

Foreword by PHYLICIA MASONHEIMER

PRICELIS  
PERREAUX-  
DOMINGUEZ

# False Peace

**How to  
Reject the Lie of  
Sameness, Embrace  
Difference, and  
Embody True Unity**

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Difference, and Embody True Unity

**PRICELIS PERREAUX-  
DOMINGUEZ**

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This book is dedicated to the church I'm privileged to be part of as pastor and congregant, Renovation City Church. You are all an answered prayer. A beautiful community in the Bronx that reflects Jesus through unity, generosity, prayer, and justice like I've never seen before. Ya'll have healed so much in me, and I thank God for gifting me with this church that exemplifies unity in a way that is going to change the world.

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# Foreword

One of the first times that Pricelis came to my hometown of Petoskey, Michigan, was to speak at my theology conference Verity. She flew from the bustling diversity of New York City to a tiny town of ten thousand residents in a county that is 92 percent White. Her message was the message you're about to read in this book: a plea for unity around the core truths of the gospel. She appealed to the women listening to pray for their enemies, dignify every human, and live in God's idea of justice. That was almost five years ago.

In my work leading Every Woman a Theologian (a ministry and bookstore), I get the privilege of working with dozens of denominations within Christianity. I also have the difficult job of reading, sifting, and communicating multiple perspectives on theological issues. I often receive emails from believers asking how we can *possibly* think Mennonites, Anglicans, Baptists, Nazarenes, Presbyterians—you name the church—are Christians, only to find an opposite email, from someone of a different persuasion, also in the inbox. But the word “denomination” literally means “out of the name.” Or rather “out of the Name”: Jesus Christ. Denominations, when centered on the person of Jesus Christ, are a reflection of diversity—not evidence of division. Unfortunately, this truth is not often realized in today's American church.

Division is everywhere. We are expected to divide from one another, expected to choose a party line in almost every area of life. But our division is not the kind Jesus mentioned when he said, “Do you think that I came here to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on, five in one household will be divided: three against two, and two against three” (Luke 12:51–52). Jesus does divide. His gospel divides us from our old selves (and selfish desires). Following him will cause some people to divide from us because they are unwilling to follow him the way we've chosen to. But the divisive culture of today's church goes far beyond

the division of Jesus. We've added rule on rule on rule, a long list of expectations people must meet in order to be loved and dignified by us. We separate into camps and categories, deciding beforehand who is worthy of our time. This is not the division Jesus was talking about. Today's division is the product of pride, power, and idolatry of people; there is nothing of the gospel about it. That's why this book is so timely.

Pricelis and I come from much different worlds. She is a Black Latina; I am of Polish-Swedish descent. She grew up and lives in New York City; I grew up in the small Michigan town where I now minister. We hold political similarities and differences. She is a pastor at her church; I am in a church tradition that does not ordain women. Both of us have been told our friendship is a liability to our ministries. The systems that want to own us pressure us to a false peace: dividing over these differences, sliding into silence and distance. Instead I've had the privilege of learning from Pricelis how to better serve the women God has entrusted to me. And she has used her gifts to serve those same women. We don't always agree with each other on secondary issues, but we love each other—and we're unified by our love for Christ and his church.

Having known Pricelis for six years and ministered alongside her for five, I can tell you this: She lives what she teaches. She prays for her enemies. She prays for those who hate her, who call her names, and who misrepresent her work and ministry. She labors for those who misunderstand her. She thinks of others before herself. She holds to the truths of Scripture and historic Christian ethics, but she will always listen to those who disagree. She fights for the healing of the hurt and abused. She will say what she thinks, but what she thinks is not her ultimate standard—Christ is. I've watched her work toward real peace in her real life. These are not just words to her.

As you read, I hope you will sit with any discomfort you feel, any conflict of ideas, and grasp the core message: Unity is possible in the church when we choose “to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). Our loyalties to denominations, to our comfortable groups, our hometowns, our backgrounds, and our political leanings must take a back seat to our loyalty to Christ. And if we are loyal to Christ, we are loyal to his people. Christians are called to “maintain constant love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet.

4:8). This directive is specifically for Christians, to Christians—and then to the rest of the world.

Love can cover the sins of pride, ego, and tribalism—while also standing on the truth. Jesus did it, and I’ve seen it done by the author of this book. I hope these pages inspire you to let Christ and his Spirit work in you a grace toward others you could never achieve on your own.

Phylicia Masonheimer

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# An Open Letter and Disclaimer

Dear reader/body of Christ,

Thanks for picking up this book and choosing to navigate such a heavy topic with me and others. The truth is, this book might be hard to read through and process, and so I want to invite you to be open to disagreeing with me. That's literally the point of all this. We can disagree and still live in harmony with one another. I address people on all sides, of different theologies, different cultural backgrounds, and different approaches to ministry in this book. My target is no one group, and I think it's important to know that from the beginning. My target is actually the powers and principalities that introduced uniformity and division to us, and my heart is for us to rebuke those powers and principalities through real collective peace. I hope that you can be open to being uncomfortable, disagreeing with me, and seeing things differently, and that you will keep reading past that. Because "how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1). The world needs good and pleasant people and places to rebuke all the harm that the powers and principalities have done through people. Let's do this, together—I know we can with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Your sister in Christ, Pricelis Dominguez

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# A Liturgical Lament

I wrote this book because I want us to heal. I don't think we actually want to be divided and be witnessing so much disunity in the church. I think if we're honest, we are disappointed and discouraged—but also life itself is a lot, so we sometimes don't even have time to process those feelings and thoughts. So I wanted to make room at the very beginning of this book for us to process a bit through the spiritual practice and gift that is lamenting.

Lament has changed my life for the better. I hold a lot in my body, heart, and mind as an empath and as someone who has a heart to see wrong things made right. Throughout my life I've been told to control my feelings, which really meant to not express them, but that's not what God says. Although he invites us to reflect on our emotions responsibly and with wisdom, he never invites us to suppress or ignore them. In Matthew 11:28–30, Jesus says, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened.” He's acknowledging how we feel, not calling us to suppress it. Throughout Scripture, we see God address emotions by inviting his people to lament because (1) it is good for them to be honest with themselves about how they feel, and (2) it is good for them to be honest with God about how they feel. This is why lament is a gift. In a time that feels discouraging, divisive, destructive, and void of dignity, we can engage in a practice and process that will draw us closer to the One who cares about all of it and about us.

For the opening of this book, I want to invite us to walk through a liturgy that includes forms of lament. A liturgy is a set of words that incorporate actions and prayers for a collective group to repeat, and the format of this lament liturgy will be practiced as a breath prayer. Lament is an expression of deep sorrow—one that we can bring to God. Practicing lament gives us a space to be honest with our sadness, disappointment, discouragement, anger, devastation, hopelessness, and despair; and it gives us permission to lay it all at the feet of the One who responds, sees, loves, and extends mercy. Lament is healthy and needed for our souls. We don't

need to pretend we are okay with how things are; we can indeed lament the realities we live in, especially if we are to move in the direction of hope.

In the Psalms, we see that God invites our questions, rage, lament, and weariness without fear, judgment, or condemnation. Psalms 13, 22, 42, and 74 provide good examples of these emotions. In his presence, we are safe to be completely honest, and it is in that openness that breakthroughs can happen, that restoration and beauty can be found.

False peace refers to a deceptive sense of peace—a feeling or appearance of safety, oneness, or harmony that hides underlying problems, sin, heresy, or injustice. It's a peace not rooted in truth, righteousness, or genuine reconciliation with God and others, and it leads to deeper roots of uniformity, sameness, division, and dehumanization. False peace keeps us complacent and passive around the things that matter most (the gospel) while we argue about the things that still matter but not in the light of eternity (secondary and tertiary issues). This is why a liturgical lament is needed.

Before I give you information, teach you, encourage you, or guide you with the words in this book, I want to invite us to collectively lament the false peace that has been normalized in our culture. Pretending will get us nowhere, but truth will take us where we are meant to go and be. You will see a few prayers to read as you inhale and exhale, and then you'll see the word “selah,” which means to stop or pause and listen. Let's lament together the dehumanization, division, and dysfunction we are seeing and experiencing. Let's begin by taking a deep breath in.

Inhale: Lord, we grieve where we are.

Exhale: Forgive us for getting here in the first place.

Inhale: Jesus, we need you to intercede.

Exhale: Restore our hope in your power.

Inhale: God, give us a right vision of unity.

Exhale: Help us to make it a priority in our lives and churches.

## **Selah**

Take a few minutes here to sit in meditation of the words you just read and repeat them if needed. Continue with this next section when you are ready.

Inhale: Lord, we confess we have worshiped idols instead of you.  
Exhale: You alone are King of kings and Lord of lords.

Inhale: God, we have made gods out of our theologies and comfort.  
Exhale: Teach us to examine them and practice discomfort.

Inhale: Holy Spirit, we have lived in the power of our flesh.  
Exhale: Help us to live by the power of your Spirit.

## **Selah**

Take a few minutes here to sit in meditation of the words you just read and repeat them if needed. Continue with this next section when you are ready.

Inhale: Alpha, you are present in the midst of all that is happening.  
Exhale: Omega, thank you for holding it all together.

Inhale: Abba, open our eyes, our hearts, our minds to what must change.  
Exhale: Empower us to act in justice and to follow through.

Inhale: Jesus, you are the one who embodied true unity.  
Exhale: Help us to be like you.

## **Selah**

Take a few minutes here to sit in meditation of the words you just read and repeat them if needed. Continue with this next section when you are ready.

Inhale: Jehovah Jireh, we are discouraged and disappointed.  
Exhale: Provide us with real peace and healing.

Inhale: God, give us hope that things can change.  
Exhale: Help us realize that change begins with us.

Inhale: Jesus, help us return to your peace.  
Exhale: Keep us in your perfect peace as we search for unity together  
and collectively repent.

