

A Single Point of Difference

EPHESIANS 4:1-7, GALATIANS 3:28, JOHN 17:21

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I was watching President Bill Clinton this January give his State of the Union address. Somewhere among his requests for the support of programs that he felt all Americans should rally around, he made what I thought was an interesting remark. He said that a most learned and noted genetic scientist had explained to his wife that human beings, no matter where they live on this planet, “are genetically, ninety-nine point nine percent the same.” Modern science affirms what ancient faith has always taught: The most important fact of life is our common humanity. Therefore, we must do more than tolerate diversity – we must honor it and celebrate it.” To a hushed audience, President Clinton continued – “Some of you here might have a problem with that.”

Some of us do. We have a problem. We have a problem because we dwell on the single point of difference and not on the ninety-nine points of similarity. We have a problem because we look negatively on the point of difference. We have a problem because we try to justify the point of difference as a liability, a curse, or something to be ashamed of or not to be around. When in fact we should be witnesses that the point of difference is a blessing and a gift from God. A point of difference is given to each person. Why? Do we not know that the point of difference another has, is our treasure too – a treasure to be lifted up to give glory to God?

Since we are so much alike, what is the meaning of the point of difference? Let me propose that it is our identity. Isn't it great that we don't have to see people who are exact copies of ourselves every where we go? What we see are all manner of race, shape, size, and cultures! All people made in the image of God – special in God's sight!

Jesus prayed that we all be one, as he and the Father are one. Jesus' desire is not only that all would be saved, but also that we be in unity with each other and God. In unity, we must let people be who they are. Let people retain their gift of culture. Let people use and share their unique gifts that God has given to the church through them.

Too often a local church cries out for people who are different to come and join our communion! But they only really accept them if they change to be like everyone else in the congregation – check their culture at the door. We must not be so insensitive!

An Alaskan Native was wooed into a particular mainline church that was encouraging Eskimos to join. The following week at the church potluck, not one person touched or sampled the traditional dish this new member worked so diligently to bring and share with those who were different.

Paul and all the other “big boys” and saintly sisters in the New Testament, did not strip people of their culture or ridicule their gifts. They preached Jesus, sinless, crucified, and resurrected. They expounded on the unity we should have with each other so that united we can lift each other and go forth to spread the good news that Jesus saves, and he saves to the utmost. That point of difference is not something to divide us but to be a catalyst and adhesive to keep us marveling at God's work and love! Marveling at the work of God in the land and giving testimony and praise!

Diversity in God's church must not cause division. We can experience unity without uniformity. We must practice dialogue free of dictation. If together we walk in the light in unity, it will be oh so victorious!

It was the summer of 1994 and I was in Marlborough, Massachusetts for my first conference of the International Council of Community Churches. Our small Alaskan church in Wasilla had just affiliated with the International Council of Community Churches. At the first meeting I attended in a grand auditorium of the hotel, I looked out at the hundreds of people present. Gazing at such a sea of people, you would expect to see all the Blacks sitting together over here and all the Whites sitting together over there. And in addition you would also expect that within those racial groups, there would be further division, a segregation of male and female.

What I saw was a mixed multitude. A sea of race and sex so scattered, it was as if someone had taken a giant spoon and stirred this mixture of flesh so that they indeed looked totally united! Also to my surprise, the mixture also included persuasions of Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, you name it. They were together freely and joyfully worshipping and praising Jesus the Christ!

Is this what Jesus meant about Unity? You bet! Are we perfect in our endeavors? No. But we will keep striving! Why? Because doing the will of God allows us to live victorious here on earth, not in confusion, not in mistrust, not in ignorance, but in love!

Reverend Martha Blanchett, the first Eskimo ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church said: "There is no Baptist heaven, no Moravian heaven, no Methodist heaven, no denominational heaven, but just heaven. A heaven for any and all who accept God's gift of eternal life." Let us always cheerfully, prayerfully, praisefully unite in Christ -- interculturally, interracially and ecumenically, in spirit and in truth!