Unity > Uniformity

*Called to Belong, Pt. 3*

*Ephesians 4:7-10*

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*January 21, 2018*
I. PRAYER
   i. Help us to be a church that is able to uniquely identify and utilize the gifts and abilities of each person so we may all grow in the gospel and effectively proclaim the gospel.

II. INTRODUCTION
   a. So, it is January 21, 2018...a Sunday morning...and our federal government is partially shut down.
   i. Anyone in here affected by that and getting some free vacation this week?
   b. Now, we know that for the most part, this is a political game that happens every once in a while because our elected leaders can’t agree on a long-term funding bill and use the looming government shutdown as leverage to try and force their political opponents to give in to certain demands.
   i. But, what is the real reason why our government is shut down?
      • What is the real reason why our government can’t agree on real solutions to something like immigration policy, or defense spending, or government entitlements?
1. Why is it when we actually see legislation that is major reform of something like healthcare or our tax code...that it usually is completely partisan and the other side vows themselves to repeal it once they gain power?

- I would say that the answer to this question is that it seems that our elected leaders and many of their supporters value uniformity over unity.

1. Repeat.

- Let’s define our terms...

ii. When I use the word unity, what I mean is when many different parts and components come together as a unified whole.

- Different forms. Different functions. Different skill sets. Different Philosophies

- Our elected leaders would be unified if they agreed on a common goal and purpose and utilized their differences to achieve that common goal or purpose.

- Seeing their differences as a strength, not an obstacle.

iii. When I use the word uniformity, what I mean is when one expects everyone or everything to become the same.

- So, my body is in unity with itself. I have different parts with different shapes and function.

- They have come together and work in unity and their differences allow my body to function as a whole.

- If every part of my body were uniform, I would not be a human being. My body could not function.
• It seems that our elected leaders believe that everyone who is different from them is wrong, should reject those differences, and become uniform in governing philosophy.

• So, our elected leaders desire uniformity, and not unity.

• Which is why they see their differences as a problem and not an asset.

• Which is why our government is shut down.

c. But, enough about politics, why am I bringing this up?

i. Well, our government is an organism. It is an organization comprised of many different parts that have different functions that must come together as a unified whole to accomplish a common purpose...the governing and flourishing of our country.

ii. In the same way the local church is an organism. It is an assembly of different people with different life experiences, different gifts and different passions that must come together as a unified whole to accomplish a common purpose.

• Just like our government, we can decide as a church if we are going to value and pursue unity or if we are going to value and pursue uniformity.
1. Pursuing unity means celebrating our differences, seeing those differences as an asset, and coming together to achieve the common mission allowing each person to use their different gifts at the right place inside the organism.

2. Pursuing uniformity means ignoring our differences, elevating one type of person as the standard, and guilt-shaming everyone to conform to that one person and their vision for where the organization needs to go.

iii. At Grace Hill Church, are we going to pursue unity or are we going to pursue uniformity?
   - Will we be stalled out as we let our differences frustrate us or are we going to be propelled as we celebrate our differences?

III. SERIES PLUG
   a. As you know, two weeks ago we started a sermon series studying Ephesians 4 entitled: Called to Belong.
      i. In this series, we want to better understand how and why every single follower of Jesus Christ is called to belong to a local church.
      ii. And as we have been studying the first part of Ephesians 4, we have said that a biblically faithful local church is filled with people who are committed to one another.
• That when you join a church, you are making a commitment to the people in that church to pursue Christ together and reach those who don’t know Christ together.

iii. Last week, we looked at the very thing that binds the church together as we studied Ephesians 4:1-6.

• What is that one common belief and purpose that brings unity to all of our differences?
• And that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.
  1. The truth that every single one of us are equal in our sin before God and need of his grace and mercy.
  2. And, as followers of Jesus, every single one of us are equal as recipients of God’s grace through sending His Son Jesus to hang on the cross in our place and forgive us of our sin.

