unity in the body.

I close with three questions.

**First, do you know that you have a spiritual gift?**

**Second, do you know what that spiritual gift is?**

**Third, are you using it for the purpose God intended – for the benefit of the body of Christ?**

There is to be unity in our diversity.