In Jesus's name, amen.

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## SECTION ONE

# Rejecting the Anti-Gospel

The gospel is a gift. It's the mercy-filled good news of the liberation Jesus provides and embodies. It's meant not just for some but for all, not just for an individual ticket to heaven but for the flourishing and redemption of all here and now. It offers belonging to the outsider, freedom for the captive, and the possibility for unity. The division and dehumanization within the body of Christ that we see today and that has been repeated throughout history, therefore, is anti-gospel because it's anti-freedom, anti-love, anti-mercy, anti-peace, anti-belonging, and thus, anti-Jesus. So if we are serious about following, loving, and becoming like him, then we will be serious about rejecting the anti-gospel message that creates a hierarchy of dignity, amplifies division rooted in theological idolatry, creates factions rather than belonging, and chooses partiality over inclusion. To reject the anti-gospel is to submit to Jesus as Lord and walk in obedience to him. And what does obedience look like?

Jesus answered, "The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these." (Mark 12:29–31)

To deny these verses is to reject the gospel message that is for you and your neighbor. To deny this message is to live in the false peace of performative action that doesn't actually submit to Jesus but only uses his name without being willing to lay down our lives to him. To deny this message is to pretend that Jesus's death and resurrection doesn't also mean you are called to die to self and carry your cross. To reject this message is to reject God's heart and what he says is "most important." All of this denial is anti-gospel.

In order to truly live out the gospel, we will need to reflect on where we are currently and pay attention to where God is inviting us to go together. We will need to address division and walk toward collective wholeness. And finally, we will need to engage openly with a topic that often stirs discomfort or fear and examine that topic through both a historic and a present-day lens: division.

Chapter 1 will invite us to a collective discontentment that leads to action. Chapter 2 will help us see the missing piece, which affects more than we realize. Chapter 3 will give a historical and cultural overview of difference to help us see how it's not a threat, instead pointing us to the actual threat we should be aware of.

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# ONE

## Devastated to Discontent

We are all one—and if we don't know it, we'll learn it the hard way.

—Bayard Rustin<sup>1</sup>

So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.

—Romans 14:19

I often pray the following prayer for myself and others: “Jesus, I need your help.” Or “Holy Spirit, we need your help.” It may seem simple, but it's a posture of living that does not dismiss the supernatural power of God in the real world. We may be divided, but that doesn't change God's heart and intention for unity. We may be devastated, but that doesn't change God's powerful comfort and presence. We may see only darkness, but that doesn't change or dim his bright light that holds great power and authority. The reality we perceive is one thing, but what God is doing in the background is something else entirely. We can keep ourselves from becoming distracted by praying, “Jesus, we need your help.”

Matthew 5:3 says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” To be poor in spirit means we are aware of our need for a savior and a helper. We understand that the gospel has the power to transform us. But in these times of harmful division, consistent discouragement, and unhealthy disagreement, we can study all we want, we can have access to all the knowledge and answers we want, yet still miss the actual answer to our cries, prayers, and questions: Jesus himself. This mistake has been the pitfall of humanity since the beginning of time, when the snake convinced Eve that God wasn't enough and that the information she didn't have the capacity to hold was actually what she wanted or needed. In the very tree God told her to not touch, his love was protecting her and Adam from themselves. Unfortunately, we continue making the error Eve made thousands of years ago. Desiring answers more than the Answer. Desiring power more than the One who holds all power. Desiring knowledge over the One who gladly gives us

wisdom when we ask for it. Desiring to be a Christian nation when he has called us to make disciples of all nations. Desiring the Spirit while ignoring his presence. It's not that God is not with us; it's that we aren't acknowledging his presence. There's a difference. And that difference has left us in a place God didn't intend us to be. But we are not too far gone. We can return to shalom—a place of peace and communion with God—together.

It breaks my heart to see how far we have come away from being like Christ, even more so because it's in stark contrast to the life I get to live in my community. In my day-to-day, real life, I'm part of a church (Renovation City Church in the Bronx) that gives me great hope that devastation is not our end. As one of their pastors, I get to bear witness to Christians who really want to love God and others even if that means sometimes wrestling with what that love looks like. I get to bear witness to people prioritizing being generous to the poor and dignifying the neglected. I get to bear witness to a church fully empowering its members to be as God created them to be instead of pigeonholing them to live, act, and sound like a specific type of believer. I get to see an image of what oneness looks like when sameness is not expected, perpetuated, or projected on people. I get to experience the kingdom of God in my community, in my home, in my church, at Sowers Summit (an annual conference I host in New York City), in my friendships, and in my ministry relationships—not because we are perfect but because we are committed to following a perfect God who has laid out his priorities through his Word and in the example of Jesus's life.

When you have seen and tasted the goodness of the kingdom of God breaking through in this life and in our world, you can't help but be brokenhearted that the most prominent representation of Christians and the church isn't from those who love God and their neighbors. Instead, people get a distorted picture of the body of Christ. So, how will people know what the kingdom of God is truly like?

In Matthew 12:25, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' accusation that he was healing the blind, mute, demon-possessed man through the power of demons by saying, "Every kingdom divided against itself is headed for destruction, and no city or house divided against itself will stand." Jesus warns of how destructive division really is and that if people within a group turn against themselves, the whole collective will collapse. If we aren't careful and continue to normalize division and preach sameness over unity,

we will crumble to our own demise and cause harm not just within the body of Christ but also outside of it.

## Enter Discontentment

Over the last few years of feeling devastated by the state of the world, the church, and those who claim to follow Jesus, I came to realize that devastation, if not addressed well, can lead to bitterness and perhaps even deconversion from the faith. I knew I couldn't stay stuck there, so as with anything I cannot fully process or hold in my limited human capacity, I brought my devastation to God. I was surprised that he exchanged it for discontentment. That may sound odd, but devastation was too weighty to hold on my own, and he knew if I stayed there long enough it would sour my soul. Discontentment, on the other hand, leads to reflection and reevaluation, which can then lead to contentment and the peace God established in the garden at the very beginning of time. Discontentment, if we let it, can be a tool God uses to spur our action so we can eventually get to a place of contentment. Division, therefore, should lead us to discontentment, which should lead us to action.

Discontentment, then, is a gift, and one I think we all need because we should neither stay devastated for too long nor accept the anti-gospel message of disunity as truth. The true gospel is that we have been saved by faith through grace, that Jesus died for us, and what else? Resurrected! Glory hallelujah! He defeated sin and death for good, and this message of salvation is for *all* people, not individuals, as we see in the most-known verse in the world: John 3:16. So, it's a unifying gospel, and anything that promotes disunity is a message of another kingdom, a dark one. In normalizing and accepting the anti-gospel message of division, dehumanization, and disunity, we go against the very gospel that saved us, and if continued, we will be crushed completely—a house not only divided but demolished. Therefore, we should receive the gift of discontentment so that by the grace of God we can find our way back to the place of God's plan and purpose for humanity, which is what we see in Genesis 1:31 when God views what he has created and calls it good. He intended a people and place of goodness and peace, a place where true shalom ("peace" in Hebrew) exists, where he dwells with humanity and where humanity dwells with one another in peace. This is revealed again in Revelation 21:3, which

describes God dwelling with his people. Jesus came to dwell with us and sent the Holy Spirit to be Immanuel for all. When we are united with and in Christ, we will find the meaning and peace we truly long for.

I'll never forget the first time I prayed for the unity of the church. While praying I suddenly began to grieve the fact that I had not prayed for this before. Had I prayed for the churches I was a part of? For sure. Had I prayed for Christians in general? Yes. But had I ever prayed for the entire body of Christ and for God to unify us? No. I don't believe prayers are magic tricks that force God to do something he wasn't already intending to do, but I do believe prayer changes us. It helps us see things as God sees them. It helps us yearn for things that are more aligned to God's will. It humbles us to a posture where we love what he loves and do what he commands. Prayer changes everything, including us. Once I began to pray for the unity of the church, I began to notice more and more the story of unity all throughout the Bible. Once I began to pray for unity, I began to grow in mercy and grace for others. Once I began to pray for unity, something in me shifted, and I wondered, if we were to collectively do the same, would things change too? Perhaps reconciliation would be taken more seriously. Perhaps the gospel would be considered more consistently. And perhaps love would be extended more intentionally.

If we grow discontent, instead of bitter, we cultivate righteous anger; instead of staying stuck, we are moved to action. The Holy Spirit ignites a righteous anger that leads us to do good. Anger, by itself, doesn't always lead to good, but righteous anger can lead to our bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Maybe that fruit looks like love in action: speaking up, protesting, fundraising, becoming an advocate, displaying a heart for justice, feeding the hungry, seeing the neglected. Perhaps it looks like repenting, unlearning, and relearning, which require humility to examine cultural, theological, or societal norms to see how they line up to the Scripture and life of Jesus. Spurred by discontent and fueled by righteous anger, the gospel motivates and inspires us to live a life modeled after Christ.

On the flip side, the anti-gospel of disunity and division encourages complacency, silence, and complicity on the one hand and fosters violence and dehumanization on the other. None of which exemplifies the mindset, heart, or actions of Jesus. We get to enjoy and embrace certain liberties today because people in the past responded with their righteous anger to injustices and other issues in the world and the church. Will we be people

who do the same? The thing is, we have reason to be righteously angry because division has become acceptable and even our norm within the church. We choose sides over souls. We choose political parties over people. We choose theologies over Jesus. We choose false peace over real peace. But it doesn't have to stay this way.

## **False Peace and Real Unity**

Unity as seen within Scripture is just something we don't tend to think about or talk about much in our current Christian culture, and honestly, the fruit proves it. We don't address the topic because it's uncomfortable, time-consuming, and requires collective effort. But what benefit is there in avoiding a hard topic? Don't we see the bad fruit it nurtures in other parts of our lives? For example, that thing I won't really talk to my husband about is going to come up eventually in an argument or at the wrong moment because we chose to not address it as a priority. Or that symptom we keep putting off mentioning to the doctor or that debilitating sadness we keep trying to act like is not there will eventually creep up to the surface and demand to be addressed.

