

# The Diverse Church

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[ 0 : 00 ] In the Bible you can go to the book of Acts chapter 11. We're going to read two sections from Acts. We're going to read 11, 19 to 30, and then we're going to jump over, skip over chapter 12, and go to chapter 13, verses 1 to 3.

We will come back to chapter 12, so don't worry. We will be looking at that, but these two kind of go together. And so I want us to read both this morning. Acts 11, verses 19 to 20, actually 19 to 30. Yes, that is correct. I've got a different one in my notes here, but that's fine. This is Luke telling us the story of the early church. Verse 19. Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

[ 1 : 27 ] He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.

So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. This happened during the reign of Claudius.

The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. And this they did by sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

This is the word of the Lord. Oh, sorry. I'm jumping ahead of myself. Let's jump over to chapter 13 and read that part as well. Chapter 13 and verse 1.

[ 2 : 33 ] Now, in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Menaean, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off just that far.

Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help. Both that I will keep my place in the sermon, and we will actually look at both these passages this morning. Let's pray. Father, your mercy is great to us in giving us your word.

It is your truth, and we want to know it. We want to understand it. We want to love it. We want to have it change us. And so we ask for your spirit to do that very thing this morning.

Help us to see your word clearly in scripture and be changed by it. Let us see Jesus. Let us marvel at what we behold in Christ. We ask this all for Christ's sake and his glory.

[ 3 : 39 ] Amen. All right, so keep, you're going to have to keep kind of both those passages open in your Bibles. We'll jump between them a little bit, although we're going to major more on the chapter 13 part.

Continue in our series in the book of Acts. Last week, we saw the Gentiles becoming Christians for the first time, or the gospel going to the Gentiles at least in the New Testament era for the first time.

So God made it really clear to the apostle Peter and to the rest of the Christians who were in Jerusalem that the gospel needs to not only go to Jews where it had been, but it needs to now go to Gentiles.

Those are other ethnicities who are not Jewish. So through Acts, what you're seeing consistently is you're seeing this outward expansion of the gospel. And it's outward in two senses.

It's outward geographically, but it's also an outward expansion ethnically. And as I said last week, in that story of Cornelius, this Roman centurion who comes to faith, we're getting the principle, okay?

[ 4 : 40 ] And the principle is this. God doesn't show favoritism. The gospel is for all people. So we've got the principle. What I'd said last week was this week, what we're going to see, staying on the same theme is we're going to see the case study.

We've got the principle. Now we're getting the case study. We get introduced to this church in Antioch. And what we see there is this wonderfully diverse church serving the Lord's purposes as an outworking of that earlier principle.

So two things I want you to see this morning. Number one, diversity on display. And then number two, diversity in practice. So diversity on display and diversity in practice.

Here's the first one, diversity on display. I want us to look at this church, what we see when we look at this church in Antioch. Now Antioch was about 500 kilometers as the crow flies northeast of Jerusalem on the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean going up towards Turkey.

The longest section that we read in Acts 11, that's the origin story of the church, how this church began, where it came from. Persecution broke out. We read about this a few chapters back when Stephen was martyred.

[ 5 : 50 ] And so the Christians, what they do is they start spreading out because stuff gets rough in Jerusalem. They spread out from Jerusalem and they preach the gospel and plant churches as they go into all the towns and the cities around Judea and Samaria.

Several church communities spring up, one in Cyprus, one in Phoenicia, and then one in Antioch. Now what's interesting is that Luke doesn't give us a detailed look at any of those other churches, some of which were actually planted sequentially before Antioch was planted.

So it's not like he's just giving us a running commentary of each church as it's planted. But when he gets to Antioch, he stops and he sort of double clicks. And he says, I want you to stay here and look at this church for a moment.

Think about this church for a moment. Now that's really important for us. He's giving us a clue to say, slow down and think about this church. It means he's making a statement that's instructive to us as the readers.

And there's quite a few different things that we learn from this church, particularly about mission, how churches are planted, how people are sent out to plant.

[ 6 : 54 ] We learn about generosity, how these early Christians served other churches by using their material gifts to serve them. But this morning, following on from last week, I want us to see something else that Luke highlights about this church.

And it's that second mention of the church that comes in chapter 13 there. Very intriguing, detailed description of the leadership of the church.

