

# Chapter 8

## Community and Diversity

Olive Hemmings

### SABBATH

#### Understanding Diversity (Acts 10:1-33)

Diversity is the essential nature of creation. Biological processes thrive on diversity, but society and its institutions seem to resist it. As individuals we tend to gravitate toward those with whom we identify and with whom we feel comfortable. We also find it difficult to tolerate those who hold ideas that differ from ours. This fear of difference leads to hatred and violence.

The problem is that faith communities most effectively perpetuate this fear in the form of dogmas and policies. This phenomenon does not generally appear explicitly, but most often hides in generally accepted forms; such as projection, stereotyping, relegation, and delegation.

*Projection.* Projection is a means by which we deny the existence of inner conflicts by attributing them to others.<sup>1</sup> We often project our own fears of diversity on God and then make them into religious ideologies. For example, in Acts 10:14, 28 we see that the Jews feared the non-Jews,

*We often project our own fears of diversity on God and then make them into religious ideologies.*

---

<sup>1</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories II*, Penguin Freud Library (London: Penguin Press, 1988), 132.

*Stereotyping is the practice of attributing a particular quality to a group. This often has the negative effect of justifying barriers against them.*

and that became part of their religious dogma of “common and unclean.”

*Stereotyping.* Stereotyping is the practice of attributing a particular quality to a group. This often has the negative effect of justifying barriers against them. For example, Peter had to receive a vision from God before he could enter the house of the Gentile Cornelius, because he believed that Gentiles were unclean (Acts 10:28).

*Relegation.* Relegation is the practice of assigning to a person or thing a lower position or rank. We often do this based on the perceptions held about that person by virtue of race, gender, class, or age. These factors ought not to occupy a position of prominence, but gender relegation remains rampant in faith communities.

*Delegation.* To delegate means to assign responsibility in a community. Delegation is a very good way to organize and divide labor for maximum efficiency. However, when we base delegation on stereotyping and relegation we encourage divisiveness within the community.

**Read Acts 10:27. How does it explain the meaning of Peter’s vision? In what ways do we render some “unclean” in the church community? What dogmas do we use to justify these? What policies do we use to enforce them?**

## **SUNDAY**

**Diversity in Godhead, Diversity in Humanity** (Genesis 1:27; Exodus 3:14; John 4:24)

In Genesis 1:27 we read that God created *Adam* in God’s image. The Hebrew word *Adam* (translated “man”) in this verse does not mean “man” as in the male of the species, neither is it a name. The word for man as in the male of the species is the word *ish*. In Genesis 1:27, *Adam* is a generic Hebrew word meaning humanity, both male and female. Adam in this verse is “them”–“male and female.”

In Exodus 3:14, Moses seeks a name from God. Moses’ question indicates that he perceived of God as “he” (maybe one of the many gods he was acquainted with in that culture). God does not reply with a name, but with the radical declaration–“I AM”. God cannot be named or identified, because God transcends the very creation. The language we use for God is human language. We call it *anthropomorphic*, meaning that we transform the divine into human terms such as “king” and “father” in order to relate more closely to God.

The word we translate as “Spirit” in the New Testament is in the neuter gender. The “Spirit” of God that moved in the creation (and all other uses of the term in the Old Testament) is in the feminine gender. We cannot in a literal sense attribute gender to God. God cannot be absolutely identified in terms of gender (or any other creaturely category). However, when we use only male terms to relate to God, it undermines the idea that the image of God is also in womankind. Male dominance is contrary to the Creation story in Genesis. This distortion of the nature of humanity may lie at the root of the lack of gender diversity in leadership in the faith community throughout history.

*Adam is a generic Hebrew word meaning humanity, both male and female. Adam in this verse is “them”– “male and female.”*

**Read John 4:24. What does it say about God? How can this fact transform our thoughts about God and gender?**

**Read Genesis 1:28. To whom does God give dominion over the earth? What does this say about gender diversity in leadership in the faith community? How can your language about God and humanity reflect diversity?**

## MONDAY

### One God, Many Cultures

(Romans 3:29)

The Apostle Paul had a major concern in his ministry, namely to justify the mission to the Gentiles. Why did he have to justify it? Jews believed that only they had access to salvation because God made the covenant of salvation with them. Others could have access to salvation, but they must first become Jews. This is called proselytizing. The most important part of this process was male circumcision, because this was the means by which Abraham ratified the covenant of salvation. Paul argues against this requirement in his letter to the Galatians, introducing the radical idea that God's righteousness is also for Gentiles as *they are*, not as they become Jews with all the cultural norms that involve being Jewish.

