

Last week we began a new series called *Distinct*. In this series, we're exploring Cornerstone's distinctives—that unique mix of values and practices that give us the distinct culture we have as a local church.

We talked about how, along with everyone else, Cornerstone's in an unprecedented season. No matter how many years of experience our leadership teams have, none of us has ever led a church out of a global pandemic before, and all the life-altering effects it's had on the world, and on our daily lives and ministries.

We talked about how we're in a *liminal* or an in-between season as a church. We're no longer where we were before the pandemic started, but we're not yet where we will be once we finally and fully emerge from it. Just like every other church or organization, we find ourselves sailing in uncharted waters, and we're trusting Jesus to captain this ship, because he alone knows how to safely navigate his church through the fog and the dark and the churning waves.

While many standard leadership practices are less helpful than usual during an in-between season, one of the most important things we *can* do at such a time as this is a practice called **tending to purpose**. That's what this series is about—tending to our God-given purpose as a local church. Because doing so will help keep us true to the path God intends for us— even and especially in a liminal season.

If you're new here, this deep-dive that we're doing into Cornerstone's distinctives offers you a great opportunity to understand what makes this church tick, and to discern how God might be calling you to be a part of it. And if you've been here a while, my prayer is that this series will reinforce those things for you.

Last Sunday we looked at the first of seven Cornerstone distinctives we'll be covering in this series— *Thinking Theologically*. If you didn't catch that message, I encourage you to check it out in our website. Thinking theologically is the process that allows us discern how to live our daily lives, do ministry and mission, and engage the culture around us in a way that is faithful to scripture—faithful to Jesus. Thinking theologically has really been the gateway into all of Cornerstone's other distinctives, including the distinctive we'll be unpacking today—*Unity-in-Diversity*— which is one of our Core Values as a church. It has to do with how:

**Unity-in-Diversity:** We celebrate each person's uniqueness, while eagerly pursuing loving, harmonious relationships with each other.

Let's get right into the subject by exploring **three aspects of unity-in-diversity from the book of Ephesians**. The first aspect is:

### **1. Tearing down walls.**

Last Sunday I shared about how Cornerstone is an intentionally intercultural church, which means that unity-in-diversity is an especially vital value for us. We have people from over 40 different countries of origin, and a range of cultural and social backgrounds. Like pretty much any church, we also have people of different life stages and experiences, abilities and personalities.

We live in a society that in some respects seems to be valuing diversity more and more, and I think that's a good thing. But the unity-in-diversity of the church we read about in the book of Ephesians and elsewhere in the New Testament goes so much deeper than, for example, today's political expressions of multiculturalism.

Have a look at the cross for a moment. It has a vertical beam, and a horizontal beam. You could say that the vertical beam represents the fact that through his death on the cross, Jesus makes peace possible between people

and God, regardless of their background. At the same time, you could say that the horizontal beam represents the fact that through his death the cross, Jesus makes peace possible between people, regardless of their differences.

In fact, through the cross of Christ, *God tears down the walls that divide us*, and unites diverse peoples together into his very own family, the church. The apostle Paul writes about this in Ephesians, speaking specifically of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews (also known as Gentiles). Paul says:

For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death...

So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. <sup>1</sup>

In Paul's day, Jews and Gentile non-Jews were about as deeply divided as any two groups could be.

In the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, there was even a barrier separating the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Israelites. There were signs posted in both Latin and Greek warning Gentiles that they must not proceed past the boundaries of their own courtyard— or else!

But Paul is saying that when Jesus died on the cross, the dividing wall separating Jews and Gentiles has been torn down—not necessarily the literal barrier in the Temple, but rather the spiritual and relational barrier between them. Jesus reconciled both groups, first to God— *and then to each other*— making the two groups into one people, one family, one new humanity.

And the New Testament goes on to make clear that this tearing down of walls in Christ applies to more than just Jews and Gentiles. It also unites diverse people from all kinds of backgrounds into the one family of God. As Paul writes in Colossians:

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us. <sup>2</sup>

And in Galatians we read that:

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>3</sup>

So the walls that tend to divide and separate people—be they walls of ethnicity, walls of race, walls of gender, walls of social and economic status, walls of age, walls of ability, walls of politics— are all torn down in Jesus Christ. Those who become followers of Jesus are united into God's one family as equals, regardless of background.