So if you've got a Bible, look at chapter 13, verse 1. It says, Now in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Menaean who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

Nowhere else in Acts do we get a description of the leadership of a local church like we do here in Antioch. Now that should make us pause and say, well, what exactly is Luke trying to tell us by describing this leadership in detail?

Well, let's take a look. Let's take a look and see who these leaders were. Two of them are fairly well known to us by this point now, having read through Acts, and that's Barnabas and Saul.

[ 8 : 06 ] Saul, who later becomes the apostle Paul. Barnabas we met all the way back in chapter 4, and we've met him at several places along the line. He was, from what we know, a wealthy land-owning Jew from the island of Cyprus.

But he was also one of the early leaders in the Jerusalem church. Somehow he'd gotten over to Jerusalem, was one of the early leaders there. And then he moved up to Antioch to help with the formation and the growth of this church.

We read about that in chapter 11. He was really well-liked by all the Christians around him. His nickname was the Son of Encouragement. So he's the glass-half-full kind of guy that you want around you all the time when life is miserable and you're feeling down about yourself. He's that guy who's going to pick you up. On the other end of the list of leaders is Saul, who becomes Paul. Now, we've met Saul in detail. We spent quite a bit of time on him. You remember that Saul was from Tarsus. He's northwest of Antioch, pretty close to Antioch, which might be why Barnabas goes and fetches him and brings him to Antioch because he knows the people in the region.

[ 9 : 11 ] Very learned, very zealous, up-and-coming Jewish religious leader who had a very dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, coming to Christianity. Now, if you think of your average elder board, what in Presbyterian language we call a session of elders, if you think of your average church elder board, Paul's probably the guy who likes the deep, intricate theology, wants to run all the Bible studies, do all the preaching.

Barnabas is the elder who likes visitation, pastoral care. He's the warm, fuzzy elder that you go to with your problems. You can kind of map that onto our elders, whoever you think that is. But those are the first two guys. We know who they are. What about the other three? Now, here's where it gets really interesting, and I think we start to see what Luke's trying to communicate. The first person mentioned after Barnabas is Simeon called Niger. Simeon is a Hebrew name, but he also has a Latin nickname, and his nickname literally means black, Simeon the black. The overwhelming consensus among the commentators is that Simeon was a black African Jew. So I want you to think about this for a second here. When Paul and Barnabas get sent out, as they get sent out in chapter 13, the leaders lay hands on them.

[ 10 : 32 ] They functionally are ordaining them to ministry, to go serve in missionary service. You have a black church leader ordaining the great apostle Paul.

I can bet you that that was probably not preached in white South African churches before 1994. Number of years ago, I remember this quite distinctly.

We were driving out of the city, maybe off to a church service actually. My daughter, I think she was about six years old at the time, she said to me, when someone had come up to the window, she said to me, Daddy, why are all poor people black?

Now she'd been in really, really diverse schooling up until that point, had lots of black and colored friends, and yet she at a very young, very kind of innocent age, intuited something about the social dynamics of the city that we live in.

She noticed that people with darker skins tended on average to be, and this is a generalization, but tended on average to be at the bottom of the social order. They were the ones who were always begging at robots.

[ 11 : 43 ] They were the ones who were always serving at a restaurant. They were the ones who were always putting in your petrol at the petrol station. The white folks, also on average, were the ones driving the cars, were the ones who were handing out money to people at the robots, were the folks who were kind of managing the restaurants or managing the petrol stations.

Now that sort of social situation that my six-year-old could intuit, could clearly see, that situation that still exists today, it got here somehow.

It got here because of the historic sin of racial segregation and supremacy that was in this country, is pretty well documented in the history of this country. It's also certainly been kind of blown up and made worse by political corruption and poor governance and our country's poor economic performance over the last 30 years.

It got here because of a combination of all those sorts of factors coming together, and you can sit and you can debate, depending on your specific political leaning, on which of those factors is dominant and has the biggest influence, but I can tell you this.

I can tell you where the current situation doesn't come from and how it didn't get here. It doesn't come from the New Testament. It doesn't come, at least it doesn't come from an honest reading of the New Testament.

[ 13 : 04 ] Because in the New Testament, we have very early examples. I mean, this is one of the first non-Jewish churches planted. So we have very early examples of people from across the racial spectrum serving in significant positions of authority and leadership within the church.

So there's no built-in racial or ethnic hierarchy in God's church at the beginning. Something to think about.