Unity is similar. We don't really like to talk about it because it just doesn't seem that important or because it seems too complicated, but so much injustice is unaddressed because the church is not unified, so many people are not coming to know Jesus because we are not unified, so many people are being harmed by the church because we are not unified. When we do talk about unity, it's often about performative action, appropriating the term "kumbaya," or perpetuating a false peace that comes from ignoring or silencing the voices that cry out for shalom. This is not biblical nor Christlike unity.

Unity is not a common topic in sermons, books, podcast episodes, conference topics, or online discourse these days unless writers and speakers are reacting to a tension in the moment. This isn't necessarily bad. It can be, as we say in the social work profession, an intervention that is needed in a crisis moment. However, a healthier route is to take preventive measures that already work toward creating a unified church. No matter how uncomfortable it is or how much we want to ignore it, a meaningful discourse about unity is absolutely necessary right now. Unity deserves our attention not only because we see a tangible need for it in our culture today

but also because it is a consistent message in the Gospels and in the Epistles of Paul. For example, Ephesians 4:1–5 says,

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

There are other such messages of unity from Paul, including 1 Corinthians 1:10, Romans 12:4–5, and 2 Corinthians 13:11. We see how Jesus calls for unity in John 17 and how he uses communal language, such as in the Lord’s Prayer, “Our father in heaven . . .” (Matt. 6:9). Jesus also often moved in groups—the twelve disciples, the three close friends, the unknown but significant number of women who supported his ministry. We should pay attention to these examples of unity in the biblical text because if it matters to Jesus, then shouldn’t it matter to us? If this is how Jesus operated, doesn’t that tell us about his values and, therefore, the values we should have? It’s more than being in community; it’s being a unified community.

Whenever a theme is found in Scripture, we need to pay attention to it. When I was growing up, my mom made sure to put a special emphasis on certain things. She would repeat herself, tell me again and again, but I rarely paid attention because I didn’t see it as important. I missed out on learning the values behind what she was trying to teach me, which I was able to see only in hindsight. I feel like that’s what we do with unity. From Genesis to Revelation, God wants his people to be unified, but we need to be able to see unity as important and worthy of our attention and our effort in order to have the peace we all so desire.

When we talk about peace, we should discern between a true peace and a false one. If something is false, it is deliberately made or meant to deceive and not according to truth. False peace refers to a deceptive sense of peace—a feeling or appearance of safety, oneness, or harmony that hides underlying problems, sin, heresy, or injustice. False peace is not rooted in truth, righteousness, or genuine reconciliation with God and others, which leads to deeper roots of forced uniformity, division, and dehumanization. It’s a false peace that actually gatekeeps true peace, as if God intended for peace to be earned or limited to a specific group of people. Ultimately, false peace keeps the church from flourishing—which I define as living out the

gospel and wanting freedom for all. When true peace is not present, people do not get a clear vision of who Jesus is. False peace distorts the real God and presents a god that is made in our image. False peace distorts the gospel and becomes a path of anti-gospel.

When we choose sides over souls and declare that disagreements justify labeling people as heretics, false teachers, or “not one of us,” we should be deeply grieved. Are we grieved enough? And toward repentance? It’s apparent from the comments section on social media posts, online sermons, and political sites that we live in largely homogeneous circles and have forgotten that we’re called to be of one mind and one spirit (Phil. 2:2) but not called to sameness. We have forgotten the power of Pentecost that made room for all people to access the gospel and began the diverse and unified church. We have forgotten the priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17:21, where he says, “May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.” God did not make us all the same to be the same; he made us all intentionally unique to then come together and become united as one.

So what is unity? It’s important that we recognize the distinction between unity and sameness. Sameness is sticking to comfortable spaces, surrounded by people who look like us, think like us, and worship like us. Sameness feels safe, but it’s a safety that comes from the distorted belief that difference is a threat. But is it a threat? What if difference is the very thing God uses to deepen our faith and transform us? Consider how learning from people who aren’t from your culture or time has affected your formation. Because that’s what the Bible is: writings by and about people from different cultures who lived thousands of years ago. So why are we convinced that being around people who are different from us is not important or is even a threat? Perhaps we wouldn’t call it a threat per se, but our thinking, decision-making, community makeup, and possibly even our theology reveal that we do see difference as a threat.

This apparent indifference to the biblical call for unity is why I feel both the weighty responsibility and an urgent need to offer a book now that teaches how real unity can be more than just tolerance or surface-level agreement. Biblical unity is oneness in Christ despite differences and disagreements, walking in harmony with one another as uniquely unified with the purpose of giving God glory and being formed by him through a life of action that serves and sees our neighbor. In this book, I want to guide us through some honest reflection on where we are divided as the body of

Christ and describe how we can walk a hopeful path toward unity together. I hope to challenge you to adopt a posture of humility and openness so you can move from judgment to curiosity, from fear to formation, and from fragile agreement to resilient love. Real unity doesn't erase difference; it is transformed by it, thus drawing us closer to the heart of God and his glory and the good of the world.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. What kinds of divisions do you see in the world, in the church, in your community, or your family? What are your honest thoughts and feelings about these divisions?
2. How do you see false peace playing out in our current time and culture?
3. In what ways do you see difference as a benefit and not a threat?
4. Consider praying for the unity of the church. What are specific issues or hopes that come to mind as you think about such a prayer?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*Unifying God of Glory, help me be discontent with the current state of the church—yet not toward weariness and despair but toward hope and action. Lead me as I discern what part I get to contribute to the health and unity of the church, and keep me grounded in remembering the gospel as I navigate all of this. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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## TWO

# Discovering the Missing Puzzle Piece

We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.

—Gwendolyn Brooks<sup>1</sup>

If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.

—Philippians 2:1–4

As I write these words, it is July 4, 2025, and through a wild miracle of God, we are preparing to move into a house we have purchased in the Bronx in New York City. While I dread the fireworks outside because they may wake up my four-year-old son, I take a break from packing and decide to search for a music video that Bad Bunny has just released for his song “NUEVAYol,” which I love, especially as a Latina and New Yorker. The music video is a beautiful homage to different Latinos/Latinas from across eras and colors, centered around a celebration common to most Latinos: a young woman's quinceañera. It's set in what looks like the Bronx in the '70s or '80s, and the party is bumping and folks are dancing, talking, and eating, which are three primary activities at most Latino/a parties. The video looks similar to the images in my parents' wedding photos, and it's a beautiful picture of unity. At the end of the video, on a black screen, these words appear in all caps: “JUNTOS SOMOS MÁS FUERTE,” which translates to “Together, we are stronger” in English. Now, of course, the Bad Bunny video is not the first time anyone has said these words, but there was something powerful and moving about seeing them in Spanish on that particular day. Spanish is the language I learned first, and though it was a colonizer's language forcefully brought to Latin America, it's the language

of my motherland, a language we've made our own. I sat there feeling the sacred moment of unity that I experienced through the video, and it got me thinking about unity in the church and the power of togetherness, how limited we are by sameness and individualism, and how we can be formed by embracing our differences. I was reminded of four things.

## **1. The Power of Togetherness**

Unity is not just being together in proximity to one another. Unity is the invisible but powerfully felt sense of togetherness that disintegrates when we are divided. The power of togetherness makes the church stronger, especially against all the ways the Enemy would want to divide, confuse, or isolate us. It's the kind of power that we should seek—the power of God that helps us live in togetherness for the sake of dignity and oneness, power that makes demons flee, empires fall, and dehumanization disappear. Recently, I attended the very first JUNTAS event hosted by the Latinas Loving Jesus ministry, a gathering for women of all different cultural backgrounds to come and be a part of something led by Latinas. It was a powerful time of unity, diversity, joy, and edification. The event was hosted in Chicago at the same time that ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) was hunting, detaining—sometimes illegally—and harming people in the city. While only God knows what transpired in the spiritual realm, I have to believe that our acts of celebrating, praising, lamenting, and praying together at the same time and place the Enemy was at work in violent ways had to have had an impact. Evil will not have the final word; division will not have the final word; violence will not have the final word. The power of togetherness is not something frivolous or trite; it can withstand and fight the powers of evil, even when we can't see it quite yet with our own eyes.

## **2. We Are Limited**

We have convinced ourselves that being in our own little homogeneous worlds is okay, even good enough. We might argue that there are still differences in personalities and family backgrounds, and that we can still grow in our faith without having to go beyond our comfort zones. We might

even argue that there are still uncomfortable moments in interpersonal relationships with people in our worlds, so we're not really all the same. But if most of the people around me agree with me, think like me, look like me, spend money like me, have privileges like me, then I will not only have a limited view of life, but I will also have a limited faith. I will be at a deficit in my understanding of the world, of Scripture, and of how the Holy Spirit moves. This doesn't mean the voices of those who look and sound like us aren't valuable or helpful. They certainly are. But valuing sameness over unity means we miss out on the depth and width and colors of voices that could strengthen, enliven, and mature our faith and witness in a way that isn't possible when we stay in our homogeneous groups. Even if you live in a city or community where most people look like you and think like you, you have access to so many different voices through books and digital media. If you seek it, you can find it, and God desires that we seek different voices so that we can see him more clearly. He is not a two-dimensional God. He is multidimensional, and we can get a greater sense of who he is when we incorporate diversity into our faith lives, into our theologies, and into how we build community around ourselves. Diversity can mean more than just cultural diversity but also diversity of gender, ability, theology, age, relationship status, economic status, denomination, and lived experience.

