

Church and Culture

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[0 : 00] The reality is that as we come together each week, each Sunday, race and culture still plays a part in our church. That is just a reality, and I'm not telling you things that you don't already know.

And I think that if we're not thoughtful about how we interact, that is we just go via remote control, and go with whatever our culture tells us, then we end up, I think, mimicking what society does, those four approaches, if you remember, and that's not very healthy.

And I think if we look back at churches in the past, sadly, with the Australian church, I think some of that has happened. I wouldn't call it annihilation, but in the past, migrants have found it difficult to find acceptance in mainstream churches.

That's why, until recently, the Anglican church was still very white. It's since changed now, and I think gaining momentum. And what we've seen as a result is we've seen ethnic churches pop up. They've come here, they've found that, oh, we're not being accepted, so we'll start our own churches. And the result of which is segregation. And if you want to look at what the problems with segregation are, you just need to look at the churches in America.

[1 : 22] And it's, you know, I know that a lot of the churches in the U.S. are working hard against it, but they've had segregation for a long time, even after the end of slavery, even after, you know, Martin Luther King, they've still kept being apart as a church.

And that has not been really healthy. So the question we want to ask is, if society's approach isn't healthy, then what approach is? And if you look at the outline, the first thing I want to say is that God intends for His church to be culturally diverse.

So if you take a look at the Great Commission, which I've got on Matthew 28, verse 18 to 20, it says there, doesn't it, we are commanded to go to all nations to make disciples.

And that should inform our strategy for evangelism. We are to go to all nations, and by that, all cultures within our society. And so if God works through that method, then we should expect our church to be culturally diverse, or at least as diverse as our local community.

So if you're a church in Echuca, well, if you don't have a lot of Chinese there, then that's fine. It will probably be less culturally diverse. But if we're in Doncaster, or if you're in Melbourne, then I think it ought to reflect the culture that we have, we find in our neighbourhood, don't we?

[2 : 47] Of course, we do have to make some allowances for language barriers. So, you know, if a particular migrant culture like Iranians can't speak English, then we need to think about how we reach them, speaking their language, if it's possible.

Just like when Paul Barker was the vicar here, he started the Chinese service to reach the Chinese first generation. And I think as we look at Holy Trinity, I think, I'm thankful that actually we do reflect our local community.

I'd say, actually, that if you go to the 9 and 10.30 a.m. congregations, they are the ones that are the most diverse, in the sense that having many cultures, whereas I think here at 5 p.m., we're probably more bi-cultural.

So we're probably 60% Asian, and then the rest, white Australian. But out there in Doncaster, it's not just Chinese and white Australian. There's more cultures than that. So I think we could work at that at 5 p.m.

The other thing that we could probably consider is that our diversity is also demographic. So we've just had Peter come up and talk about this. But the survey, there was 70% young adults, 19 to 30-year-olds.

[3 : 55] And again, you can expect that with an evening service, because all the folks find it difficult to come out in the evening when it gets dark and all that, and we don't have a Sunday school, so we

don't capture the families.

But nevertheless, we need to think about whether that diversity we could do better, that we're actually turning away people that would otherwise come to our service.

But the point I want to make as the first point is that cultural diversity is part of God's plan, and it doesn't mean that it's going to be easy as a result. Because even though we're all Christians, our tendency is to just communicate and relate with others on the basis of our own culture.

And we actually have to sort of think about working to overcome that, and that's not always easy. Just to give you an example, Evelyn has not been well today, but if she was here, I hope she doesn't mind me using this example with Eric.

But when Evelyn first started working in the office, she was a little taken aback at first, because Eric was always very flippant in his comments, and making friendly jibes at Andrew and myself.

[5 : 09] You see, for Evelyn, her culture is that you must be respectful to pastors in church.

Whereas for Eric, and I think for most of you, to tease your pastor shows that you're actually fond of them.

At least I hope that is anyway. But eventually, so this was sort of like, Evelyn was like, why are you doing this to Andrew? And she thought, are you trying to criticize Andrew or something, or Mark, or whatever?

But eventually, we explained it to her, Evelyn worked it out, and so now we even make fun of her, and she's really embracing it. But can you see how, you know, we tend to just relate based on our own culture, isn't it?