• As the church, we hold common belief and a common vision.
  1. We believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ as given to us in the Scriptures and we believe that we have been sent on a mission to proclaim that gospel to the world.
  2. This is what unifies us.
  3. This is what we have in common.

b. This morning, I want to continue in Ephesians 4, looking at verse 7-10, and I want us to see how our differences makes us strong.
IV. Ephesians 4:7-10

a. Read Ephesians 4:1-6
   i. So, in v.1-6, Paul is exhorting us as a church to be eager to maintain unity and our bond of peace.
      • We do that through being unified in our calling, which is the gospel.
        1. This is what we discussed last week.
        2. And that unity in the gospel has very specific and practical consequences when it comes to how we treat each other and love one another.

b. But then, Paul shifts his focus from what we have in common to what makes us different. Read v.7-10 (worded awkwardly)
   i. Okay, the key verse here is verse 7, but Paul references some imagery from Psalm 68 in order to give us an illustration of what is happening in v.7. Let me explain this...
      • So, in verse 8, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18. And Psalm 68 is a Psalm written by David that gives this picture of God who has defended the nation of Israel from warring nations, he has conquered their enemies, and he is leading a procession back to the sanctuary in Jerusalem where he receives gifts from the spoils of war and uses those gifts to bless his people.
      • Well, in v.9-10, Paul applies this imagery to Jesus Christ.
1. Jesus descended from his heavenly throne to the earth and became a human being with the mission of defeating sin and accomplishing redemption for his people.

2. So, this will be how Jesus will defeat the enemy of sin and rescue his people:

3. He will live a life on this planet without sin and therefore not deserving death.

4. Yet, instead of reaping the rewards of his own righteousness he will allow us who are guilty of sin to enjoy those rewards.

5. And he himself will take our sin upon himself and go to the cross to die in our place.

6. Yet, since the perfect Son of God took upon himself the punishment for our sin, instead of death defeating him, he defeats death and rises from the grave three days later victorious over sin!

7. And anyone who places their faith in Jesus Christ’s victory over sin and follows Him will be forgiven of their sin.

- So, Jesus descended from heaven, defeats sin, and then he ascends back into heaven with a victorious procession and v.7 is telling us, he graciously bestows upon the people of the church different gifts.

- And we know from later in Ephesians 4 and other places in Scripture that the purpose of God giving these gifts to his people is for the building up of the people of the church and the advancement of the mission of the church.
c. So, in this sermon series, I am trying to help all of us understand that one of the reasons that every follower of Jesus is called to belong to a local church is because Scripture is so clear that our Lord, Jesus Christ, gives each of us different gifts and those gifts are to be utilized in unity with the other people in the church in order for the mission of the church to be fulfilled.

i. So, think about this. If you follow Jesus, you have been given certain gifts by Jesus Christ that needs to be utilized in unity with the other people here in this church in order for Grace Hill Church to be faithful to the calling that God has given it.

- Listen, you, yes you, are indispensable to the fulfillment of the mission of this church!
- You have unique life experiences. You have a unique story. You have gained unique skills and talents through school, through work, through your upbringing, through your hobbies.
- And on top of that, God has also given you spiritual gifts that must be identified and utilized in the church!
1. See, when we come to faith in Christ and commit to a faithful church, God sanctifies our past and all of the skills and experiences that we have gained and then he also bestows on us new gifts, and all of that mixes together to create a very unique you that needs to operate in unity with the rest of the church.

ii. This reminds me of my good friend Will.
   - Will is the pastor of New City Fellowship in Manassas and we served in ministry with one another in the past.
   - Will is a High School dropout, former drug addict, former drug dealer.
     1. And through the grace of God, Will’s parents forced him into a Christ-centered drug rehab program and through that experience he gave his life to Christ and got clean.
     2. But what is a kid to do with his life who has dropped out of high school, is out of rehab, and doesn’t have any formal job training or education?
       1. Well, a local business owner heard about Will at his church and gave Will an opportunity to try out sales in a commission only job selling oil.
       2. You know, it turns out that Will was a pretty good salesman...and became the company’s top salesmen.
   - And as Will was being discipled in his church, it also turned out that God had gifted him in evangelism and teaching.
1. And so God had taken Will’s past and all of his experiences and the unique skillsets that you learn from those experiences...even dealing drugs and he began to redeem it.