Now who else is on this list? Next up is Lucius of Cyrene. His name is also Latin. It's possible that he was a Latin-speaking Jew.

He comes from Cyrene, which is a town in North Africa, but modern-day Libya. It's possible, though, that Luke, and there's a bunch of scholarship on this, is using this name, Cyrene, not just to refer to that specific town, but to kind of use it as a casual term for most of North Africa.

And we actually know that the parts of North Africa where people spoke Latin were quite far west, further away from Judea and Samaria.

[14:14] So you have to go pretty far west before you start running into Latin-speaking people in North Africa. That means that Lucius is definitely a foreigner in Antioch.

This is not his hometown. He's not indigenous leadership. So kind of take that into our context. It might be like having a Zimbabwean or a Congolese pastor or elder or deacon in a church down here in Cape Town all the way down on the southern tip of Africa.

And then the third individual is a man by the name Menaion. Now he has a Greek name, but it's a Greek form of a Hebrew name.

So he's probably like a lot of people in the area around Judea and Samaria who sort of straddle the Greek and Hebrew world a little bit. That's not the most interesting thing about him though. The most interesting thing about him was that he was raised in the household of Herod Antipas who is the youngest son of Herod the Great.

So Menaion is basically aristocracy. In fact, the word that describes his relationship there is a little bit hard to translate. It might even mean that he was a foster child in that household.

[15:25] So he's high society. He's a cultural elite who moved in the highest echelons of power. Kind of actually like some of the past ministers of this church.

Past ministers and leaders of this church. So this man up here, the Reverend John Philip, probably the most famous minister in the history of this church. He regularly dined with the governor of the Cape Colony in the early 19th century.

He was good friends with several members of parliament back in England at the time when the British Empire was the biggest and the most powerful empire, largest empire on the planet. So he was pretty high society.

He was friends with William Wilberforce, the great abolitionist. Reverend James Cameron is over there in the corner. He's one of the early registrars of UCT. Andrew Cunningham, I think, is on the right over there.

He was deputy mayor of Cape Town in the 1920s. In fact, you guys are a little bit short-changed by getting me as your pastor because I know nobody famous. I was trying to think about this actually as I was preparing this sermon.

[16:30] I was thinking about who do I know that is famous and powerful? And then I remembered something. I remembered one thing and maybe some of you don't know this about me but that is I have really deep struggle hero credentials, anti-apartheid struggle hero credentials and that is that my father was on Robben Island.

Now he was the lighthouse keeper's son on Robben Island but I mean if you're on Robben Island, you're on Robben Island, right? It's like Menaean Menaean on the other hand, this leader in the church in Antioch, he was proper high society.

He really knew people in powerful places and was probably powerful himself. Now step back a second here. Look at this picture that Luke is painting for us.

What an unbelievable collection of diversity. in the church's leadership. And remember just a few years before this, the church was exclusively Jewish and geographically contained within the city of Jerusalem.

See I think Luke is telling us this is what the gospel does. This is what the advancement of the gospel does. It produces churches, it produces communities that break down the prejudices and the divisions and the stereotypes and the categories that are assigned to us by history and by geography and by culture.

[17:58] And so perhaps then the somewhat uncomfortable reality we have to deal with today is that when that's not taking place in churches and in ministries, then we have to wonder if the biblical gospel is actually advancing in those places.

decisions. When churches racially segregate formally or informally we have to wonder if those decisions are driven by the advancement of the gospel or by cultural prejudices. When churches entrench I think divisions between old and young we have to wonder if they're being driven by the advancement of the gospel or they're being driven by pragmatism. When churches treat poor as second class citizens and give extra attention to the powerful and the privileged well then we have to wonder if they're being driven by the gospel or by materialism. Jesus didn't come to save a homogeneous group of people. He just didn't. He gave his life so that the nations could come streaming into the kingdom of God. That's why at the very end of your Bible when you get to see what has happened once the nations have streamed in when you get to see a picture of the redeemed of the saved singing to God it's every tribe and nation and tongue and language that's gathered there worshipping him.

You know that from 1813 when this church was founded for the first 26 years of the life of this church this congregation whites and colored actually worshipped together in this congregation the early 19th century.