That's how we think, it's assumed, and therefore, and so someone who's coming in, even though both Evelyn and Eric are godly people, they're just, you know, that's just not a common basis of communication or understanding, until you express it explicitly.

And this example ended very well, but it's not often like that, is it? Because we can end up misunderstanding each other, like with that baffle game this afternoon, or we end up embarrassing ourselves, or worse, we end up hurting one another unintentionally.

[6 : 26] And all because we're just different cultures. We don't want to hurt people, but because we just communicate differently, that's just what happens.

And when that happens, the temptation becomes that, oh no, this is so uncomfortable, we're going to pull away, we're going to disengage, because we don't want to end up doing more of this hurting, we don't want to make people feel uncomfortable and awkward.

But I think that's the wrong approach, and I want to really encourage us as a church not to do that, but really to just embrace that initial discomfort, so that we get past that, and really begin to interact at a deeper level.

A bit like how Peter was sharing today, about having that sort of more enriching conversation, because we actually are in Christ. And I actually think it's a bit like dating.

You know, when you first go out with someone, it's a bit awkward, you know, you're probably trying to suss each other out, you're not quite sure, a bit reserved and that, until you then, you know, but you persist because you like the person, and then, you know, eventually you get comfortable, and then eventually after being married for 20 years, you're absolutely comfortable, right?

[7 : 42] Maybe even too comfortable. But all those things that were awkward at first, you know, just aren't issues anymore, because you've just pushed past them, right? So I'm not trying to, you know, make sure all your relationships are like marriages, but that's a similar analogy.

Sometimes we need to just push past that initial discomfort, so that we learn to then communicate at a deeper level. And learning to do that, and wanting to do that, does take commitment.

And as it says there in the thing, it requires us to be other-centered, to deny ourselves. So Paul in Colossians 3, verse 12 and 14 says, And if you've got your Bible open there, you will see that those verses come right after the teaching where Paul says that there's no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.

And so I think Paul is saying, put up with the cultural differences in church for the sake of the unity that we have in Christ. So bear with one another's ignorance of your culture.

Forgive others when they unintentionally offend you, because they don't understand your culture.

Be patient. In fact, take the time to explain your culture to others, to help them understand.

[9 : 21] Don't be embarrassed to articulate that when you interact, that there may be cultural differences to negotiate. Oh, just say, Oh, is this how you, you know, why do you do this?

Is this something that, you know, your parents have taught you? Or how have you come to actually say it like that? Rather than to just assume that someone is basically doing the wrong thing by your culture.

So don't be too quick to judge someone else's culture. And if someone tells you that, Oh, this is what we do in our culture, then try and listen and learn rather than being dismissive.

It doesn't mean you have to agree or adopt that culture, but it's, I think it's just part of loving each other to be thoughtful in how we interact, isn't it?

Don't assume that people will interact based on your culture, but go out your way to interact based on theirs. And that way, I think we all grow in maturity, not just as individuals, but I think as a body, as Christ's body, we grow in maturity as well.

[10:32] Now I'm going to look at another passage in 1 Corinthians 12, and verse 18 to 24. I think it's on the slide. Yep. Now I know this next passage that we often look at relates to differences in spiritual gifting.

But I actually think the principles apply to other forms of differences as well. So to race and culture, to demographic and social economic difference as well. So let me read it, and then we'll see how it sort of relates to culture.

So as I read it, think of the different parts as being people of different cultures. All right? So think like that as I'm reading it. But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them.

If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you. And the head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you.

And so what I'm trying to say is that we as a church actually need people from different cultures. And if you look at the handout, just under the second point, you'll see the two things that I'm going to mention.

[11:47] First, we need each other because it enables us to learn from the strengths of other cultures. So someone from an individualistic culture can learn stuff from the collective culture.

How decisions are made jointly, how members look out for each other is not just about ourselves. On the other hand, if you're from the collective culture, then you can learn from the individualistic culture the importance of the individual, not to coerce people into conforming to the majority. And so, just as iron sharpens iron, two differing cultures can helpfully challenge each other and expose the cultural blind spots in each.

