

Finding your Story in God's Story (Part 3)

Diversity in Unity that leads to Maturity – God's plan for His People in 1 Corinthians 12

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***Diversity, unity, and maturity* are words that characterize the community of faith created in Christ Jesus. In this article we will examine the relationship between these three words and why they are at the heart of God's plan for His people's sanctification.**

In order for your life story to be a God-approved story, no matter how your uniqueness expresses itself, your story will be aligned with the following three beats: ***diversity, unity, and maturity***. **1)** you will find your purpose (calling) by exercising your giftedness in the interdependence of a **diversely gifted body** (1 Cor 12:4-10), **2)** so that through the manifestation of the Spirit in the exercise of your gift (1 Cor 12:7), you bring the joy of edification, mutuality, and thus **unity to the body** (12:25), and in so doing, **3)** you serve the common good of the body (12:7), by helping others move toward **spiritual maturity** and in the process, you are also **matured spiritually** (Col 2:19).

That's the common theme in every God-approved story; **out of unity born of diversity comes maturity**. That is the goal of grace; holy maturity in Christ (Col 1:18-29). That is the glorious testimony that the church is Christ's body on earth—showcasing His virtues in relationships before the watching world in a wonderful interplay of diversity, unity, and maturity operating together by the power of the Spirit of God (1 Jn 4:17).

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis offer this insight on the priority of body life: *“True community where God's Word is proclaimed and our love for God grows forces us to open our eyes to the big picture, rather than shelter in the cozy narcissism of our own little worlds. We ask, “Where does God fit into the story of my life?” When the real question is, “Where does my little life fit into this great story of God's community?”* And, to further elucidate, the authors state:

[Our tendency is] we want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives, when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation. I may wonder what kind of community God has for me, when I should be asking what kind of me God wants for his community (Chester, Timmis, *Total Church*, p. 35).

God's redemptive plot is being carried out in God's world, and central to that plot is the role of His called and regenerated community (Rom 1:6-7). Life in His community exerts a sanctifying influence upon us, for collectively we are having our lives shaped to His story, not our own. The pervading reality of God's story pushes us past all the barriers we have erected to 'safely' hide our lives in insulated cocoons. But, thankfully, the power of God in the gospel bursts us out of those cocoons so that we can enjoy life in the Spirit in our Christian relationships.

We are designating this relational dynamic produced by the Spirit as 'deep community'. For, 'deep community' is God's pattern for His people, and it is a pattern which involves close relationships of interdependency that are energized supernaturally by God's Spirit. Why the modifier, 'deep'? Because of deep connection; true believers are literally *members of one another* (Eph 4:25). And, therefore, what happens to one member affects all of the members: “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice

with it” (1Cor 12:26). The fruit of the Spirit includes empathy and care, and these fruits are not born in isolation, but within close relationships (‘weep with those who weep; rejoice with those who rejoice’, Romans 12:15-16). There is a supernatural reason for this radical empathy as we’ll see.

The believer, at the moment of conversion is supernaturally joined to Christ, and to the brethren (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:6, 10). The true believer has a corporate identity; he or she is a child of God who is *in relation* with all other individuals in the family of God. Our true identity is found in the positional reality that we are a child of the living God—living in relation to our brothers and sisters in Christ (Phil 2:2-5).

Living out the reality of that identity in a community of like-minded believers brings boundless glory to our risen and exalted King. For, the body dynamic of ‘deep community’ envisioned in Scripture predicates *life in the Spirit* within a community of believers who make themselves available to live out their identity by continually edifying one another. Does that seem too idealistic? Or out of reach? Perhaps there have been so many decades of ‘spectator Christianity’, that the biblical pattern seems loftier, and more out of reach than the stars above our heads. But, through the power of the gospel, ‘deep community’ is possible.

Consider the marvel of unity in diversity as described in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. It is a unity NOT flowing from sameness in gifts, tastes, interests, or experiences. I know of a church that has scores of Bible studies, each of which is based on shared hobbies—one study is made up of dirt bikers, another needle pointers, another tennis players—I don’t fault this approach, Christians ought to spend as much time together as possible. But, even the world can produce a form of unity based on common hobbies. By contrast, what Paul is teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 is that our diverse gifting, operating in mutual edification is the source of our unity and commonality.