### **3. Spiritual Formation Through Culture**

*Juntos somos más fuerte.* Seeing those words in my native language just hit differently. It resonated more deeply in my soul because it was in the language of my home, the language I use to converse with my mother every day. When we become Christians, our cultures aren't meant to be erased. They are an important part of how God made us and how God will speak to us and through us. For example, when I worship in Spanish, there's a nuance to certain words that aren't expressed in the same way in English. Conversely, when I hear a worship song sung in Haitian Creole or Korean, I may not know what the words mean, but I am blessed to hear my brothers and sisters of a different ethnicity worship God in their native tongue. I'm blessed when I hear people who I differ with theologically share how they understand Scripture and how they live out the gospel because I can see that my way isn't the only way. Our differences are a blessing to our spiritual

formation, not a hindrance, and they impact how we do church, home life, friendships, conferences, and any other space we occupy as Christians.

## 4. Dismantle Individualism

Finally, the idea of *juntos somos más fuerte* should be the heart cry of the Christian community because togetherness dismantles individualism. I was raised to be incredibly independent, which prepared me for adulthood when I went to college and moved out on my own. I was equipped to support and fend for myself, and even at twenty, I felt confident that I could do everything on my own. Yet, when I dealt with roommates and then got married, I recognized I had not been prepared to be dependent on others or to be in community. Learning to be a unique, independent individual is not a bad thing, but when individualism drives an independence that leads us to separate from one another, it makes the individual the hero of the story instead of Jesus. Too much individualism can make us struggle in community, which then leads to struggling with unity, because how can we learn to come together if we can't even be together? It can cause us to develop so much pride in our own theology and way of being that we descend into the idolatry of "there's only one right way of doing things."

But togetherness opens up a new way of being. At the beginning of our marriage, my husband and I kept separate bank accounts, and we didn't really have anyone to help us understand why it would be beneficial to join them. After years of arguments around money, we finally got a joint account, and you know what that did? It helped us be more honest about money, be more humble in our approach to money, and use money in a healthier way together. We can live in hyper-individualism even while living together, but when we choose real togetherness, harmony abounds and communal and individual strength increases. The goal is not to be like one another but to be with one another in Christ.

Bad Bunny is not a theologian, but through his art, he speaks a word on unity—one we should all embrace. How much more should we seek unity as the body of Christ? As Father Gregory Boyle says in his book *Tattoos on the Heart*, "There is no 'them and us.' There is only us."<sup>2</sup>

## The Puzzle Is Missing Something

I'm not a puzzle girlie. I never have been. Whenever I go to Barnes and Noble and see a five-hundred-piece puzzle, I get overwhelmed. But since becoming a mom, I've had to become open to puzzles because my son loves them. So sometimes I put together puzzles with him, and there have been times when we have encountered the problem of a missing piece. The picture looks complete to a certain extent, except for the hole that makes it incomplete. Like that puzzle, the church has a missing piece that we have lost and ignored, a puzzle piece that perhaps can answer so much of the discouragement we experience within the church today. That missing puzzle piece is unity, and let's look at where we lost that piece.

Much of the leadership and culture that exists in the US primarily comes from the hyper-individualistic approach to life. Because of this colonial, power-hungry, empire-driven approach to life, much of our history and society has built systems, cultures, norms, and policies from a place of oppressive power. In essence, our roots are tainted. We can't do much about the past except learn from it, but there are certainly things we can do in the present and for the future to dismantle oppressive systems and structures that weren't made for all people and that don't cultivate unity in society. We can look at politics, health care, economics, education, and social services and see disparity, inequity, and division; but my heart for this book is that we take a good hard look at the church. Much of what we see in the US church today is the fruit of colonialism and White supremacy, which celebrates individualism and power grabs. I like how Zainab Cheema at American University defines White supremacy: "White supremacy describes structural hierarchies in society that translate the subjective meanings attached to various races and groups into differential relations of power. These relations of power are organized around the idea of white superiority, or the perception of whiteness as the norm and standard against which other races and ethnicities are defined. It is maintained through legal, social, political, and cultural systems enforcing racial dominance through the unequal distribution of power across society."<sup>3</sup> The fruit of colonialism and White supremacy is othering, erasure, and injustice that the church has accepted and normalized, despite it being rotten fruit. I'm not saying that only White people do these things. I'm saying this is an inherited spirit of White supremacy that takes root in policies, pulpits, and platforms that have infiltrated our churches.

The interesting thing is that our country, though divided in so many ways, is called the United States of America. It could have just been called States of America, yet the word “United” is in the name. Before it was called the United States, it was called the “United Colonies.”<sup>4</sup> The purpose for changing the name was to give each state a sense of freedom and independence while it remained part of a collective country. In some ways, this reasoning reflects well what unity is actually meant to be and do. Let’s be very clear: I’m not stating that those who named this country were pursuing a Christian train of thought or that the US is a Christian nation. But the idea behind its name provides a helpful example of what unity is supposed to be. We have cast unity as uniformity, but unity is about harmony, not sameness. Unity is about togetherness not assimilation. Unity is God-glorifying, not self-centered. And because we have misplaced the purpose, definition, and power of real unity, we have become a divided people. And, to our grief, a complacent, divided people pretending we are living in peace while the current division communicates another narrative altogether.

“We are more divided than ever.” That’s what I keep hearing people say everywhere—people from different races, ages, theologies, and lived experiences. I wonder if it’s a good thing that we are united in the thought that we are divided. If we didn’t all agree on this point, then the work of unity would be held back by a lack of shared awareness and acknowledgment of a deficit. But it seems that at least most people living in the United States of America today feel that we are divided, and that’s a good start because it is true. Generations are divided and react by blaming and ignoring one another. Genders are divided by the lack of equal pay, rights, and dignity one gets over the other. Economics are divided in drastic ways. According to a 2020 Pew Research Center report, “The wealth gap between upper-income and lower- and middle-income families has grown wider this century,” and “as a result, the wealth gap between America’s richest and poorer families more than doubled from 1989 to 2016.”<sup>5</sup> And this report was released before the 2020 pandemic that financially devastated so many of us and changed the economic state of the world.

There are certainly divisions in religion and Christianity. Christianity is divided into Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox, and each of these groups are internally divided by theologies and denominations. Those churches are further divided into cultural and regional spaces, like the Black

church, Anglican churches, the Southern Baptist Convention, Asian Presbyterian churches, and the Latino/a Assemblies of God community. And each of those churches are divided into pastors, elders, ministry leaders, congregants, children, and visitors. Each layer, as we trickle down, holds division. Perhaps some people wouldn't use that word to describe all these separations, but really that's what it is. But division is not inherently a bad thing—it's the principle behind the division that matters.

So, what is the motive for the divisions we see within the church in the United States? Some people mark divisions because they want to discern between who they consider to be lukewarm Christians or unbelievers versus true believers. Others find that categorizing people into conservative, progressive, affirming, nonaffirming, reformed, and so on makes it easier to understand the people in each category (though labeling can also lead to judging and targeting the people within certain categories). Some seek comfort and safety by staying within their ethnic people group, particularly if they're immigrants from different countries. Others might be motivated to separate themselves from unbiblical perspectives like Christian nationalism, cults, or oppressive theologies. Again, division is not inherently a bad thing; the motivating root for division is what needs to be discerned. And once we acknowledge the root of division, we can move toward a place of unity if people collectively want to make that move.

## **Willingness to Distance Ourselves from What We've Always Known**

When I was in third grade, I attended school in the Dominican Republic in a small town called Santa Barbara de Samana, where my dad had grown up. I will never forget the day we began to learn about Christopher Columbus. The Dominican Republic was the first land to be “found” by the European colonizers in the “New World”<sup>6</sup> and established as a Spanish colony. (I put “found” in quotations because the land was already occupied; referring to “finding” the land is the language of colonizers.) While learning about this history in class, I was confused to hear my teacher say, “Thank God for Christopher Columbus, because if it wasn't for him, we would still be savages.” Clearly my teacher had a very colonized understanding of history but also, sadly, a very poor view of her own cultural history and people.

Before colonization, the Dominican Republic was full of Taínos, the Indigenous people of the island. They were not savages. In fact, they had their own language, their own way of creating food and shelter for themselves, and they had survived centuries on this island before it was colonized. So no, not savages.

Even when I was that young, I felt my teacher's idea was wrong, but I had been taught that teachers teach from a place of truth and knowledge, not opinion and bias, so I accepted her opinion, though not without some doubt. As I grew up, I learned she was indeed wrong, and I had to set myself apart from this perspective because it was an oppressive ideology that I didn't agree with or support. In this, my teacher and I were divided, but this was a good division because it moved me away from thinking poorly of my ancestors, allowing me to see the truth of who colonizers were and what they did and giving me the chance to reflect on what in my life I think, do, or say because of ingrained colonization. Division isn't always bad; sometimes it is necessary. We might choose to wisely distance ourselves from what we've always known, because it's wrong, in order to embrace and embody healthy unity.

## **The Requirements for Unity**

In order to complete the puzzle of the church, we need the missing piece—we need unity. Puzzles include lots of distinct pieces of different shapes and colors that come together to create something beautiful and united, usually with an image that holds some sort of message. For the church, the message is that the gospel is for everyone, but because unity is the missing piece, the gospel message is incomplete. So how do we get to a place of finding and clicking in the missing puzzle piece? We must embrace and embody five specific attitudes and actions to become united.

### ***1. What Does Unity Require? Humility***

A few years ago, I attended an event where my friend Jess Connolly was teaching, and she said something about humility that struck me. She said that humility is the one characteristic she looks for in a leader whom she wants to learn from and follow.<sup>7</sup> It was a simple statement, but in that moment I had a flood of memories from all the leadership trainings I have

taken, the leadership meetings I have been a part of, and the leadership-building activities I have participated in at my previous churches. None of them had ever mentioned humility as a requirement or expectation for leaders. How can the attitude that Jesus most embodied be the very thing we lack most in the American Christian culture?