The message that Jesus and his followers preached was the ancient Hebrew prophetic gospel of righteousness (righteousness meaning justice). Paul builds his argument for Gentile inclusion on an unshakable foundation of radical monotheism. God is the God of all, and Christ's own faithfulness<sup>2</sup>

*Paul builds his argument for Gentile inclusion on an unshakable foundation of radical monotheism.*

<sup>2</sup>The phrase in Galatians 3:15 that we translate "faith in Christ" literally translates "faithfulness of Christ".

to God is the only basis for any claim to God's righteousness/justice. Paul calls the cultural literalism of proselytization "works of law" (Galatians 3:10) or "works of flesh", and invites believers to be "in Spirit" (Galatians 5:16; Romans 8:9) or be "in Christ". This erodes the distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:28), or any other fleshly distinctions, because through Christ, not through circumcision, all have access to the righteousness/justice of God.

To be in Christ is to become blind to the fleshly things of this world—our cultural norms and bodily forms that hinder full fellowship in the community of the righteous. A particular lifestyle, worship, race, gender, or nationality does not recommend us to God. It is Christ who writes that recommendation with his own blood.

When we transform our culture into religion, we subscribe to a religion of flesh, rather than one of Spirit, and our cultures become gods. When we provide seats at the table for all regardless of cultural preferences, we begin to walk in the faith of Christ and embrace a common humanity springing from One Source. That is "radical monotheism"—a genuine belief in one God. True monotheism is not a mere dogmatic confession, but a full commitment to the cosmic cry for oneness and peace.

**Is there only one way to be a true Seventh-day Adventist? Explain your answer.**

**How does God regard the believer who is not a Seventh-day Adventist?**

*A particular lifestyle, worship, race, gender, or nationality does not recommend us to God. It is Christ who writes that recommendation with his own blood.*

## TUESDAY

### One Gospel, Many Ways

(1 Corinthians 8:13; 10:29-30)

The text in 1 Corinthians 8:13 is a well-known passage that is often explicated in sermons. The focus of responsibility seems to be always on the one causing the stumble, and never on the one stumbling. But Paul does hold the one who stumbles accountable to the same degree as the offender. Paul believes that while the offender may be insensitive to the weak, the stumbling one may be intolerant of diverse convictions within the body of Christ.

The conversation about food offered to idols is part of a larger conversation in 1 Corinthians about unity in the diverse and opinionated Corinthian community. Paul's call is for unity, not conformity, because too many of our differences have no real bearing upon our salvation. What actually bears upon our salvation is the extent to which we can all abide in love in spite of our differing convictions. This is how the conversation develops:

The church is stronger when it focuses on matters that have real bearing upon our salvation; "Food will not bring us close to God" (1 Corinthians 8:8).<sup>3</sup> Paul agrees with the strong and knowledgeable believers in Corinth that "no idol in the world really exists" and that "there is no God but one" (8:4), but he argues that since it really matters not whether we eat or do not eat meat offered to idols, the strong should refrain from it if it causes the weak to stumble (8:8-9). Paul holds the "weak" as accountable for unity in the body as those with "strong conscience." "For

why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?" (1 Corinthians 10:29-30). This is a challenge to those of "weak conscience" to grow up. It is an exhortation to "not seek your own advantage, but that of another" (10:24).

Paul's summary statement on the matter is found in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, "Whether you eat or drink . . . do all to the glory of God . . ." It is directed to the entire community, not just the "strong." Focus on your relationship with God, rather than stand in judgment of a fellow believer's relationship with God (1 Corinthians 10:30).

Judging others creates chaos in community. Seeking common ground brings about unity in spite of our different convictions.

**To what extent is your use of 1 Corinthians 8:13 an attempt to have your own way in the community of faith?**

## WEDNESDAY

**"Discerning the body of Christ,"**

**Affirming the Poor**

(1 Corinthians 11:29)

Growing up in the church, I discovered that many people missed communion service because they feared they might "drink judgment against themselves" due to some secret sin, or not being sure that they are "worthy" to partake. What Paul addressed was a class issue in Roman society that

*What actually bears upon our salvation is the extent to which we can all abide in love in spite of our differing convictions.*

*Judging others creates chaos in community. Seeking common ground brings about unity in spite of our different convictions.*

<sup>3</sup>This text and all other quotations in this chapter are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

had spilled over into the church.<sup>4</sup> The passage regarding the issue (1 Corinthians 11: 17-34) starts out by telling us what Paul means by partaking in an “unworthy manner.” It says, “I hear that there are divisions among you . . . For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk” (11:18-22).

The behavior of rich members of the Corinthian community transformed it into a pagan banquet where the rich separated themselves from the poor in order to enjoy the best of the feast, leaving the poor with little or nothing (11:22). Thus the meal had become a symbol of the oppression of the poor rather than a celebration of their liberation. It had become an occasion for class division, rather than a celebration of our common humanity in hope of liberation. The passage suggests the rich had a place of honor in the community, whereas the poor had none.