We are unified by the truth in the power of the Spirit for the common good. **Supernatural unity, in a community of diversity is a testament to the power of the Spirit.** No wonder Paul describes the exercise of spiritual gifts as ‘the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ (1 Cor 12:7). Through regeneration, the Spirit of God changes our orientation from inward to outward. The whole trajectory of our life switches toward the direction of blessing others—the miracle of the new birth produces an individual who is saved to serve (Gal 5:13).

Through the church, God is perfecting His image in His people through community. By means of close relationships of mutual edification there is an interplay of virtue which literally showcases the character of Christ—that is the body of Christ building itself up in love by the truth spoken corporately (Eph 4:16). This is how God brings glory to Himself in the church, and eternal blessedness to us by the communication of His glory to us. As one pastor succinctly describes it,

The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God’s new community. For his purpose, conceived in eternity past, being worked out in history, and to be perfected in a future eternity, God’s plan is to glorify Himself through sanctifying a particular people. It is not only to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is, to call out of the world a people for his own glory (John Stott, *The Living Church*, pp. 19-20).

Why is it so important that we accept this as God’s blueprint for His church? The central reason is so that we don’t find ourselves thwarting the purposes of God. Both pastor and

parishioner are called to this dynamic of mutual edification. It was Martin Luther who indicated that historically, the church tends to deteriorate into a system of honoring men (see 1 Cor 3:21). And, as that decline takes place, the priesthood of the believer becomes obscured. Without the priesthood of the believer being taught and practiced, the ‘body life’ intended by our Lord dries up, and structurally, a church can become fossilized into a religious institution. But, that need not be.

According to Ephesians chapter four, gifted pastor-teachers are to not only exert their spiritual influence by expositing the Word of God, but also by equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry (Eph 4:11-12ff.). But, equipped to do what? Equipped to speak the truth to one another in love (Eph 4:16). That describes a body edifying itself. The apostle Paul gives us a remarkable analogy of this interdependency of spiritual fellowship in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. In that chapter the interdependency of believers is likened to a human body in which each and every member plays a vital role—contributing what is needed for mutual support and healthy function (1 Cor 12:14-25). Paul’s argument turns on the fact that each member’s ministry is vital to the whole.

‘Doing church’ in a way that reveals that we are *members, one of another* requires a supernatural power source operating through our new natures. This is why we need to frequently hear from the Word how we have been made *new* in regeneration; how we are *indwelt by the Spirit*; how we are *gifted spiritually to serve*; and how we are *uniquely placed in the body by the Spirit* in order to be a *channel of blessing to its members*. These truths are fundamental to body life.

As a regenerate body of believers, we have our portion in God’s story through life in Christ. That is the foundation of spiritual fellowship, our shared life in Christ (1 Jn 1:1-6). Therefore, your story will be found in God’s story, not in your (solo) personal achievements, but in the story which flows from your role in deep community (deep because through Christ we are members one of another). Christ, in His passion, assumed our alienation, our disrelated-ness due to sin, and through His atoning work of substitution He gave us His own right-relatedness to the Trinity (Gal 3:26). Through this work of grace, that supernatural bond we have with Christ is the basis of our deep community with the brethren manifested in *unity through diversity, unto maturity*.

That is the common theme in God-approved stories; you fulfill God’s calling in your life in the context of deep community. Deep community is the matrix and staging area where you serve as the Lord’s instrument to bless the members of the body through your spiritual gift.

This means I cannot be who I am called and appointed to be without being in close relationship with other believers. This is how the believer reasons: at regeneration I was baptized into a community of believers (1 Cor 12:13). I now belong to God and I belong to my brothers and sisters in Christ. I am not my own, but have been redeemed and grafted into an eternal family. Not that I belong to God, and then make a decision to belong to a church, my being in Christ with others IS my identity. To fail to live our identity out corporately is rebellion against God (Heb 10:23-25).