One of the reasons I love pastoring at Cornerstone is the rich diversity of this church. It stands as a testament to the fact that Jesus died not only to make people right with God, but to unite diverse peoples together into God's family.

So in Christ, the dividing walls have been torn down. What does this mean for us as God's people?

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:14-16, 19 (NLT)

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 3:11 (NLT)

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:28 (NLT)

It means *we must live accordingly*. If in Jesus, the walls that divide us are torn down, we must not live as if they are still standing. And we certainly must not erect new walls! Listen to what New Testament scholar John Stott writes about this:

How dare we build walls of partition in the one and only human community in which [Christ] has destroyed them? To deliberately perpetuate these barriers in the church, and to even tolerate them without taking any active steps to overcome them in order to demonstrate the trans-cultural unity of God's new society, is to set ourselves against the reconciling work of Christ, and even to undo it.

You see, the world desperately needs to see the church united—both in terms of local churches like Cornerstone, and the wider, worldwide church as well, across all its varied expressions, traditions and denominations. Jesus himself prayed that his church will be one, so that the world may believe in him. <sup>4</sup>

As much as society seems to be valuing diversity more and more, at the same time society is as deeply divided as it's been in decades. The pandemic, of course, has only served to exacerbate this.

Not to mention the fact that algorithms on people's social media platforms are often designed to reinforce their own viewpoints, and filter out diverse perspectives. So people end up in their own echo chambers, they double-down on their own opinions, and they vilify those who think differently. On top of this, social media makes people feel far less inhibited when it comes to public ranting that's toxically divisive.

That said, the world was even more divided during New Testament times. Which is what made the rich unity-in-diversity of the New Testament church stand out as the miracle of God that it was. In those days, diverse people simply didn't come together as family. But the unity-and-diversity of the New Testament church stood out, and attracted many to faith in Jesus in the midst of an otherwise deeply divided world. The same thing needs to happen again today. As John Stott goes on to say:

I wonder if anything is more urgent today, for the honour of Christ and for the spread of the gospel, than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is—a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and who love each other... Only then will the world believe in Christ... only then will God receive the glory due his name. <sup>5</sup>

But living with no walls is easier said than done. Which brings us to the second aspect of unity-and-diversity that we find in Ephesians:

## **2. The hard work of unity.**

In Ephesians 2, we saw that God calls diverse peoples together into one family. In Ephesians 4, Paul goes on to say:

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. <sup>6</sup>

Whatever our differences, those of us who follow Jesus are, in fact, one family in Christ—so we must live like it. As different as we all may be and as messy as relating across our differences can be, God still calls us to pursue loving, harmonious relationships with each other. In fact, says Paul, we must make every effort to do so.

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<sup>4</sup> See John 17:21

<sup>5</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: Message of Ephesians*, 111-112.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3 (NLT)

Think of a human family. Let's say it's a mother, a father and a few children. They're one family by virtue of their relatedness to each other. Mom and Dad have a marriage certificate and the kids share the same gene pool. But we all know that such kinship doesn't automatically amount to practical unity.

If mom and dad aren't speaking to each other, and the kids treat each other miserably, they're still one family, but they're not living into that oneness.

You see, lived-out unity doesn't just happen; it requires commitment, effort, and persistent intentionality from each member of the family. The church is, in fact, one family in Christ; so we must live like it. And that means applying ourselves to the hard work of unity.

What do you think of when you think about unity? Many folks think of it as the absence of conflict. They think of unity as what happens when we all get along. There's truth in that, but absence of conflict can also be a sign of a lack of unity. Absence of conflict might be a sign that we really haven't invested that much in building relationships with each other in the church. It might be a sign that we haven't become close enough to rub each other the wrong way. We haven't become close enough to have to patiently bear with each other in love, as Paul urges us to do.

So maybe God's challenge for you this morning, is to commit yourself more fully to cultivating meaningful relationships with fellow believers in this church. Maybe, for example, it's time for you to join a small group. As you heard during announcements, we have a **Group Launch** event coming up in May that will allow you to get connected in a starter small group at Cornerstone. To learn more and to sign up, just go to the web page you see on the screen: [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups).

Maybe you're already in a small group, and it's time for your group to have a discussion about what going deeper as a group might look like.

Maybe God is calling some of you to connect more fully with others in this church by making a return to in-person worship services.

Now, after telling us to make every effort to keep the unity of the church, Paul goes on to declare:

For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.<sup>7</sup>

What word keeps repeating in that text? It's the word *one*. It occurs seven times in just three short verses. Paul is trying to tell us something very important here.