[19:33] They were here together on Sundays not in this building the building was the bottom of the city at that point and yet for all the very good things that John Philip over here did and he did incredible good he was one of the few missionaries who got out of that period with a really good reputation in terms of the good that he did in 1813 he decided to segregate the worship and have the coloreds worship in a separate church in Barrack Street it's still there to this day the congregational church in Barrack Street.

Now having read his biography and several biographies actually about him I don't think he was primarily driven by racism doesn't fit with everything else that he was doing I think he was driven by pragmatism actually that drove him I can reach more colors this way if I start a separate church over there by district 6 and I'm not saying there aren't occasional times to implement a bit of pragmatic wisdom for example language is a real barrier and sometimes it makes sense to have a French speaking church an English speaking church an Afrikaans speaking church a Klosser speaking church but that decision that he made there at that point in many ways greatly undermined the project he'd given his entire life to which was to elevate the status of indigenous communities in the Cape he was a vehement abolitionist and so instead of bearing gospel witness against the increasing segregation that was already happening in so many other institutions in Capeton at the time the Union Chapel got sucked deeper and deeper into that historical sin and so I think we need to be constantly praying constantly praying that God would keep us from those sins that we would see here great diversity across race age gender socio-economic spectrum not as a result of window dressing not as a result of social engineering but as a result of genuine gospel advancement so when we look at Antioch what we see is diversity on display now what does that look like in practice now here's the second point diversity in practice if you combine Acts 11 verses 19 to 30 and Acts 13 1 to 3 what you get to see is you see a church that's heavily heavily engaged in really the basics of Christian ministry yeah so there's evangelism happening in the church in chapter 11 verse 21 large numbers of people coming to faith as a church they even send out missionaries by sending out Saul and Barnabas laying hands on them and commissioning them to go spread the gospel in chapter 13 there's worship regular worship and discipleship Barnabas gets Saul and the two of them spend a year meeting in worship and teaching the people in this church so they're going through normal ordinary Sunday worship there in fact when they have that visitation from the spirit to commission Saul and Barnabas it's in the context of a worship gathering and then there's radical generosity as well in the church when this prophetic word comes about a famine the church rallies together they send money to the believers in Jerusalem to prepare for the famine so it looks like there's vibrant diaconal work happening in this church like we've seen earlier on in the book of Acts all the basics of Christian ministry are firing in this church but by combining

Acts 11 with Acts 13 we see that this is all done within the context of a diverse group of people doing it and so we need to think about that what would that look like for us what would diversity on display in the ordinary life of this church and church ministry in general be and when we think about diversity I think we can extrapolate it beyond ethnic diversity and racial diversity here to age to gender to socioeconomic status a bunch of different areas and let's think let's think about the heart of what it is that we do together as we gather which is worship Lord's Day worship the centerpiece of church life together they're coming together on a Sunday to worship some church denominations

have what we might call a book of church order our denomination is a book of church order that regulates worship what you should do in worship some churches like the Anglican Church have a prayer book that does a similar thing regulates what you should do when you gather together for worship now the reason we do this is because if you read your Bibles

Old Testament and New Testament you're going to see lots of places that say do this when you worship do that when you worship that regulate what it means to worship and that you can't just worship God in any old way a key part of Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine is that we don't just worship God in any old way but we look to his word for direction on how we ought to worship him that's encapsulated in the Ten Commandments the very second commandment is about regulating worship our confession of faith the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 2 sorry chapter 21 first paragraph says this the acceptable way of worshipping the true God has been instituted by himself and so limited by his own revealed will that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations or devisings of men or the suggestions of Satan or under any visible representation or any other way not commanded in Holy Scripture that is to say we worship God according to what the Bible tells us to do well here in Scripture we're seeing worship and diversity being brought together and this is not a new thing it's not a novel thing that just sort of pops up and appears when the church in Acts comes along if you go all the way back to your Old Testament and you go back to all the details about worship that you find in the Old Testament law go back to the book of Exodus you will find even there provisions for the inclusion of foreigners and outsiders in worship during Passover and other festivals you see friends diversity should actually be a consideration in our worship not just an afterthought in how we gather to worship that is