God glorifies Himself through the sanctification of His people as they edify one another. He has determined how He is going to do that; it is through the mutuality of community. For in the act of reclaiming His image in us through Christ, God is making a new humanity that in the present age reveals its ‘newness’ through the relationships found in community (Jn 17:20-21). But, this miraculous new humanity is not witnessed by examining a person praying alone in the moonlight, no, it is revealed in the relationships which comprise community.

Sharing in Christ means sharing in His purpose of building up His body unto the

spiritual growth of each member. True *koinonia* ‘fellowship’, is expressed in the words “common,” “commonality” and “sharing,”—shared life in Christ. We live unto God because our Savior lives (Gal 2:19-21). Every believer is dead to sin and alive to God by virtue of being united to Christ (Rom 6:11). This shared life in Christ is experienced by means sharing in His Word, His causes, and His purposes. It means feeding on Christ together. True fellowship has to do with exhorting, instructing, teaching, meeting needs, encouraging, speaking the truth to one another. Because we are now in communion with the Godhead, we share our entire lives with one another unto one great end: “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5).

Diversity unto unity that leads to maturity is God’s plan for His people. Paul wrote First Corinthians chapters 11-14 as a corrective to the sinful heart attitudes and behaviors that work against community. The Corinthians were gravitating toward the following carnal behaviors: a party spirit, over-under pecking orders, sectarianism, boasting in men, abuse of the Lord’s table, and misusing spiritual gifts. These divisive behaviors were, according to the apostle Paul, *prima facie* evidence that the Corinthians were still crawling around in spiritual diapers (1 Cor 3:1-3ff.).

The immaturity of the Corinthians was evident in their thoughtless destruction of unity. In chapters 12-14, Paul addresses their lack of love and their misuse of spiritual gifts. Paul’s reproof of their prideful boasting is woven throughout this epistle. Pride was in the hearts of these congregants and was expressing itself in the church’s lack of unity. Paul exposes their pride by targeting their self-centered, and inappropriate use of spiritual gifts. Their spiritual gifts had become ‘medals of honor’ worn on puffed out chests. Theologian Frederick Dale Bruner observes:

Their every high notion must be torn down and brought under obedience to Christ. All *huper* (Grk. “over”) must become *hupo* (Grk. “under”), everything high must become low, and all exalted sense of spiritual power and fullness must become a deep sense of spiritual need. Christian spirituality is placing oneself under Christ, it is not going beyond him (Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, p. 306).

A self-constructed identity is far removed from an identity received by grace. Paul rebukes this mentality, exposing the ignorance of taking credit for what is a gift, “For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor 4:7). The Corinthians abuse of verbal and sign gifts was a symptom of their pride. They were, in essence, using their spiritual gifts as a kind of scorecard of superiority. “Paul [is] entreating the Corinthians through the “meekness and gentleness of Christ,” [2 Cor 10:1] for it is just this lowliness that the Corinthians are in danger of losing through their high spiritual self-consciousness” (Bruner, p. 303).

Paul is addressing two types of people in the church at Corinth, those feeling “inferior” (vv. 15-20) and those feeling “superior” (vv. 21-26). Their ‘rating system’ of spiritual gifts was not unlike children boasting about who received a part in the school play. “I am important, I got the lead part in the school play!” Paul wants to show the Corinthians that these gifts are not innate, they are graciously given (v. 7), divinely empowered (v. 6), sovereignly dispensed (v. 11), wisely arranged (v. 18) and composed (v. 24) by the unified Triune God (vv. 4-6). Not only does Paul stress God’s sovereignty over these gifts, he also reveals that God has a holy and divine purpose for them. These

gifts were the manifestation of the Spirit who indwelt them, and were a byproduct of union with Christ. Therefore, the Corinthians needed to align themselves to God's purpose for these gifts.

A proper understanding of the gifts is necessary in order for the Corinthians to go from boasting to building. “In a word, Paul wants to turn the eyes of the Corinthians from the spirit of *huper* (Grk. “over”) which boasts, to the spirit of *agape* which builds; from being impressed with one's own spiritual relevance and power, to being concerned with finding a lowly and a patient relevance of quite a different kind to the weaknesses of the church” (Bruner, p. 318).