In a way, he's trying to tell us that God's math is easy. The answer is always *one*. There is one Spirit, the Holy Spirit; one Lord— Jesus Christ; and one God and Father of all. That's the doctrine of the Trinity, which teaches us that God is one God, but he exists in a loving community of three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

One plus one plus one equals—*one*.

God's oneness is the not oneness of singularity or individuality, but rather the oneness of community, of loving unity between persons. So in this passage, we see that the Triune God—Spirit, Son, Father— the original community of oneness, is the Creator of his family called the church, which is to live in his image as a community of oneness.

Theologian Dallas Willard captures this idea when he writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:4-6 (NLT)

God's aim in human history is an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.

- Dallas Willard

That's what God's up to. His dream, his vision of oneness for humanity, will be fulfilled through us—his church. All Christians—as diverse as we are—still share one Spirit, one Lord, one Father, one body, one hope, one faith, one baptism.

We can put it this way: What we have in common in Christ is much greater and far more important than what divides us. Realizing this can allow us to find ways of working together for the good of the church and the world, in spite of our differences.<sup>8</sup>

Some of you may be in the place where you're not sure if it's worth making "every effort" to maintain the unity of the church. Maybe you feel like you've already tried, only to encounter relational frustrations and tensions, for example, or indifference—perhaps a lack of reciprocation from others. And the whole experience has left you disillusioned.

Do you think that if a person finds themselves in such a place, that they're in a good place spiritually, or a bad place spiritually? How many say a good place? How many say a bad place?

Well, it's certainly a dangerous place. It could become a bad place. But by God's grace, such a person might actually be on the verge of crossing a threshold into a spiritually good place. Surprised? Let me explain.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian, martyred at the hands of the Nazi regime. His writings on Christian community are some of the most profound and insightful in the church's history. He wrote about how we sometimes buy into an idealized dream of what Christian community should be like. He calls this the *wish dream*.

Have you ever had a *wish dream* – an idealized, perhaps romanticized picture of what fellowship of the church should be like? Bonhoeffer says, and get this:

God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and if we are fortunate with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live in a dream world.<sup>9</sup>

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

So if you're on the brink of disillusionment about your involvement in Christian community, it could be that God is graciously at work in your life to shatter your wish dream. And while painful, it's actually a promising place to be spiritually, because when your wish dream gets shattered you're on the verge of learning to love and work with the people of this church community like Jesus does—unconditionally.

When Paul tells us to be humble, gentle, and patient with each other, when he tells us to bear with each other, does that sound like a wish dream community, or a real-life human community with all its ups and downs, inconveniences and ambiguities? When we get to the place where by God's grace we love the real-deal rather than some false ideal of community, that's where genuine, loving relationships in the church really start to take off. It's also the place where spiritual growth and maturity start to take off.

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<sup>8</sup> As noted by N.T. Wright in his essay *Church Unity Through Paul's Eyes*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26-27,

Each one of us who is part of this congregation needs to ask, “Have I made every effort to preserve the unity of this church family so far as it depends on me?” Jesus died to make us one, and again, it’s up to you each of us to live into that oneness. Romans 12 says:

Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. <sup>10</sup>

You and I each need to ask ourselves before God, “Have I done all I can?” Have I done the hard work of unity?

Let’s move on to the third aspect of unity-in-diversity that we find in Ephesians:

### **3. Diversity of gifts and service.**

Picking up where we left off in Ephesians chapter 4, Paul writes in verse 7:

However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ. <sup>11</sup>

This is one of many passages in the New Testament that speaks of how as followers of Jesus, each of us is given a special gift or gifts by God—unique abilities and capacities that we are to develop and put to work in service to God and the church’s God-given mission.

It’s the diversity of spiritual gifts that God gives his people that strengthen the life of the church as we serve together. It’s the diversity of spiritual gifts that God gives his people that enhances our ability to reach out to the greater community and the world.

Therefore, it’s vitally important that everyone in a local church like Cornerstone discovers what their gifts are and gets involved in serving in the church in one way or another. Because as Pastor Rick Warren says:

There are no insignificant ministries in the church. Some are visible, and some are behind the scenes, but all are valuable.

- Rick Warren

Everyone in the house say, “My role matters.” Everyone online, type it into the chat: “My role matters.”