[ 25 : 48 ] I don't think it's sufficient for us to just say look guys the gospel is for all people without in some way tangibly demonstrating that truth in the way that we worship together and this is especially true for us in such a diverse yet divided place like the city of Cape Town see I think we should regularly be asking ourselves this question what does our worship communicate out to those who would come in from this diverse divided city do we have beautiful diversity on display here and at work in our worship so for example that's why we are committed to intergenerational worship in this church for diversity of age in this church we keep our kids in only the smallest kids go out for a segment of the service for Sunday school everybody else stays in the service throughout and we when they get to 10 we're like you're out buddy go to church now suck it up go listen to Stephen's sermons when we set out to plant what was back then still called

Hope City 13 years ago we very much targeted what was the largest statistically the largest unreached and unchurched demographic of the city bowl and that was young professionals from what we could tell from the existing churches that were here in the city center they were not doing a great job at reaching 20 year olds 30 year olds professionals living here in the city bowl in these apartments around us going to all these restaurants and these coffee shops around us and so that's who we went after we were like okay those people need to go to church let's go after them and in some ways it was a very natural group for us to try and reach out to Robin and I my wife and I we were in our early 30s when we started the church and our core group they were all young professionals between the age of 25 and 35 that was it that was the demographic of the church like if you were in your late 30s you ran the seniors ministry that's what it was and for a long time that was the overwhelming demographic of our church but over time it became a problem because where are the mentors in the faith where are those who have walked a road with Jesus for 20 30 40 years and can share their wisdom you got young professionals coming to faith and they were coming to faith in the church in those early days and they're coming to

Christ at this really complex time in their life where they're wrestling with how to think about their career how to think about getting married and having a family how to think about relationships having children and there's no one around who's gone through all of that before and done it holding on to their Christian convictions you can see why it's a problem picture this think about this in your mind I want you to picture this picture the 10 year old standing in worship next to the 70 year old and the 10 year old looks up at the 70 year old as she sings out her praises to God like she's done for the last 50 years God's diverse plan of salvation is beautiful it's a beautiful thing our worship should display that beauty and then I think there are so many other opportunities for us to show growth and development in diversity in our worship racial diversity is probably one of the big ones in our city 30 years after the ending of apartheid and churches are still often some of the most segregated spaces on a Sunday morning now I am a realist I understand that there are genuine

barriers and struggles that create this current situation

I am not at all at all and hear me clearly I'm not at all in favor of kind of social engineering or window dressing worship to make it more diverse let's just find all the people of color and get them up on the stage all the time and people will think that we're a diverse church I think that's a terrible terrible idea so for example I don't think the guy who goes and plants a church a cluster speaking church in the rural eastern cape needs to go and find a bunch of white people and invite them to church to make it more diverse I just think that's silly but I do think we need to look at where God has placed us and he's placed us here in this diverse city center of Cape Town and so we need to ask this question does our congregation amplify and perpetuate the sinful segregation of the city's past or does it point forward to a beautiful diverse future of the heavenly throne room that that future that you actually catch a little glimpse of in the church in Antioch you want to know what the racial breakdown for the areas are around our church and of how many of you know the actual stats and the details about who lives here our congregation mainly draws people from four different wards that's ward 54 which is seapoint ward 57 which is Woodstock and Observatory and Mowbray ward 77 which is Gardens and Aranjzucht and ward 115 which is the foreshore and Greenpoint here's a racial snapshot of those four wards combined 27% black African 19% cape colored 46% white 3% Asian or Indian and 5% other or unspecified see they told us that aliens were among us well now we know there's 5% of them now I don't give you those figures to say that that's exactly the racial breakdown that we have to have a church like we're going to put a bouncer at the door and once we get what is it 27% of black people and you're like sorry you can't come in here if you're black that's not what I mean I put that data out there for you to be able to go this is who lives here and this is what we should be aiming for this is what we should be praying for this is what we should be heading towards if we want to go against the centuries of segregation that sin has brought to the city