Paul sets forth three truths about the Spirit's manifestation in the exercise of our Spiritual gifts.

1. **There is a *variety* of spiritual gifts (v. 4).** This principle illustrates the unique diversity in the body. God delights in variety and so we celebrate diversity in the body of Christ knowing that He has fitted His body uniquely in such a way as to bring about full maturity. The world responds to diversity by removing it (often pursuing unity by enforced conformity). The church celebrates diversity by embracing and enjoying the complementarity in diversity as a testament to the grace and wisdom of God.
2. **Spiritual gifts are *divided, applied, and empowered by God* (v. 6,11; 1 Pet 4:11).** God supplies the power to make his people useful to His body (Rom 12:6). Your spiritual gift is hand-selected by God, appropriated according to His sovereign will, and made fruitful by His infinite power. The significance of this glorious truth is, *love the Giver, and the gift you've been given; for the Lord has gifted you to be a blessing to your brethren.*
3. **The manifestation of the Spirit in the use of our spiritual gifts is *for the common good* (v. 7).** Our spiritual gifts are not designed by God to edify self (14:4, 12, 26). God has given them to build up others. The gifts are designed to bring unity that leads to maturity. Grace was distributed in varied measure to each individual (in accordance with the gift bestowed—Romans 12:6).

In view of this truth, we ought to freely acknowledge that not only do the brethren need the exercise of my gift, but I also need to receive the exercise of their gifts. That is the very opposite of placing the importance of one gift above another (1 Cor 12:20-25). There are no self-sufficient people in the body of Christ. How radically different this is from the proud Western mindset wherein one must ‘have it all together’ and ‘be cool’ (self-contented, smug, detached, independent, and emotionally uninvolved).

Paul concludes chapter twelve's theme of *body life* with a transition verse: “But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And, I show you a still more excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31). Oh, that ‘more excellent way’, it is a way, a path, a highway above all others—it is the way of love. Commentator C. K. Barrett sheds light on Paul's intent in this verse:

The Corinthians evidently valued too highly what Paul regarded as one of the lowest gifts, that of speaking with tongues. Thus, the Corinthians might seek—by prayer and self-preparation—the gift of prophecy or of teaching. These gifts would enable them to make a maximum contribution to the life of the church. Even so, the last word has not been said. ‘I am going to show’ (bringing out the force of the present tense, *daiknumi*) ‘yet a better way’ [the way of love] (C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 296).

Paul is not saying that spiritual gifts and love are antithetical, no, he is saying that the Corinthians needed the humility of a servant wrapped in love. They needed to recognize their error, turn, and change course. The apostle sets forth the solution to their problem by explaining the proper motive for using the gifts and to what end these gifts were graciously given by God. The unity born of mutual edification that produces maturity is best served by love—that is the more excellent way!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer waxes eloquent on the necessity of divine love versus natural love:

Human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ's sake. Human love desires the other person, his company... but it does not serve him. Human love cannot tolerate the dissolution of a fellowship that has become false... and human love cannot love an enemy. Genuine spiritual love, does not desire but serves. Spiritual love comes from Christ; it serves Him alone; it knows that it has no immediate access to other persons. Jesus Christ stands between the lover and the others he loves. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 34-35).

The love for Christ defines and mediates all our affections, and desires. It is Jesus Christ who defines what love truly is. He IS love, He is the source of all love and we don't get to redefine it. Saint Augustine brilliantly summarizes the concept of Christ mediating love: "He loves Thee too little, who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake."

And, again, Bonhoeffer notes how this applies in our relationships: *this means that where Christ bids me to maintain fellowship for the sake of His love then I will maintain it. If he wants me to break fellowship for the sake of love then I will break it. [He is my chief evaluator.] He is the singular object of my love for which all other love passes through.*

Because we still carry indwelling sin, the unity of the body is a fragile thing that must be protected. The command is to guard the unity produced by the Spirit (see Eph 4:1-3; 1 Cor 1:10; Phil 2:2-5ff.). Genuine spiritual love does not desire something in return but rather its nature is to serve. When we receive God's love it need not be affirmed by the world. It is "otherworldly" indicates John (1 Jn 3:1). This is why the use of our spiritual gift for the selfless building up of God's family is evidence that we have received His love. This species of love is unique and it is distinguishable in true, deep community. The experience of God's love is not primarily a private experience, we experience God's love in community. It is a divine love that comes from above and moves out horizontally through the channels of God's people (1 Jn 4:19).