Because in church life, it can be tempting to think that the really significant ministries are the ones that are the most up-front, the most visible. But imagine what would happen to the church if the behind-the-scenes people didn’t do their thing? The whole church would shut down in a big hurry, just like your body would shut down if its internal, unseen parts didn’t do their thing.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul likens the church to a human body that has diverse parts, and yet those parts are designed to work together in unity. Every part has its function, and every part is vitally important:

Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, “I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,” that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, “I am not part of the body because I am not an eye,” would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” The head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you.” In fact, some parts of the

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 12:18 (NLT)

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 4:7 (NLT)

body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary... All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it. <sup>12</sup>

So in the church, every person's gifts and service— every person's contribution, *including yours*— is vitally important.

You see, ministry is for everybody—it's for every follower of Jesus.

Now "ministry" is a common term for serving God, but when many people hear it, what do they think of? They think of a pastor, or a priest. A professional clergy person, many say, is a *minister*. As a result, many church folks have a concept of ministry that's modelled more on Superman than on Jesus:

Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to fill the baptismal tank with a single bucket, it's Super Pastor! Super Pastor teaches the most insightful Bible classes; Super Pastor preaches the highest quality sermons without fail; Super Pastor has wise counsel for your every need, sings inspirational solos, visits your great aunt Matilda in the hospital, and somehow manages to raise all the funds the church needs, and then some.

I thank God Cornerstone has never expected us to be Super Pastors! You may see Pastor Jeremy wearing Superman attire now and then, but I assure you that's only because he happens to be a big Superman fan. It's not because he wants you to let him carry the church's entire ministry load on his shoulders, broad and strapping as those shoulders may be. Hey, speaking of Jeremy, why don't we show him our appreciation now for all the tremendous work he does with our Group Life Ministry? Those of you online can type "Thanks Pastor Jeremy!" into the chat.

Contrast the Super Pastor mentality with what Paul goes on to say in Ephesians chapter 4:

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. <sup>13</sup>

When we serve together, we grow together. When we serve together, we mature spiritually. When we serve together, we become more like Jesus.

Therefore, this passage teaches that the job of pastors and other church leaders is to equip and empower God's people—that's all of you guys—to put the great diversity of gifts among you into God's service—to equip and empower all of you to do the work of ministry.

And each one of us—each one—has a vital part to play in all this. If you jump down to verse 16, it says:

[Christ] makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. <sup>14</sup>

Are you engaging in serving here at Cornerstone? If not, what special work might God have for you to do? Here are a couple of resources that can help you explore that question.

First of all, on the screen you'll see a link and a QR code to an online spiritual gifts test you can check out if you're not sure what gifts God has given you: [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/spiritualgiftstest](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/spiritualgiftstest).

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:14-20, 27 (NLT)

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 4:11-13 (NLT)

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 4:16 (NLT)

Second, you'll also see a link to our serving opportunities web page: [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve). There, you'll find info on a wide range of opportunities to engage in serving here at Cornerstone.

Do check those resources out, and if you have any questions, please feel free to connect with any of the pastors or staff.

So today, we've explored different aspects of unity-in-diversity in Ephesians—how in Christ, the walls that divide people are torn down, how we need to commit to the hard work of maintaining unity, and also the importance of unity-in-diversity when it comes to spiritual gifts and service.

I wonder, which of those three aspects speaks to you the most right now? Whichever it is, God is probably bringing that area to your attention because he is calling you to grow in that area, perhaps to take action in that area. Will you open your heart to what God is saying to you this morning?

### **Communion**

And would you bring your open heart to the Lord's Table now— to the Lord's Supper?

I trust those of you worshipping online have your communion elements ready at home.

Communion, is a celebration of the fellowship we share with God and with each other. Both dimensions of communion—relationship with God and with each other—are made possible by Jesus Christ—what he has done for us on the cross, where his body was broken for us, his blood shed for us.

We have a relationship God only through Christ, and our relationships with each other are made possible in Christ, and sustained by Christ. Nowhere is this truth more powerfully expressed than in the Lord's Supper. Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 10:

When we bless the cup at the Lord's Table, aren't we sharing in the blood of Christ? And when we break the bread, aren't we sharing in the body of Christ? And though we are many, we all eat from one loaf of bread, showing that we are one body. <sup>15</sup>

Communion is a celebration of unity-in-diversity, reminding us that though we are many, we are one body in Christ.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and broke it...

Instruction for opening sealed cups on screen when the time comes...

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 (NLT)