2. And he also gave Will new gifts and all of that redemption and all of that grace was mixed together to give Will a unique skillet to serve the church.

3. And he began to pray if God was calling him to become a pastor and plant a new church, which he did in Manassas.

- See, it doesn’t matter what your past is. It doesn’t matter how much knowledge you have. It doesn’t matter what specific skillsets you have. It doesn’t matter if you’re a former high school dropout drug addict.

1. No one’s story is outside of God’s ability to take it, redeem it, and use it within the church.

d. Everyone of us have different stories, backgrounds, abilities, and gifts.
   
   i. I’ve been in ministry long enough to see that God can take any dark past, redeem it, and use it to create a ministry in the present.

   ii. And the church is strongest when all of those work together in unity for the building up of the church and the advancement of its mission.

   iii. This is why we’re about unity and not uniformity.
• If we were about uniformity, the focus would be on how you could conform your life to our standards for the glory of our church.
• But we’re about unity. The focus is on how God redeems your life and unleashes it within the church for his own glory.

V. MEANINGFUL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

a. Okay, so I believe I have made a good case for why the church needs to be about unity and not uniformity. That we should celebrate our diversity and all the various gifts that God gives us to work together.
   i. Allow me to pivot and talk to us about how we practically at Grace Hill Church want to develop and protect a culture of unity and not uniformity.

b. It is because we want to intentionally pursue unity over uniformity that we practice what I am going to call: meaningful church membership.
   i. We believe a faithful church is filled with people who are committed to one another and also use their gifts together in unity.
   ii. And to encourage this, we practice meaningful church membership.
 • Let me define: meaningful church membership is:
1. A formal process where a professing follower of Jesus enters into a mutual commitment with the other church members to help each other grow in their faith, to protect the ministry from corruption, and to reach those who do not know Christ.

- And the reason why I say that we practice meaningful church membership is because we are very intentional about how we practice membership.
  1. It’s possible you grew up in a church or have visited a church where membership wasn’t meaningful.
  2. One Sunday, the Pastor asks who wants to join the church, you raise your hand, and you’re a member.
  3. So, for many churches their membership database has more names on it, in some cases hundreds of more names on it, than those who actually show up on Sunday morning.

- Well, when a church practices meaningful church membership, we have a process for you to become a member and you get taken off of our membership list if you leave the church for whatever reason.
  1. And we do this because we want to know who are the people who have made this mutual commitment to follow Jesus together, to protect the church, and to reach people who don’t know Jesus.
  2. So, in a healthy church model, there really should be more people showing up on Sunday than those listed in the membership database!
And so for us here at Grace Hill Church, I hope we have three different kinds of people gathering together on Sunday mornings.

1. I hope our worship services are filled with our church members. People who have committed to follow Jesus together and who value our Sunday morning gatherings to connect with one another, worship together, and sit under the preaching of the Word of God.

2. I hope our Sunday mornings are filled with people who are not church members. Followers of Jesus who are new to Grace Hill Church or are not quite ready to make the step towards membership. We understand these things can take time. So, if you are not a member yet but you call Grace Hill your church home, you are welcome here! Your welcome to participate in community groups, come to all of our events, and grow in Christ here. We hope that you are moving towards membership but in the meantime, you’re welcome here.

3. Lastly, I hope there are people who still don’t know if they believe in Jesus or not coming on Sunday mornings. I pray Grace Hill is a place where people can wrestle with questions and dialogue about faith. If that is you, you’re welcome here. We love that you’re here and we do hope and pray that through hearing the gospel and engaging in this community, you’ll come to a place of trusting Jesus with your life.
VI. **FOUR REASONS**

i. But, back to meaningful church membership. We practice this because we believe that this actually encourages unity in our church and discourages uniformity. Let me give you four quick reasons why and then we’re done.

b. **Reason #1: MCM Ensures the church is united in common belief and purpose.**

i. At Grace Hill, we require our members to be a professing follower of Jesus and to agree to the same statement of faith.