Humility is a necessity because it makes us more compassionate, open, and loving. To be a unified church we must be a Christlike one, and to be humble is to be like Jesus. That's it. Period. When we act as if humility is not needed to be unified, we are showing our sin of entitlement and ego. Ego says we can do it on our own, and entitlement says my way is the best way. Both create barriers to unity because they lead people to belittle different theologies and perspectives. If we don't think of humility when we think of Jesus, we have created a false Jesus in our mind, and, therefore, the image of God we are worshiping is not the one we find in the Bible in the person and life of Jesus. We can disagree on other interpretations within Scripture, but if your understanding of Jesus after reading the Gospels doesn't include him as being humble, we are not reading the same Bible.

Scripture shows that Jesus was not a power-hungry, individualistic person. In addition to the Gospel accounts of Jesus's life, Philippians 2:6–8 confirms it by saying that he,

existing in the form of God,  
did not consider equality with God  
as something to be exploited.  
Instead he emptied himself  
by assuming the form of a servant,  
taking on the likeness of humanity.  
And when he had come as a man,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient  
to the point of death—  
even to death on a cross.

The whole of Scripture agrees that Jesus was humble, so if we claim to follow Jesus, we cannot make humility an afterthought in how we live our faith. It must be the foundation of every action we do.

An aspect of humility is found in Matthew 16:24 where Jesus says, “If any of you want to be my follower, you must stop thinking about yourself and what you want. You must be willing to carry the cross that is given to you for following me” (ERV). Many translations say, “deny yourself,” but

that phrase can be a struggle for some; thus I wanted to give a translation that more of us could understand. The ERV says, “Stop thinking about yourself and what you want,” which is not to say that what we want and who we are don’t matter, but it acknowledges that following Jesus is the way that leads us to our true selves and aligns our wants to his will. Denying ourselves requires humility, but it opens the door to unity because it means we would stop wanting to always be right and instead seek to have the right relationship with one another. We would stop aiming to be on top and instead seek to walk alongside one another. We would stop following people and theologies with an idolizing heart while dehumanizing anyone who doesn’t agree or align with us and would instead follow and worship the one true God.

At our annual Sowers Summit in 2024, Rich Villodas, pastor of New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, preached a powerful word on humility. In his sermon, he offered the following questions as a humility inventory check:

- How often do you consider the perspectives of others?
- When was the last time you invited someone to teach you about a topic?
- When was the last time you changed your mind about an important issue?
- How willing are you to admit that you are wrong?
- How do you respond when you are corrected?<sup>8</sup>

As you reflect on these questions for yourself in all areas of your life, how would you honestly answer them? With regards to unity in the church, how do these questions help you see where you may need to be changed? How might the Holy Spirit be leading you to repentance?

## ***2. What Does Unity Require? Repentance***

*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says, “In a more general sense, repentance means a change of mind (Gen. 6:6–7) or a feeling of remorse or regret for past conduct (Matt. 27:3). True repentance is a ‘godly sorrow’ for sin, an act of turning around and going in the opposite direction.”<sup>9</sup> I particularly appreciate this definition of repentance because

we should grieve how we sin against God and others, not from a place of shame or guilt but from a place of desiring unity with God and others. Sin causes disruption and distance in our relationships, and repentance is the balm that diminishes that divide and creates room for change.

Repentance may be one of the hardest requirements for unity. We're prone to resist it because it requires the humility we just discussed and asks us to be mature. Repentance means acknowledging how we have offended, sinned against, or caused harm to others and therefore to God. Do you ever think about that? It stuns and humbles me when I reflect on the fact that every time I sin against someone, I'm sinning against God because I'm doing something wrong or unjust to someone he created. Just as loving our neighbor well results in loving God well, sinning against our neighbor also results in sinning against God.

When we cause others harm, whether directly or indirectly, we have added more bricks to the wall of disunity within the church because our sin pits us against one another. When my old pastor spiritually abused me, he created a divide within the body of Christ on so many levels. Some believed me and some didn't. Among the people who believed me, some stayed at the church out of loyalty to him and some left. Further, some of those who left the church after what happened ended up leaving the faith altogether because it was the last straw for their belief in the good of the church. See how sin by one person can cause so much division in God's church? Now imagine if that pastor were to repent. Not all would be resolved, but healing from some of the division could be possible.

### ***3. What Does Unity Require? Forgiveness***

When we choose sides and create an us-versus-them reality, our hearts often become hardened as we become increasingly offended by one another. Then we end up with a forgiveness problem: If we don't forgive each other but remain in our offense, we deepen the division between us. In her book, *Living Beyond Offense*, my sister-friend Yana Jenay Conner says, "Forgiveness is the merciful decision to release an offender of a debt and to not retaliate against them in anger."<sup>10</sup> When we don't extend forgiveness, we withhold mercy. Unity cannot exist if unforgiveness is thriving. Instead of being the body of Christ together, we simply remain Christians together, but divided. It's easy to convince ourselves that we can be Christians existing next to each other without ever having to be in community with

one another. We apply the individualism we see in society and say we can do the same with our faith. But to experientially understand that you belong to the body of Christ is to acknowledge that your faith is not a solo walk. I like how Desmond Tutu puts it: “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”<sup>11</sup> I see it the same if we replace the word “humanity” with “Christianity.” Our Christianity is bound up together, for we can only be Christians together as the body of Christ.

I want to note here that forgiveness is hard, especially because so many of us have experienced abuse, oppression, and othering by family members, church folks, and others in our lives. Forgiveness for many is a process of years because it’s a part of our healing journey and one that will have to happen again and again. Forgiveness might not even be offered in-person if that person is not safe or willing to reconcile. While I acknowledge that forgiveness may be incredibly difficult in certain situations and that division is necessary at times to separate us from abuse and other harmful situations, forgiveness remains an essential part of answering the call to unity together.

#### ***4. What Does Unity Require? Biblical Understanding***

Acts 2 is one of the foundational passages that show us what unity looks like. When reading that chapter, we see the birth of the church in how believers of all backgrounds and locations and languages came together. Much happens in this chapter, but let’s take a closer look at the intentionality of diversity and the amplification of unity. When we pay attention to that, we get a far better understanding of what God’s church is meant to look like, sound like, and be like—united while being diverse.

Pastor Jocelyn Holmes from Renovation City Church (my church and one of my pastors—woot woot!) says it like this in a sermon she preached on Acts 2:

Unity in the church means we go beyond what’s comfortable and intentionally welcome what’s different. Not just tolerate it—*honor* it. Because if the church is truly going to reflect the heart of God, then it has to sound like many tongues, and look like many people, and create space for many stories. The wind and the fire didn’t come just to *excite* the disciples. It came to send them out—to speak to the nations, starting right where they were.<sup>12</sup>

An honest, humble, and Spirit-led interpretation of Scripture will lead us to see God’s heart for a united church and actively contribute to the building

of that unity and the dethroning of division. Scripture can be misused and weaponized to support what is wrong and evil, and that's why we must have a grounded biblical understanding of Scripture in order to understand and live out unity. Just studying Acts 2 and the Epistles would give us a more robust understanding of unity, how God wants it to look, and how the early church lived it out. How much more if we read the whole of Scripture and asked the Spirit to teach us!

## ***5. What Does Unity Require? Discernment***

I think we have a discernment issue, which is why we seem to have trouble knowing what is real and what is false. This lack of discernment probably grieves me the most because discernment is not something we need to attain through seminary or through a prayer night or a Bible study; it's something that God gives to us through his Holy Spirit. Our ignoring of the Holy Spirit then results in our lack of discernment.

Discernment is required for unity because we have a very real common Enemy, and he is delighted by our lack of discernment, accepted division, and normalized dehumanization. He is supposed to be our Enemy rather than one another, but we fight, argue, and struggle to disagree with respect because we are not discerning how the Enemy is using all this dissension to fuel more division. Ephesians 6:12 says this: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens." Flesh and blood are not our enemy. We need to discern our enemy through the help of the Holy Spirit and open our eyes to the real battle, not the ones in the comments section of social media posts with someone who voted differently than us. The real battle is in the spiritual realm and shows up in how we treat one another, how we either demolish or amplify darkness and dehumanization, and how we discern what is true or false peace. I speak on this topic in depth in chapter 4.

Maybe you're like me and don't like puzzles to begin with, but as we consider this missing puzzle piece in the church, you might sense God inviting you to step out of your comfort zone and pay attention to how you can be part of finding and inserting that missing piece of unity. I hope you will answer God's invitation. With humility, forgiveness, repentance, a deeper biblical understanding, and more discernment, we can work toward

the collective flourishing of humanity, but it does require all of us to contribute to this path forward. Will you help put the puzzle together?

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. How would you differentiate sameness and unity?
2. How can you begin or continue to better embody humility?
3. Is there someone you are experiencing division or separation from that you need to forgive? Even if there is no reconciliation, how can you release that person so you can be free?
4. What are you discerning right now? What is the Spirit showing you regarding how you can contribute to unity in the church?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*United Trinity, help us walk toward the path you have laid out for us to be a people who aren't just Christians but who are the body of Christ together. That we would repent of all other powers we have tried to attain or elevate and that we would embrace the power of togetherness instead. Holy Spirit, we need your help to put together this puzzle you call the body of Christ. Forgive us for ignoring and losing the missing piece of unity and strengthen us in becoming united. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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## THREE

# Difference Is Not the Threat

Embrace diversity.  
Unite—  
Or be divided,  
robbed,  
ruled,  
killed  
By those who see you as prey.  
Embrace diversity  
Or be destroyed.

—Octavia E. Butler<sup>1</sup>

Finally, all of you be like-minded and sympathetic, love one another, and be compassionate and humble.

—1 Peter 3:8

If we look at the history of groups of people who have had conflict and struggled with unity, we could find a common ground of reasoning. Usually, it's because of a difference—difference in belief, difference in values, difference of ethnicity, and the list goes on. Difference can feel like a threat because it is uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Difference might feel like it will negatively affect us somehow. While difference does have an impact on us, it doesn't have to be negative. Differences tend to make people react quickly and fearfully instead of responding deliberately and thoughtfully.