God's love is reflexive in that it is not designed to remain stationary or to be hoarded by an 'end-user'. God's love is active—in the regenerate it produces the 'reflex' of love to others. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father and we are in Him and have received His love and now that love moves outward. God has purposed that His church exhibits this love before the eyes of a lost world, for, it is through the testimony of this supernatural love that the divinity of Christ Jesus is revealed to the unbelieving world (Jn 17:21-23).

So, we receive the Lord's love in order to pass it on. That is the nature of divine love, it bubbles up in us like a pure spring of water and finds its fulfillment when we dispense it to others. And, when we experience this species of love in community, then we experience the love of God. It was Lewis Sperry Chafer, one of the founders of Dallas Theological Seminary who said, *if you want to taste the wine of heaven now, allow the love of God to flow through you to others.*

The Apostle John says in 1 John 4:7-8 that one's love for the brethren is evidence of having received God's love. Our relationship to this kind of love is not contingent upon it being accepted by another, it is a love that goes out without any consideration for self. It is selfless and only interested in the benefit of its recipient. We love, because He first loved us. This is the only validation the Christian needs. Bruner remarks on how love is the solution to the Corinthian catastrophe:

It is interesting to observe, for example, that the spiritual pride or inflated sense of one's own spiritual experience ("puffed up," Grk. *phusioun*) which Paul saw as the peculiar affliction of the Corinthian higher life Christians (cf. 4:6, 18, 19; 8:1) appears in the negative in this passage: "love is not . . . *phusioun* [puffed up] [1 Cor 13:4] (Bruner, p. 296).

Love, in Lauterburg's figure "is the burning-glass [magnifying glass] which unremittingly concentrates the diverse charismatic manifestations [spiritual gifts] toward their unified goal," the common good (Ibid.).

Our love, and edification and service in the body of Christ comprise a list of clear marks of new life; marks which distinguish gospel faith from mere presumption. How vital it is that our story be constructed upon the bedrock of the gospel (1 Cor 3:10-11ff.). Therefore, the following exhortation is most needed today.

Because we are weak on the gospel, we are consequently weak on our identity in Christ, and because we are weak on our identity in Christ we allow our perceived successes and failures to define us; and because we define ourselves by temporal things, we choose not to whole-heartedly risk and pursue close relationships in the body of Christ.

The cure is the gospel believed, loved, and obeyed. Only the daily 'food' of the gospel can reverse the trajectory of privatized, self-focused Christianity. For, the cross of Christ is the great leveler of mankind; evaporating our imagined distinctions. The justifying blood and righteousness of Christ together eliminate a class system, for every true believer shares in the equal status of being 'justified through Christ' (Gal 3:28). Christ's justifying work makes close relationships possible, for since Christ carries our righteous status before God, it would be disobedient to attempt to arrogate that task to ourselves. Bruner notes the role of the gospel in creating community.

"Faith in God's sufficient salvation in Christ has within it, by the Spirit, the power to remove the believer's eyes at last from himself and from his own attempted religious sufficiency and turn him outward toward his neighbor whom he now has strong reasons, motives and, in the Spirit, the power for loving as freely and unconditionally as he himself has been loved. . ." (Bruner, p. 231).

It is through the dynamic of close caring relationships that the intimacy necessary to experience one another's gifts takes place. We must draw close enough to one another to benefit from each other's gifts. Only when Christ's members are cultivating a living, vital, unity, born of diversity will the body be characterized by the mutual edification needed to see its members move one another to maturity. The gospel is our food and drink, our soul's sustenance. For by the gospel we abide in Christ and have fellowship with Him (Jn 6:52-57). Gospel 'fluency' drives spiritual fellowship; for the gospel creates the conditions necessary for deep community. And deep community is the context for writing God-approved stories. May that be our goal, for our Savior has told us, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have loved you; abide in My love" (Jn 15:8-9).