



A theology of unity in diversity

We may hold different views and ideas, but can we unite in Christ? Here are three theological ideas that can help us appreciate the kind of unity God spoke about in the Bible.

By Israel Olofinjana

Our world continues to wrestle with various discourses that could easily polarise us. As we continue these various conversations around different categories such as age, disability, sex and race, what is our understanding of unity and why is it fundamentally important in the current climate? Is it possible for the church to give emphasis to these important distinctions and yet unite in Christ?

In this short article I want to explore three theological ideas that can help us appreciate the kind of unity God spoke about in the Bible. This biblical unity also incorporates diversity.

Creation

The first theological basis of unity starts with *creation*, evidenced in the fact that God created one human race. Creation theology (*Imago Dei*) furnishes us with the understanding we are all created in God's image therefore affirming our equality, human dignity and respect. God created us all, meaning we all - whether male or female, south Korean or white British, young or old - originate from the same source: that is God. This doctrine also means we are all equal before God because he created us. The beauty of this creation is that, while God created one human race, he also created our distinctiveness.

God created man as well as woman, he created Nigerians as well as Canadians. This is the beauty of God's creation as, although he created one human race, all equal in his image, we are not all the same! Creation is therefore a first theological basis for expressing unity and diversity. In essence, being created by one God in his image means we are equal, but the fact that creation is expressed in different physical features, skin pigmentation, biology, history and geography means God also values diversity. This is why God is not colour blind because he created people of colour in the first instance! God himself expresses this unity and diversity in his very being. God is three distinctive persons in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but yet the Godhead is one, in essence and purpose.



Incarnation

The second theological framework for our unity in diversity is **incarnation**. This is the theological idea that God, who created us in his image, decided to share our humanity through his Son - thus becoming human like one of us. John describes this process as 'the Word becoming flesh' (paraphrasing John 1:14). *The incarnation of Jesus expresses God's solidarity with humanity in its entire diversity.* In a way, the fact that he identifies with humanity is an expression of God's cross-cultural language and cultural intelligence. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way:

'In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he

sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.'
(Hebrews 1:1-3, NIV).

The fact that God 'speaks to us through his son' means God communicates to us and identifies with us in our weakness and vulnerability, giving us a framework for God's mission in identifying with the oppressed, marginalised and disenfranchised. Therefore, the incarnation is a theological basis for God's mission which should never be separated from unity and is expressed for all humanity. This is why John could say *'For God so loved the world that he gave his son'* (paraphrasing John 3:16). Unity and diversity are an integral part of God's mission, but a further step in understanding the incarnation as a theological basis is that it also speaks to particularity. In other words, the incarnation is contextual since, while Jesus becoming one of us identifies him with the entire human race in its diversity, he nevertheless came to us as a Jewish male born in first century Palestine. This is specific and speaks to the heart of how important it is to

recognise the various distinctives or identity markers such as our disability, sex, race and age, but at the same time the incarnation connects beyond the particular. We have to hold this in tension - God is particular but also connects with us all.

Reconciliation

The last theological basis for unity I want to discuss is **reconciliation**. This takes forward the ideas in creation and incarnation; whilst Jesus was revealed to us in the incarnation, identifying with humanity, his death on the cross achieved reconciliation - therefore recreating humanity in a new image of God. Paul puts it this way:

'For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put

to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.' (Ephesians 2:14-18, NIV).

Here Paul was describing how Jesus' death on the cross has brought an end to the cultural hostility between Jews and Gentiles. The death of Jesus on the cross is undergirded by understanding the need for reconciliation between humanity and God, but also between divided communities. Reconciliation therefore gives us a language of pursuing a just, integrated society where all humanity is reconciled and flourishing. The church was supposed to be the new community modelling this new image of God which is why Paul, in another passage, could talk about the body metaphor to illustrate the importance of different parts of the body, but how ultimately they have to function together - because if one part hurts then the whole body hurts. *'If one member suffers, all suffer together with*

it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it' (1 Corinthians 12:26 NRSV). Each member of the body of Christ is important - whether African Caribbean, a woman, a disabled person or a young person - we are all important to God.

It is therefore important in this season that we model God's creation, incarnation and reconciliation in our churches and contexts to reveal God's purpose of unity in diversity.

CONVERSATION

'It's important that we model God's creation, incarnation and reconciliation in our churches'

What does this look like in your context?

STARTERS



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