- If we are going to allow our diversity to be a strength at Grace Hill, then we must be unified in what we believe and what our purpose is as a church.
- If we are divided in areas of doctrine and what we believe, then we’ll be too busy fighting internally within the organization versus advancing the mission of the church.
- So, meaningful church membership forces us to have that conversation before the commitment is made to ensure that we’re unified in belief and purpose.

c. **Reason #2: MCM Protects the church against manipulative and abusive power.**

i. At Grace Hill Church, we are what we call Congregationalists.

- What this means is that we believe that the authority in the church rests with the members of the church and not one person or one board.
• The elder board is charged with leading the members, but the members are who have authority in the church.

ii. So, I am the primary preacher at this church. And if I start teaching in a way that is not in accordance with our statement of faith, then the members have a responsibility to remove me.

• If I start getting influenced by the outside culture and allow every cultural movement, every politically correct sentiment to cause me to question the truthfulness of Scripture...the members need to sit me down.

• This is why only our members collectively can amend our statement of faith or our bylaws.
  1. I cannot do that on my own. The elders cannot do that on their own.

iii. This is why our members are the ones who ultimately decide who becomes a member of Grace Hill and our members are the ones who decide if we need to remove someone from membership.

iv. This is why no denomination has authority to change the doctrine, the practice, the leaders of this church, or mess with our finances.

• When you give authority in the church to the members, all who are united in belief and purpose, all who love Jesus, and all who have been given various gifts to minister in this church, it protects the church against abusive, manipulative power.
d. Reason #3: MCM allows the leadership to know who they’re responsible for.

i. This church is ruled by our congregation but it is led by our elders.
   - And we believe that the Scripture is very clear about the elders job description: teach the Word of God, pray, shepherd the flock, and equip the people of the church in their various gifts.
   - So, meaningful church membership helps our elders know who they are responsible for.

ii. I believe that one day I will stand before God and give an account for the members of Grace Hill Church in how I led them and cared for them.
   - This is why every member of our church is assigned to an elder.
     1. Our elders intentionally connect with the person, pray for them, visit them when needed.
     2. This is why the majority of our elder meetings are praying for our members.
   - But we also believe that every one of our members has been uniquely gifted by God and has a very specific and indispensable ministry to fulfill here at Grace Hill Church.
     1. And we believe that later in Ephesians 4 (we’ll study this in a couple of weeks) we learn that the elders have a responsibility to equip each church member in those various gifts to be utilized for the work of ministry.
iii. So, meaningful church membership helps us pursue unity and not uniformity because it allows our leaders to intentionally equip each individual person and to get them utilizing their gifts within the church.

e. Reason #4: MCM calls people to primarily invest in the ministry of their church.

i. If we are going to be about unity and not uniformity, then we need people to step up and invest their time, their gifts, and their money into the ministry of the church.

- And meaningful church membership helps us to call people to invest in this way,
  1. We expect our members to be the primary funding engine behind our ministry.
  2. We expect our members to utilize their gifts in the church.
  3. We expect our members to prioritize their time to be with these people, to help these people love Jesus, and to reach those who don’t know Christ together.

VII. CONCLUSION

a. So, that is meaningful church membership.

i. And I really believe that this helps us pursue unity and not uniformity.

ii. Without meaningful church membership, it is too easy for churches to be centered around a preacher, a cause, a building, a performance, a worship style.
• And all of that is uniformity. It doesn’t celebrate the diversity of the church and use that to build up and advance the church.

b. So, let me close by, again, encouraging you to pursue membership if you have not already and if you have to come to the R.E.D. workshop.
   i. Membership Class – Online (sign-up online)
   ii. R.E.D.
      • Recognize.Equip.Deploy.
        1. Feb. 11 & Feb. 25
        2. Sign-up at gracehillchurch.com/red

VIII. PRAY

IX. BENEDICTION
   i. Grace Hill, look to your left and right. See the people of the church. These are the people that you have been called to love. These are the people you have been called to encourage. These are the people that you have been called to point to Jesus.