I live in New York City. I was born here and have lived here the majority of my life, and I'm surrounded by difference. New York City attracts people from all over the world, who speak over one hundred languages. More than thirty religions are practiced in New York, and a wide variety of Christian denominations and theological camps are represented. Residents include both immigrants and US-born folks, and a spectrum of people within the LGBTQ+ community live throughout the city. New Yorkers come in all ages and sizes, and voters in late 2025 elected the city's very first millennial and Muslim mayor. There's a reason New York City is called the melting pot and capital of the world. Pieces from all over the

world crunch into the corners of this big city. So, difference is not new to me, but just because something is familiar does not mean it's always comfortable.

The reality is, no matter who we are, where we live, the life we've had, the decisions we've made, how spiritually mature we are, or how much we've gone to counseling, difference will feel uncomfortable to us. Sameness, or commonality, is comfortable and certain. Commonality makes us feel safe because we know the answers or understand the situation. Commonality leads us to being more confident and trusting of people and spaces. Commonality doesn't feel like a threat, but perhaps sometimes it is.

One of the questions I had when coming to learn about God and the Bible in the first few years of my Christian walk was, "Why did Israel respond to Jesus the way they did during his earthly ministry?" Of course, there were people who believed him and sought to learn from him and get healed by him, but there were also people who didn't. Some of those people included the Pharisees, Sadducees, some of his disciples at certain points in time, and other folks among the Jews. We see an example of this in Matthew 27, just before Jesus is crucified. There is a festival going on and it was custom for the governor to release a prisoner of the crowd's choice. There is a man named Barabbas, who was a prisoner, and we see the chief priests and elders persuade the crowd to choose Barabbas, a murderer and insurrectionist, over Jesus. Matthew 27:21–23 says:

The governor asked them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?"

"Barabbas!" they answered.

Pilate asked them, "What should I do then with Jesus, who is called Christ?"

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

Then he said, "Why? What has he done wrong?"

But they kept shouting all the more, "Crucify him!"

These were very likely people who at least had heard of, if not seen, Jesus's miracles and his teachings, yet they chose to shout, "Crucify him!" They chose violence instead of receiving God's gift of salvation to the world because Jesus wasn't who they expected the Messiah to be.

When we feel like difference is a threat, we can actually become a threat ourselves. To the elders, priests, Pharisees, and Sadducees, Jesus didn't live up to their interpretation of the Old Testament and, therefore, couldn't be the Savior they had been eagerly awaiting for generations. The difference

between what they expected him to be like and who they came to know him to be felt threatening to them. This led them to do ungodly things to God and to direct others to do the same. Jesus was not the Messiah they had expected. That made them uncomfortable, unsettled, and unsure of what he was supposed to mean to them. They thought the Messiah would come and rule Rome and hold authority in government that would make Jews no longer the oppressed, but they got a different Jesus than they expected, so they handed him over to the Romans. He was killed because he was a threat to what they were working toward and waiting for—freedom by way of governmental dominance instead of through a humble and sacrificial death and resurrection toward real liberation over oppression.

As much as I'm proud of my race and see the beauty in different races, race itself is a social construct. "In colonial America, the notion of race arose and not coincidentally co-evolved with the emerging transatlantic slave trade in the late 1600s; it was used to justify the enslavement and brutal treatment of Africans. Globally, the separation of groups into fundamentally different, 'superior' and 'inferior' races has been foundational to justify both slavery and genocide."<sup>2</sup>

The difference the colonizers noticed between themselves and Africans was used to threaten the lives of African people and enslave them. This behavior is another example of how difference is not a threat but people's response to difference can be. We see this race-related threat behavior continue for centuries all the way up to 1954 when part of America thought segregation had to end and another part thought it was perfectly acceptable. "In its decision on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the US Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated public schools were unconstitutional and ordered public schools to desegregate with all deliberate speed." But it was not speedy. Years passed, and many people fought to keep segregation, as we see in the story of Ruby Bridges—a six-year-old Black girl just trying to go to her local school in New Orleans. Instead, "Bridges required the assistance of federal marshals who escorted her to and from school. A psychiatrist, Robert Coles, was also hired to counsel Bridges through the trauma."<sup>3</sup> See, difference isn't the threat; the threat is in how people react to difference when they feel uncomfortable and unwilling to change.

Similarly, discomfort itself is not a bad thing; it's our perception of discomfort that can become a problem. The way we see discomfort can lead

us to be holy like Jesus or it can lead us to be dangerous like Nazis, Christian nationalists, or the Ku Klux Klan—all groups that let their discomfort with others lead them to build their organizations, perspectives, and dehumanizing campaigns. We see a consistent pattern throughout history when it comes to how people react to difference—the Nazis and the Jews, Israel and Palestine, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and so many other examples. Violence is not far behind when people feel threatened by difference.

While all the examples given in this chapter so far demonstrate how people reacted to difference as a threat, their behavior wasn't rooted only in their fear of difference. Their actions were also a result of their desire for power, possession, and personal perspective. So let's go deeper to see how all three of those desires play out and how the way of the kingdom turns them right side up.

## **Power Not of the Holy Spirit**

People, when they are not humble or interested in unity and dignity, seek out power because it centers them, their needs, their priorities, and their perspectives. Those people then strive for power, hustle for it, and do whatever it takes to get it and keep it. They seek to hold positions of power that would lead them to control narratives, theologies, and people, wanting to be the dominant or majority in any given space. This mindset and approach to living is very much connected to colonization and how power was used against people. Colonizers were surely not the first to use power this way, but they were a group of people who did it globally. While there weren't many of them, colonizers made an impact because they took their little power and monetized it in such a way that it became unstoppable and untouchable for centuries. Power also often arises from wanting control, a desire to determine what's to come or what the results will be. Difference is a threat to power seekers because it's not something they can predict or control, so they squash it as quickly as they can.

Power can take many forms—some may take it with force, while others accrue power through more subtle means. They may seem like the ones who are helping, who know more or better, who are better educated or have all the answers, but they seek power in the shape of saviorism. What starts

off with all good intentions can quickly turn into desiring control and wanting people to submit to your help or wisdom when mutuality is needed.

Mutuality reminds those seeking power to repent of desiring to be all those things and to acknowledge that everyone has something to offer and can contribute. Judith Jordan puts it this way:

Crucial to a mature sense of mutuality is an appreciation of the wholeness of the other person with a special awareness of the other's subjective experience. Thus, the other person is not there merely to take care of one's needs, to become a vessel for one's projections or transferences, nor to be the object of discharge of instinctual impulses. Through empathy, and an active interest in the other as a different, complex person, one develops the capacity at first to allow the other's differentness and ultimately to value and encourage those qualities which make that person different and unique.<sup>4</sup>

Power is confronted in the presence of difference, but how someone deals with that confrontation shows where they're putting their trust. Those willing to engage with difference seek out God's power through his presence, while those who shun difference seek worldly or self-promoting power centered on domination and destruction. That kind of power is the way of the empire that wants to place those who are most vulnerable and marginalized at the bottom and keep them there for generations. But the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit leads to serving, seeing, and loving the marginalized and vulnerable. When humans try to hoard power, nothing good can come from it, but it's always a good idea to seek God's power.

We see this power play in Exodus 1, where we are introduced to a king who came after Joseph, son of Jacob. Joseph had been in a powerful position of leadership in Egypt that allowed him to save his people, the Israelites, and Egyptians from famine. But as all people do, Joseph died, time passed, and a new king came into his role. In Exodus 1:8–11, we see this king feeling threatened by the Israelites even though they were enslaved by him. He made up stories in his head about wars, them leaving, and fights, all because he saw that there were many of them. Although it wasn't right, the Israelites were technically his possession, and he was so scared to lose them that he lived in fear and created an even deeper culture of oppression for this community. Verses 12–13 say, "But the more they oppressed them, the more they multiplied and spread so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. They worked the Israelites ruthlessly." This is the power that evil can hold over others who submit to an earthly leader and not our heavenly Father. Even the Egyptians themselves began to perpetuate

and support what the Pharaoh was doing because of the threat of difference and how it affected the power they thought they held as Egyptians. They were willing to sacrifice the dignity of another to keep or attain a power they thought they were due. Pharaoh's power was confronted by difference, and eventually he was confronted by God. When we position ourselves to just focus on power, we develop narratives in our head that block us from seeing properly. Pharaoh couldn't see how killing baby boys was wrong, and he couldn't see how enslaving others was wrong because his priority was power not people. When you embrace mutuality, your priority will empower others. These two different paths result in very different fruits.

## **Right to Possession**

We can convince ourselves that we deserve what we have to the point that our possessions become an idol we are proud of or are afraid to share. Those who want—perhaps obsess over—the right to possess things are unsettled by difference because they fear that people who are different want to take away what they have or own. This fear is rooted in scarcity and greed; when we feel the need to protect our right to our possessions, we become people whose eyes are so glazed over by our possessions that we no longer see image bearers when we see people.

We see this clearly when it comes to the topic of immigrants in the US. Most immigrants come here for freedom, finances, or family, and yet so many people in the US see them as a threat rather than as vital contributors to the ever-growing economy, diversity, and health of this country. I wonder if those who feel threatened by immigrants could be honest and say they are really just focused on keeping what they have and don't want to share it or lose it. When confronted with difference, people who are worried about their possessions can respond with cruelty, calling immigrants "rapists," "illegals," and "dogs." I've seen all those terms used by people in power to describe both undocumented and documented immigrants on social media and in news reports. These words are neither unintended nor neutral but have been chosen to incite irrational fear so their followers will be afraid that people who are different might take what they have. What irony! We are a country full of people afraid that what they own will be taken away when this is how our country came to be—it was founded by people who

took everything away from the natives of the land. These were not “settlers” but dangerous colonizers.

