

Voices: Unity through diversity: Its impact on theological education

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Diversity and many of its associated issues are being criticized unfairly these days. There seems to be confusion about its value and purpose.

Underlying agendas and political viewpoints have charged diversity with multiple touchpoints, and now the word seems explosive. This is unfortunate, because God created a diverse world, full of color and differences that make life varied and beautiful.

So, why all the disagreement and fuss over diversity?

I think one reason is a natural tendency for humankind to fear the unknown and what is different. Racial discrimination, xenophobia and other negative issues relating to people of color mostly stem from fear.

Many cannot admit to this truth readily, but the reality remains: We fear what we do not know or what is different from ourselves.

Cultural diversity leaves many with an unknown understanding of cultural customs, norms, values and practices. Misjudgments are made about people from diverse backgrounds, and then stereotypes are formed and upheld. Within these shadows of fear about diversity, hatred and bigotry grow.

Misinterpretations about diversity and the resulting negative thoughts that sometimes follow can be expected from the unchurched. However, some of these assumptions also occur within the church and are incompatible with

God's perspective on diversity, which is a unity across diversity.

Diversity from God's perspective

Approximately 169 languages are spoken in Texas. We are a diverse state. As we consider our ethnic, social and economic backgrounds, diversity looms large in Texas, which, in my opinion, is an incredible landscape.

Although our population is diverse, we are unified in this truth: We all are created in the image of God.

Genesis 1 describes Elohim's desire to create unity through diversity, and one singular truth that unites us all, despite our different cultural customs, languages and food is the *imago Dei*. We all are created with an ability to know God and to be known by him. What an amazing perspective!

Truly to witness and appreciate God's perspective on diversity, one must view it from Genesis and Revelation.

As the biblical narrative shifts to Revelation, John records a vision while exiled on the island of Patmos. In Revelation 7, he describes a vivid picture of believers in Jesus who come from "every nation, tribe, people and language." Still, they all unite for the same purpose—to worship Jesus.

How will a diverse group of disciples unite in heaven without ministers and churches competent and confident in their ability to encounter a multicultural world and win many for Christ?

It will take a unique minister skilled with an exceptional understanding to engage a diverse world for Christ and allow them to know they have a place of belonging in the kingdom of God.

Diversity and theological education

And yet, some ministers are not as prepared as they should be to minister to a diverse, cross-cultural community. Some blame could lie with the minister, yet others could lie in the seminary or university that prepared them for ministry.

Therefore, as Christian educators, we must take to heart the challenge of preparing our men and women pursuing ministry to become prepared for cultural diversity.

Christian educators must remove, as best they can, the fear of the unknown about cultural diversity within ministry and encourage these students to engage in experiences within cultural diversity, so this type of ministry is something they no longer might fear, but welcome and even grow in competency.

Ignorance about diversity no longer will be bliss for these ministers or churches. A modern minister must be prepared competently to encounter a changing demographic. These pastors also will have to guide their churches to view diversity within the biblical perspective set forth through Scripture. In this endeavor, the church will be prepared truly to love their neighbors.

The ministers must be ready to handle the word of God and make it culturally adaptable to a diverse population. These types of ministry skills very much are in demand. Those who graduate from seminaries focusing on the beauty of diversity biblically will instill that value and prepare their graduates to be effective in our changing, diverse landscape.

How will we get there?

To produce culturally competent ministers ready for a diverse ministry field, seminaries must do a better job of having a diverse faculty. Seminaries are enriched when their faculty includes people of color, men and women devoted to preparing the next generations of ministers.

My experience has been seminaries too often are less diverse in their faculty, limiting their students from appreciating professors from different backgrounds who can bring a unique perspective to the classroom.

I witnessed this power of diversity during my Ph.D. studies in Southern California. Through this personal educational experience, my commitment to diversity has become an individual value.

When the seminary I currently serve approached me about joining them, I was excited about joining an institution that shared my values about diversity within its walls. We are reaping the benefits of that dedicated focus.

Second, we must value the voices of seminary students of color. Many come from a unique cultural perspective that enhances a seminary classroom and better prepares future ministers by hearing and appreciating perspectives outside their cultural norms.

Seminarians need to stretch their minds and have their perspectives challenged from a biblical perspective. The seminary class I taught this semester was vastly diverse. In my class, there were students from Uganda and Kenya, and a Latina, to name a few.

Our class discussions were incredible and enriching. We all walked away from that learning experience better prepared as ministers, and our appreciation for another's perspective was a learning outcome that will go

beyond the classroom.

In this, we further God's desire for diversity by preparing ministers to engage a diverse world competently for the kingdom of God as they lead churches who welcome and allow all to belong and thrive.

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