So again, take it as an example, communication. So, Australian culture is really direct. I think some of the Baffer Baffer stuff. And you know, with Australians, disagreement is not seen as unhealthy. If you want to say no, just say no. Don't say yes, meaning no. And so we say, Australians speak openly as a way of resolving differences. Now, I think that's a very helpful challenge to Asian culture because Asian culture is all about saving face, right?

[13:00] And you just say no, even when you say yes, even when you mean no. You don't really want to do what they ask you, but you just go, yeah, maybe, and all right, and then you end up not doing it.

So that's really good for us Asians to know, yep, there's value in being direct and honest. But on the other hand, sometimes, it's also good to be tactful. And so, you know, someone who is sort of right in Australian culture may learn a thing or two about not needlessly shaming someone in the name of being honest and direct.

And so both cultures, if there's a sense of humility, can actually learn from each other. And in the long run, everyone grows from it. But I have to say, it probably doesn't happen very easily when the church only has a single dominant culture.

So once you get above 80% or 90% of a single culture or demographic, demographic, then that tends to dominate. And the more that happens, the more you need to work against it in order that you might actually expose some of the blind spots in your culture.

That's why it's actually very good for people to go overseas for cultural mission because they're thrown into a foreign culture, aren't they? And it exposes their blind spots. And at the same time, they see the positives in other cultures.

[14:25] But I think we've got enough of diversity here for us to be able to do that in our church. It's great for you to go overseas, but you can actually do it here as well.

But whether we make the most of it or not, so I think we've got the right conditions to learn, but whether we make the most of it or not depends on the approach we take. And if you turn over to page 15, there's essentially two ways we can react.

Don't worry too much about the first diagram, acknowledging cultural difference, but look rather at the bottom one with the second model, how we approach difference. A lot of times when the two cultures come together and there's a clash, we can start with just an opening sort of disposition. Are we, in the green flag, open and trusting and adaptable as it comes to approaching a cultural difference? or do we approach cultural difference with suspicion and fear or thinking, mine's better, therefore I don't really want to interact with the other?

Because depending on where you start in your attitude, that then translates to how you respond and react. So if you start with the green approach, positive, then it carries through to your response of being willing to observe, listen, inquire, and initiate.

[15:47] If on the other hand you are negative to begin with, then you're likely to criticize, rationalize, and withdraw from that engagement. And then that leads to rapport, on the one hand, good understanding and relationship, or negatively, alienation, isolation, and broken relationships.

So I hope that as a church when we come together we have the green approach, one of openness, one of inquiry and listening and observing and therefore growing in understanding and rapport. But let's come back to 1 Corinthians 12 again because there's another point I want to make there and in verses 22 to 25 Paul says this, On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.

And the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty while our representable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together giving greater honor to the parts that lack it so that there should be no division in the body but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

Now if you think again parts meaning cultural people of different cultures then how does this apply to us as a church? I think in this way namely that in a culturally diverse church we are to give greater honor to the culture that is weaker or less dominant.

[17:14] If you remember the four ways that society does it the culture that dominates is the one that assimilates or forcibly assimilates others doesn't it or annihilates.

But that's not what God is requiring of us as Christians. Instead if you belong to the stronger culture then we are called to give special honor to the weaker culture that is those that are not part of the dominant culture.

we are to listen carefully to them to understand how they may feel excluded and to you know see if there are things we can do to help them integrate or be part of our dominant culture.

And so I think if you look at our congregation at 5 o'clock what is the dominant culture here? If you look at that survey response it's firstly the young adult culture is dominant yeah and then secondly I think it's the Asian culture that's starting to dominate.

Whether you're born here Australian born Chinese or Australian born Asian or whatever or you've arrived more recently that's the culture that's starting to dominate in this congregation.

[18:32] Now it may be that you've just come from overseas and you nearly arrived and you don't think that's the case. It may be that when you interact out in Melbourne in the wider society that you still feel like you're in the minority at school or work or whatever and it may even be that you have been bullied or abused because of your race or culture at school or something.