When it comes to possession, difference feels like a threat across the board because almost everyone wants to keep their money, as well as their privileges, unearned freedoms, and comfort. Whether you hold these comforts and privileges because of your race, gender, class, ability, or network, Jesus’s words in Mark 8:34–37 are a response to this perceived right to possession.

Calling the crowd along with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me and the gospel will save it. For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life? What can anyone give in exchange for his life?”

God’s kingdom and God’s ways constantly upend what empires deem as right and good for their own benefit. The Bible is full of messages that teach us how we are to handle what we own, whether money or other material goods or our privileges. It says to share what we have (Heb. 13:16), not store up treasures on earth (Matt. 6:19–21), be a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:6–7), live generously (Prov. 11:25), live hospitably (Rom. 12:13), and share what we have with others (Luke 12:33–34). God’s kingdom promotes abundance instead of scarcity, not just for some but for all. Our response to difference that feels threatening should be generosity.

## Personal Perspectives

We hold on to our personal perspectives like they’re gods who will save us. We believe that expressing our values, our perspectives, and our theologies holds more weight than offering dignity, patience, mercy, and love toward others. As I’m writing these words, SNAP benefits that supplement food supplies have been paused for some Americans, and so many people are publicly sharing their opinions about those who receive SNAP benefits and what they think recipients should be doing instead. However, if you’re Christian, Matthew 25 should ring loud and move us to action regardless of what we think about those who receive SNAP benefits (although what we think about them should also shift and change based on Jesus’s words). In Matthew 25:35–36, Jesus says, “For I was hungry and you gave me

something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.” And in verse 40 he says, “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” Here, Jesus is teaching a direct message about our call as those who follow him, and thus our personal perspectives shouldn’t hold much weight at all if they go against the Word of God.

Here’s another way to see it. I’m pro-life, but for some, this ideology becomes an idol when it is used to deny the humanity of a pregnant woman who is choosing to get an abortion and to dismiss any dignity toward her by labeling her a murderer without even knowing her name. Despite having an unwanted abortion in 2012, I am still pro-life, and not in the “I just want babies to be born” way because that’s not pro-life, that’s pro-birth. I’m pro-life in the way that I want the baby to be born and also want that baby and mama to be fed, housed, clothed, loved, supported, and equipped for a life of flourishing, whether that mom raises that baby herself or chooses to put the baby up for adoption. Pro-life in the way that I want mothers to have access to good health care, want to see the death rate of Black women giving birth diminish, and want new moms to get access to all the resources they need to be healthy mothers and women. Pro-life in the way that I want children throughout the world to not go hungry and not be killed because they live where countries are warring against one another. Pro-life in the way that I think access to guns should be banned in the US because children matter, and the number of mass shootings we have in schools alone should make us ashamed of ourselves, especially when we always want to blame it on mental health problems. I am pro-life in the sense that I think the death penalty should no longer be a thing. I could go on, but you get it.

I promise you that if someone had yelled out “Murderer!” to me as I was walking into the Planned Parenthood clinic in June 2012, it would have made me feel far worse than I already did. It wouldn’t have stopped me from getting an unwanted abortion but would have made me feel even more condemned. Our convictions should not lead us to dehumanize others because we disagree with them. We need to acknowledge when our convictions lead us to become a threat to others because we find their perspective to be a threat to us. There are far more effective, trauma-

informed, empathetic, and helpful ways to communicate our perspectives without others feeling shamed or othered by our perspective.

It's not that power, right to possession, and personal perspectives are bad, but an unhealthy approach to any or all of them can prompt our hearts and minds to detect difference as a threat. On the flip side, when we seek God's power and work toward unity *with* differences, breakthroughs can happen. When we give what we possess and provide for those who are in need, we embody Christ, who gave even more—his whole self. And when our personal perspectives and convictions line up with who Christ was, then we can live them out wholeheartedly. This perspective would make all the difference and would make difference feel less threatening.

## The Abundance of Unity in Uncertainty

Differences disrupt and can cause uncertainty. And if I'm honest, I don't like uncertainty. I'm sure I'm not the only one when it comes to that. Uncertainty makes me anxious and unsettled. I realize I'm indeed not in control, and I don't like it. I love how Tracey Gee puts it in *The Magic of Knowing What You Want*: "Uncertainty can be an abundant place."<sup>5</sup> When I read that, I began to see uncertainty differently because in the midst of uncertainty, there's a limitless number of ways things can turn out. That is indeed an abundant place because we serve a kind God who gives us options and presents pathways to help us walk toward his will. So, really, uncertainty doesn't have to be scary but can be sacred. Similarly, difference can be sacred rather than scary. We can choose to engage difference from a place where we wonder more, trust God infinitely, and offer up any control we thought we had in exchange for peace in the God we know holds it all together.

Uncertainty is better battled with others. Unity in uncertainty could help us take what has previously been considered a threat and make it a doorway toward creating a more liberating, diverse, just, peaceful, and loving community of faith. Here's what I mean: We have created a formula for how all churches ought to sound, look, function, and run Sunday services. But what if we implemented elements that were new to us even when we weren't sure how they would work out? It could make our churches look like and reflect heaven more. For example, if we mixed our Sunday worship to not be solely contemporary Christian music (CCM) or just gospel music

but a mixture of genres and languages that represent the people of God, we would be blessed. Or what if we allowed more time between services (if we have more than one) to see if the Holy Spirit wants to extend a portion of the service or not? Or what if we let children share their testimonies, insights, or a word during service? These are just some examples of how blessed we could be if we embraced the uncertainty that difference brings. If we see uncertainty not as a threat but as a doorway for the Holy Spirit to do what he wants, forming us as people of God, we could be people who welcome difference, knowing that the uncertainty it can bring allows us to experience a bit of heaven on earth.

## Uniquely Unified

Before sharing this story, I want to start with a disclaimer and an invitation. The disclaimer is that I don't have all the answers and I welcome correction. The invitation is that you would begin to embody what this book is teaching and that even if you disagree with me, you wouldn't dismiss everything else written on these pages.

I started hosting the annual Sowers Summit in 2021 to create a space that ignites the body of Christ to be more than hearers of the gospel but sowers of it—to glorify God, make a local impact, and walk in internal freedom. It has been such a delight and honor to create this space, and I carefully consider who I invite into that space to speak. I usually invite speakers I know personally or through others. A few years ago, I invited a woman to speak on walking in obedience to God with boldness. I loved what she had shared in her testimony to me, and I knew her words would be an encouragement to others. However, when she learned that the conference would include a workshop on gender and sexuality, she reached out, wanting to better understand how we were going to handle the topic. After talking, we came to the realization that we embraced different theological stances: I fall under what some would call the traditional or historical sexual ethic, and she considers herself affirming.

She offered to still come and said she would love to learn from those who would be at the conference just as much as she hoped others would learn from her. I had to admit that I found her response a bit shocking because I knew that some people who share her interpretive perspective would call me a homophobe and decline to attend at all. But that's not what

she did. With her kind response in mind, I told her I would pray and think about it and get back to her. She was open to my approach and supported it.

For the next two to three weeks, I prayed and talked to several people in my life who do ministry in different ways. I talked to my pastors, to my husband, to a friend whose ministry had been deeply and publicly affected years earlier by wanting to bring together people from different interpretive backgrounds on this topic, to the speaker who was going to teach the gender and sexuality workshop at Sowers Summit that year—a person who has experienced gender dysphoria and is same-sex-attracted—and to a few other people. I wanted to process this decision through prayer but also from a wide spectrum of lived experiences and ministerial positions, but everyone I spoke to also held the traditional sexual ethic position. Ultimately, after those few weeks of conversations and prayers, I came to the conclusion that God was calling me to keep the invitation for this speaker to come to the conference.

I found that by inviting her to speak despite our different theology, I was engaging in unity—to be of the same heart and mind. This is oneness—not sameness. This is being uniquely unified but not uniform. She came to the conference and spoke as planned and actually spent the majority of her weekend with the speaker of the gender and sexuality workshop, who holds a different theological perspective on sexuality than she does. They connected deeply, and through this experience, I saw that unity is more powerful, more beautiful than sameness and uniformity.

I could have seen our differences in interpreting the biblical texts on sexuality as a threat, but I didn't. I chose another path. Although we still disagree, what brings us together is Jesus. This is the kind of oneness of mind where both people care about following Jesus and desire to see others do the same. It's not a threat, nor is it scary; it's actually unity.

When it comes to the topic of gender and sexuality in the church, we often see extreme responses such as “You are homophobic” from the affirming community, and “You are a heretic” from the nonaffirming community. But what if we don't run to these extreme corners but meet each other in the middle with dignity and a willingness to have a conversation? Because while we are yelling at one another, many of those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community are struggling to see the love of God among his people, and the world is just witnessing fighting Christians, not loving ones. There are people in your life who have a different

interpretive perspective of what Scripture says about divorce, women in leadership, and even how salvation is attained—those differences, if we let them, will amplify the division currently overwhelming the church. But if we agree to divide when dehumanization is present and unify even when differences are present, then perhaps we will no longer live in factions and sectors but will become one body of Christ. Jesus sat at tables with people he disagreed with, and it's important we never forget that. You might not invite someone you disagree with to come preach at your church or conference, but you can find your own way to listen to how God might be moving you to be unified with those who are different from you in order to share the same mind and spirit—the mind and Spirit of God.