[ 32 : 14 ] God has given us this beautiful diverse template for worship in his word but through centuries of human sinfulness that beauty has been covered over it's been blotted out through division segregation and hatred classism elitism and so we should be constantly on our knees asking God to break down those barriers of hostility as we meet between these four walls here on a Sunday and in our general church life maybe diversity and particularly diversity within worship makes you a little bit uncomfortable and I understand that I really do we all to one level or another have been deeply socialized into our groups and our tribes and our identities and it's hard to break out of that it's hard to overcome what sometimes feels like it's built in to who you are it's hard to be intentional to reach across the divide engage in genuine relationship with people who are very different from you it's hard to rid yourself completely of a sense of subtle subtle sense of racial or ethnic superiority or inferiority diversity can be uncomfortable but when that sense of discomfort starts to come and rise up in your heart remind yourself of something very very important remind yourself that in the new creation the end of human history you are going to be surrounded by diversity it's going to be everywhere all around you people from every nation tribe and language diversity absolutely everywhere around you and you know what you're going to feel in that moment you're going to feel pure undefiled joy like you've never experienced before you will never feel more unbridled delight and ease and comfort and a sense of truly being at home then when you are standing before the throne of God worshipping with the multitudes of people who are not like you and so my big question for us is this why wait for heaven for that why can't we start to tap into that joy now why can't we like the church in Antioch start to experience something of that now why wait for heaven if you're against diversity now it's not necessarily because you're uncomfortable with people who are different from you it might be because you're uncomfortable with God and his plans for humanity divided worship is an indictment on the sincerity of our worship of God in fact more than that it might even be a betrayal of the gospel itself you remember last week the key figure in establishing this principle of the gospel going to all people was the apostle

Peter he's the one who got the visions from God he's the one who declared clearly God doesn't show any favoritism this gospel is for all people he was the center figure in the story last week and yet if you read your bibles and you keep reading your bibles you'll know something terrible about him tragic about him maybe later in Galatians 2 the apostle Paul recounts an occasion where he forcefully had to challenge Peter on the issue of ethnic division Peter used to sit in fellowship with Jewish and Gentile believers but when a group came to town who wanted to emphasize their Jewishness over their new Christian identity in the gospel Peter slowly stopped sitting at the tables

where the Gentiles were and he started sitting more and more at the tables where the Jewish Christians were and he even led others astray other people followed his example because he was a leader now when Paul saw this he was outraged outraged he confronted

Peter to his face he says and here's how he described Peter's behavior this is in Galatians chapter 2 verse 14 he called it I'm quoting not acting in line with the truth of the gospel he says Peter when you segregate yourself from the Gentiles you are out of step with the gospel itself now why would he say that why is it out of step with the gospel think about this how did you get to be included in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ how did you become a Christian you didn't get in because of your ethnicity you didn't get in because of your skin color you didn't get in because you're a good person a moral person like Jesus in fact you are nothing like Jesus Jesus is perfect you're broken and incomplete Jesus is sinless you're a sinner Jesus obeys his father perfectly you constantly rebel against your heavenly father in some ways you could not be more different than

Jesus and yet although he is completely different from you he dies for you friends that's the gospel that is the gospel the gospel is the holy one who dies for the sinner the infinite one who dies for the finite one Christ dies for people who are holy other and different from him in so many different respects you are only saved because Jesus dies for you the outsider the foreigner and so now Paul can then say in Galatians chapter 3 in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile neither slave nor free nor is there male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus the gospel the gospel is Christ who is so different from you dying to save you we cannot claim to believe that gospel while at the same time alienating others who are different from us in our worship we just can't that's why

Paul is so harsh with Peter I guess my deepest prayer is that our worship here will never be a betrayal of the gospel my prayer is that God would forgive us for the times that we do alienate people who are different from us my prayer is that God would give us a strength and a conviction to go beyond our comfort zones and joyfully integrate those who are different from us into the family and the worship of God can we start living for heaven now it won't always be easy given our history given our own sinfulness it won't always be easy but it will be beautiful it will be beautiful when when black sits with white when foreigner sits with local when old sits with young when rich sits with poor but they all have the same thing coming out of their mouths what they sing in revelation 7 salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our

[ 39 : 53 ] God forever and ever amen let's start living for heaven now let's pray merciful God we need to call upon you for strength in this endeavor if we are to display something of the heavenly throne room in our worship and our life together as a church and we will need your strength because our own sinful hearts lead us to divide our history our upbringing can sometimes make that worse and so we need strength that comes from your spirit to pull together to come together to break down division and hostility won't you help us Lord help us in that I thank you for how far you've already taken this church Lord I thank you for the way you've diversified this church over the last 13 years and it is an incredible blessing

Lord won't you just continue it Lord build us up strengthen us in this we want people to be able to come out of a world that is very divided and segregated where people are prejudiced against each other we want them to be able to come here to worship and to taste something of Revelation 7 have that mercy upon us we pray we ask this for Christ's sake in his glory amen