I don't want to dismiss any of those experiences. I sort of understand how you feel as well but more and more in this church and I think in Australian churches generally there are more and more Asians joining churches even as Australians white Australians are leaving them and so the culture in church is beginning to the culture that dominates in church is beginning to be more and more Asian so I want you to encourage I want to encourage you particularly if you are young adult and Asian not to have this minority mindset anymore especially not at HCD it may be that you're still hurting from the past and you've got experiences that make you think that way it may be that you finally feel that now that the shoe is on the other foot you can sort of take the opportunity to get back get one back but I want to encourage you not to do that but to forgive and be gracious as Christians just as

God is gracious and forgiving in fact if you've known what it feels like to be excluded how painful that is then the last thing you want for someone coming into our church is for them to feel like that

because they're not part of the dominant culture now I do realize that some of the feedback on the survey did say that there were too many ABCs or whatever too many young adults in our congregation I suspect actually it's people who are young adults and Asians trying to empathize with those in the minority making those comments in which case that's really commendable but I come back to my point about race and culture the reality is that if you're Asian we're Asian right there's nothing we can do about it if you are a young adult you're a young adult there's no point trying to act like somebody else one day you will not be a young adult but until such time we are a young adult congregation where there are a lot of Asians and I'm certainly not saying okay there's a quarter on young adults there's a quarter on Asians we need more of the others so any more young adults coming sorry come back later until we've got no

I mean like just attracts like we've got a lot of young adults here that's the kind of people we're going to attract so the problem isn't that who we are the problem is that we mustn't allow our dominant culture to turn other people away because it's unwelcoming does that make sense we are who we are but there's a lot of things that we can do to be welcoming of those people that are not like us and that means applying 1st Corinthians chapter 12 verse 22 and 25 and I think most people when they come and they see how welcoming we are even though we're not like them or they're not like us they actually appreciate that because they know that it's easy to say get to know people that are like you but it takes Christian love to really interact with people that are not like you the true mark of Christian hospitality comes not when we welcome those like us that's easy isn't it but when we welcome those who are not like us so I want to encourage you particularly if you're young adult to just think about that just a word to say us older people and I include myself we're not trying to be best buddies with you as young adults we're never going to keep up with you with board games until 12 midnight we're not trying to hang out with you in that way it's just like me being a parent I don't want to be my best friends with my daughter's schoolmates that's not how it works and that's actually wrong but what we want as older members and I speak for the elders is that we want to be brothers and sisters in Christ with you that is to encourage you even as you encourage us and so that means conversation that means talking that means spending time taking the effort to get to know each other I think we just need to start with that and let's see how that goes it's not that you know they need to you know when you're going out for your films and all that everyone's gonna jump in and we give everyone the freedom to engage as much as they want but we got to try and relate at the level of our true identity that of being in Christ sons and saints all right and let me come to our final point and I think this is a it seems like a postscript but it's an important point and that is whatever our age or race the thing that unites us is

[23 : 46] Christ and that means that while as a church we should be embracing of racial and cultural diversity and many other forms of diversity what the Bible does not advocate is theological diversity okay and I mean that in relation to the core doctrines of the faith now we may argue what's core and what's not core but if you look at Ephesians chapter 4 verse 13 and 16 which is on the slide Paul encourages the body of Christ to reach unity in the faith to be mature in the knowledge of God and he warns against being tossed to and fro in verse 14 by every wind of teaching in other words Paul is saying that theological unity is important okay we've talked a lot about being different and how we embrace each other I mean this in the racial and cultural sense not in the theological sense okay we need to work hard at understanding what God is saying is the truth and not be saying oh yep you can believe this

I can believe that we need to be humble and not say I'm always right and you're wrong okay but apart from that we need to realize that God unites us in the faith all right so doctrines matter and okay don't hear me wrong I'm not asking I'm not saying people have to agree to sign off the Westminster Confession of Faith or Kelvin's Institute that's not what I'm saying but I'm also saying we need to be careful not to just say we can just believe whatever we like doctrine and theology matters because unless we have this unity in Christ theologically which we do in Christ that is the thing that holds us to our diversity together does that make sense because if we have diversity there is actually nothing that unites us but when we're united in the word that allows us to embrace the differences that we have culturally and racially it's this deeper unity in Christ that allows us to then be open to the diversity in culture co