

## ***The Gift of Diversity***

Dear Timoteo,

During my ministry I have learned that Jesus calls us to serve people who are like us, who are almost like us and many who are not like us at all. I've come to realize that it's important to accept differences among people and to love each one appropriately. These differences between human beings are usually defined by appearance, geographical origin, historical accidents or a person's station in life. As a young man I recognized diversity, but did not necessarily value diversity. I now understand that seeing human diversity as *a gift from God* is an important step towards effective ministry. The farther a person is from their context and comfort zone, the greater the challenge for ministry.

I have heard many sermons that say that God doesn't care whether you are white or black or brown or red, or what language you speak, or in what part of town you live. These sermons assume that our particularity should be ignored, and that it should not get in the way of our unity in Christ. The result of this kind of preaching is that we homogenize our differences. We claim to be above discrimination, and settle for a Christianity that distrusts diversity and promotes sameness under the banner of Christian love.

As I reflect on this early understanding of diversity, I realize that I was invited to become a Christian by leaving my particularity at the altar, as if my uniqueness was sinful or disruptive to my newfound faith. But please notice,

Timoteo, that the Gospels paint a different composite picture of the Body of Christ—a much richer picture. Jesus loved John the Baptist although there was a *strangeness* to him. He called disciples from the working classes and the professionals. The woman at the well was from Samaria, and that geographic location was important. Matthew was a hated tax collector, yet it did not deter Jesus. Mary Magdalene, an unlikely believer, became the first to proclaim Christ had risen. All were accepted with their particularities and unique differences.

The early church gave evidence of the affirmation of diversity in ministry and church growth. The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles show us an emerging Christian church breaking free from its parochial views. It shows a church moving beyond the geographic limits of Jerusalem, seeking to engage communities outside the synagogue and in the marketplace of major cities. It is a church creating and celebrating the gift of a pluralistic Body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit descended at a time when there were many nations represented in Jerusalem and invited the crowd to hear the Gospel in their own tongue. On the birthday of the Christian church, its breath and diversity was assured. The Gospel was proclaimed to the insider and outsider, the local and distant, the religious and secular, the elite and commoner and the Jew and Gentile.

The history of the New Testament church supports the idea that ethnicity matters. Geography matters. One's profession or occupation matters. It matters because it gives context to our identity and helps define our place in the world. The particularity of our human existence is one of the gifts God provides. It is part

of the beautiful tapestry He is creating among us. He redeems our particularity, not replaces it. Through this gift God enables us to truly love one another. We are a community that has differences in color, language, race, class and social location. To see ourselves differently, is to practice ministry with a serious blind spot. It is a form of human denial, and fails to honor one of the outcomes of the cross.

In the Scriptures the particularity of a group helped determine the nature of ministry to that group. Ministry to the poor and under-employed is qualitatively different from ministry to the educated and upwardly mobile. Ministry to groups that enjoy power and privilege is different from ministry to groups that are on the margins of society. And ministry to people of color is different from ministry to people in an Anglo culture. This is true not only because God made us different, but also because our faith is fleshed out in different contexts inside and outside of the church.

The Christian faith is the answer to all the world's questions if we keep in mind that we all have different questions, shaped by our particularity. God is the answer to the many questions shaped by our diverse human reality. If we assume we are all the same, we miss the opportunity to see the Gospel applied to our unique situation, and to the full range of the human experience.

Finally, Timoteo, the most compelling picture of diversity found in Scripture is the image of all humanity standing before God's throne in the *Book of Revelation*. People of every land and ethnic persuasion will participate in this incredible gathering. I get a tingle down my back just thinking about it. God will

acknowledge us for who we are, where we came from and the place where we found Jesus. Our common denominator is our union with Christ. And the greater our diversity, the more it elevates His greatness in drawing all kinds of people unto Himself.

What a glorious day it will be, and what a glorious day it can be today, when we appreciate the beauty of our differences and celebrate our particularity. Appreciate the characteristics of the people you serve, and you will serve them more effectively.

En el servicio del maestro,

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*After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude  
that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language,  
standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.*

*They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*

*And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.*

*Revelation 7: 9-10*