The background of the communion meal in the early church was the Jewish Passover—“a sacred meal and a celebration”<sup>5</sup> of God’s deliverance of the oppressed from the Egyptian bondage. It includes two phases—the celebration feast and the symbolic breaking of bread we call “the Lord’s Supper.” A major feature of the Passover was the intimacy and fellowship meant to bond Israel in solidarity repeating the statement: “This is the bread of the affliction our ancestors ate when they came from Egypt.”<sup>6</sup> In like manner, the Communion Service is to bond the church as one body in Christ repeating Christ’s statement “This is my body . . .”

Those who enter around the Lord’s table to eat

and drink the symbolic body and blood, having little regard for the poor and marginal among them, do so in an unworthy manner and drink “judgment against themselves.” To “discern the body” is to embrace our oneness in Christ in hope of a glorious future.

**We often persist in sinful behavior unconsciously. Becoming conscious is the beginning of reform. Discuss various ways in which we unconsciously enter the Communion Service without “discerning the body.”**

## THURSDAY

### A New Humanity Embraces Diversity (Galatians 3:28)

Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Christ was a great awakening. It gave him a better understanding of the purpose of God through Christ. He returned to the Scriptures with clearer lenses. He came to understand that his Judaic faith and all its mores and norms do not recommend anyone to God (righteousness apart from law). God established the covenant with all humanity, not just the descendants of Abraham. The Christ event gives access to the righteousness/justice of God to all, not just those who practice Judaism.

Paul’s argument in Galatians reveals how the circumcision requirement is divisive. It means that millions who do not practice circumcision and subscribe to other Jewish norms have no hope, even if they acknowledge God. It also means that women have no direct access to God’s righteousness/justice. By abandoning the necessity of circumcision and

*To “discern the body” is to embrace our oneness in Christ in hope of a glorious future.*

<sup>4</sup>Craig Keener, *1 Corinthians, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 477.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

*To be in Christ is to become blind to the fleshly things of this world, particularly our cultural norms and bodily forms that hinder full fellowship of all in the community of the righteous.*

all that goes with it, Paul makes the conclusion that there is no longer Jew or Gentile, . . . slave or free, . . . male and female (Galatians 3:28), or any other fleshly distinctions, because through Christ, not through circumcision, all have access to the righteousness/justice of God.

Paul points his readers to that hope of resurrection that can be realized only as one lives “in Christ.” This “in Christ” experience he describes as a spiritual experience over against a fleshly experience. Thus he uses the terms “in Christ”/“in Lord” and “in spirit” interchangeably to exhort the church to embrace a new humanity. When we focus on flesh, we focus on our historical selves – our race, gender, social class, nationality, even our religion. We tend to view these as the indicators of our status before God and in the community of faith. When we walk by Spirit, the outward flesh has no significance beyond its ability to enable us to live our best life. This is the new humanity in Christ. We stop marking off boundaries against each other based on racial, national, and biological differences.

To be in Christ is to become blind to the fleshly things of this world, particularly our cultural norms and bodily forms that hinder full fellowship of all in the community of the righteous.

**Can you think of any religious practice that may hinder your spiritual development?**

## **FRIDAY**

**Love Outperforms All Differences**  
(1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

Diversity is the very nature of existence. Could this be the Creator’s way of teaching us to love? Too much of the division, war, and violence comes from the rampant intolerance toward difference. The Corinthian church divided over all kinds of issues. 1 Corinthians 13 is a climactic point at which Paul calls the church to consider what really matters. It implies that all the controversy and division over differences emerge from spiritual immaturity in what really endures—love.

Much too often individuals and groups want to embrace and affirm only those who look, believe, and behave as they do. There is a primal fear that sometimes becomes evident even in a Sligo Church potluck—the fear of sitting with someone of another race or even social class. Love teaches us that in spite of our differences, we are all the same. As Leah Daughtry says, “you don’t have to be just like me to be just like me.” We come from one eternal source that cannot be defined by any one earthly group, or opinion, or set of doctrines. These earthly things will all perish with time. We tend to divide over our earthly, partial understanding of things about which we may never have a full understanding. Because we are earth-bound, our understanding is always changing. But that understanding must always be defined by love, so that even though difference may appear threatening, love quells our fears and makes us one.

The church is not a particular culture to protect, nor is it a body of doctrines to embrace or dispute. Rather it is a community of living, breathing believers with one task—to learn and grow in grace and love in all our different ways of being.

*Much too often individuals and groups want to embrace and affirm only those who look, believe, and behave as they do.*

**How is your definition of yourself the same or different from your definition of the church community?**