We ourselves are very different from Jesus because we are sinners, and yet he welcomes us. He is God, and we are not. He is holy, and we are not. He is perfect, and we are not. He is sovereign, and we are not. He is all-knowing, and we are not. He is ever-present, and we are not. He is sinless, and we are not. He is mighty, and we are not. He is eternal, and we are not. He is all-powerful, and we are not. He saves, and we do not. He loves unconditionally, and we do not. He is faithful, and we are fickle. He is very different from us, and yet in our differences, he invites us to his family, table, and arms because our differences don't threaten him. He doesn't change his mind about what he claims to be true just because we have come to his table. And he also doesn't change his mind about us, despite what we think, believe, or interpret. We still have a seat available to us. Let's dare to do the same with and for one another.

Finally, all of you be like-minded and sympathetic, love one another, and be compassionate and humble, not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult but, on the contrary, giving a blessing, since you were called for this, so that you may inherit a blessing.

For the one who wants to love life  
and to see good days,  
let him keep his tongue from evil  
and his lips from speaking deceit,  
and let him turn away from evil  
and do what is good.  
Let him seek peace and pursue it,  
because the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous  
and his ears are open to their prayer.  
But the face of the Lord is against  
those who do what is evil. (1 Pet. 3:8–12)

# REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. What theologies do you hold that others in Christianity hold differently? What do you think about their theologies and how they came to their convictions?
2. Do you have people in your life who hold a different biblical interpretation of a topic than you do? If so, what are those, and have you ever talked to those people about the different interpretations you hold?
3. What power, possession, or personal conviction do you hold on to that may be holding you back spiritually from being more Christlike?
4. How can you view uncertainty as a way that leads to abundance in your life?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*God of peace who isn't threatened by difference, help us see with your eyes and live with your heart and learn with your mind. Help us engage in difference in a way that is healthy and holy. This is a difficult thing humanity has been dealing with for centuries, and yet we know we can call on you because you have not given up on us. So, lead us toward repentance, restoration, and renewal for the sake of the gospel reaching all different kinds of people. We thank you, God, that uncertainty can be an open door for your Spirit to move and for your kingdom to break through. In Jesus's merciful name, amen.*

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## SECTION TWO

# Practicing What He Preached

Have you ever heard the saying “practice what you preach”? In this section of the book, I invite us to four practices that will help us live out what Jesus preached. Because ultimately, what we preach and live out should be what he preached, has proclaimed, and has established as truth and ways of being like him. Here is what is coming up in the next few chapters.

Chapter 4, “Discerning When Division Harms or Helps.” Division is not always a bad thing. Even in the Bible we see God calling us to divide (or sanctify) ourselves from certain people, perspectives, and places. This chapter explores how the Bible calls us to unify around what is helpful and God-glorifying and to discern when to divide around things that harm humanity.

Chapter 5, “Discomfort as a Spiritual Practice.” Comfort is something most of us seek, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. But when pursuing comfort is all we seek to do, discomfort won’t be something we practice, which may cause us to live in a lack of awareness and with a sense of amplified entitlement and dissociation from the realities of other people’s stories. Discomfort should be a spiritual practice to engage in and grow in as a means of becoming more like Jesus.

Chapter 6, “Dethroning the Lie of Sameness.” We are stuck in a cycle of normalizing uniformity, so this chapter explores methods to dethrone uniformity from the high and mighty place we’ve given it. Then we can embrace the gift of oneness in Christ above the lie of sameness, which God has not called us to seek.

Chapter 7, “Disunity Breeds Injustice, Unity Feeds Justice.” This chapter further discusses how division harms and particularly points to how it perpetuates injustice. Thus, unity is one of the answers to injustice.

These four practices of discerning, discomfort, dethroning, and living justly are major components to transforming from anti-gospel people who accept division to people who return to the gospel to practice what Jesus preached.

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## FOUR

# Discerning When Division Harms or Helps

Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.

—Walter Brueggemann<sup>1</sup>

For to begin with, I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. Indeed, it is necessary that there be factions among you, so that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

—1 Corinthians 11:18–19

When we accept division, we live in defeat. I say this because the Enemy is most successful when the body of Christ is divided on the things that matter the most and unified on the things that oppress the most. He succeeds when we are divided because that is when we pick up our human weapons (unforgiveness, slander, oppression, etc.) instead of God's weapons described in Ephesians—the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, and feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:14–15). He succeeds when we are not united in our fight against dehumanization, oppression, and othering people. The truth is, I actually don't want to spend a lot of time talking about that fool (a.k.a. Satan) in this book, but our own foolishness combined with allowing that fool to wreak havoc has gotten us here. Therefore, we do need to talk about him and how we have all both directly and indirectly involved him in this problem of division.

In this chapter, we're going to explore our current culture of division and how it shows up in different ways and who it directly affects. Then, I'll walk us through where division is necessary. Let's first start with who and what division is harming, so we can understand the scope of the damage.

# Who and What Is Division Harming?

*Our witness to the world.* The world is witnessing a great divide within the church, and that divide is confusing those who aren't believers about Christianity, the gospel, and Jesus. The truth is that division weakens and harms our witness to the world. Therefore, it harms the world. We should certainly not be pretending in front of the world, but we should be mindful of how our behavior, life, and fruit are being watched by those God wants to save. We have devastatingly normalized dehumanization, especially among one another. One of the definitions of dehumanization is "to address or portray [someone] in a way that obscures or demeans that person's humanity or individuality."<sup>2</sup> And friends, we do this all the time. It grieves God and should grieve all of us. The way many Christians talk to one another, view one another, and treat one another is not the way of Jesus, and such a dividing factor should be unacceptable to us.

I'm writing this chapter the week after Charlie Kirk was killed in September 2025. He was a leader in the MAGA movement, working to elect President Donald Trump and boost the Republican Party through his own organization, Turning Point USA. I'm not writing these words to convince you of anything based on what you thought about him in his life or after his death but rather to talk about what occurred on social media the week he was killed. Some people decided that dehumanizing Kirk after his death was okay, while others decided that celebrating him as a martyr was okay. I disagreed with many things Kirk said, and I rebuke the things he said about marginalized groups, but you won't find me dehumanizing him to make my point. Not because I'm a super Christian but because I never want to dehumanize anyone, and I never want to behave like my enemy. Love them? Yes. Be like them? No. Here are some factors we should consider in sensitive situations, especially if we are going to share thoughts publicly:

1. Is what I'm saying about this person targeting them or revealing the truth for the benefit of others?
2. Is what I'm communicating about this person taking into consideration that they are an image bearer?
3. Is what I'm saying about this person the same thing those around me or at my church would say? And am I saying it, then, to please them?

And vice versa, am I saying things that oppose what my community thinks simply to argue with them?

4. Is what I'm saying necessary for me to say publicly?

5. Have I prayed for this person?

The world needs to witness a united church—one that is prayerful and thoughtful with what we say publicly. The simplest test to see if we are exemplifying Jesus to the world is to live by John 13:35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

*The wounded.* The people who have been harmed within the church have often been left to figure things out on their own in the way of an exile. The church has been divided into those who are church hurt and those who aren't, and being one or the other should not be a reason to be divided. While this may not be the case for everyone, it's possible that the person who was harmed by the church could also find healing in the church. I don't mean in the same church or with the person that harmed them; I mean the body of Christ can and should be the very place/people this person can rely on to grow in healing. When I was spiritually abused, I found healing not in a church building on Sundays but among the people of God who restored my hope in Jesus and the church. It helps no one when people in the church say hurtful comments like, “The church didn't hurt you; people did.” Or when they say that church hurt is an agenda instead of showing up for those who have actually been harmed. Or when people publicly condemn those who have been harmed by the church but never privately walk with someone who has experienced this harm. We don't want to leave the wounded unhealed, unseen, and unserved.

*The marginalized.* While the church adds to our distractions by fighting about theologies, debating stances on different issues, and canceling each other, the marginalized remain forgotten. The widows, the orphans, the poor, the sick, those in prison, and those who are hungry—the marginalized—continue to be ignored and abandoned. Division in the church is causing us to focus on our differences and to debate what is right or wrong while the marginalized are forgotten, underserved, overlooked, othered, and left behind. Something is wrong when those outside the church are serving the marginalized more than those inside the church. I'm not saying we as the church aren't doing anything, but the time and effort we put into fighting

about our differences takes away time from caring for those who need our attention, our care, our effort, and our time.

*The use of spiritual gifts.* James 2:8–9 says, “Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. If, however, you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” In verse 9, James makes it very clear that favoritism is a sin, and it causes division that harms. One example of favoritism that perhaps goes overlooked is with regard to spiritual gifts. We fall short when we celebrate and uplift the gift of teaching above all the other gifts. It’s not written in the Bible that teaching is more important or somehow more holy than other gifts (see 1 Cor. 12:4–11; Rom. 12:6–8; Eph. 4:11–12). When we overlook the gifts of mercy, administration, encouragement, tongues, wisdom, and others because we’re enamored with someone’s gift of teaching, we not only miss out on these other gifts, but we create an idol out of a gift.

The purpose of spiritual gifts, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:12–13, is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness.” Spiritual gifts aren’t necessarily for fun or to allow us to boast that we have talents but for the unity of the church and for the building up of spiritual maturity among one another. When we extend favoritism to certain gifts and exalt some over others, we dishonor the body of Christ and create hierarchies of importance that God didn’t establish. We fill the body with loud speakers and silenced administrators. This is not edifying or Christlike; this is self-centered and divisive. This says to some, “You’re needed and important,” and to others, “Your gifts aren’t as important so you’re not needed here.”

*Space for mutuality.* Mutuality is defined like this: “In a mutual exchange one is both affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is also receptive to the impact of the other. There is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other’s state. There is both receptivity and active initiative toward the other.”<sup>3</sup> Mutuality is a helpful posture in any culture and space but especially in the church, where power and positions take precedence over reaching people with the gospel. Mutuality invites us to lay down power, levels of giftedness, our

position, and even our vision or plans in exchange for God's vision and purpose.

Mutuality then can clear the way for unity from a place of community, dignity, and humility, making room for all people to be able to contribute to the very body of Christ they already belong to. This is the faithful work the Holy Spirit is inviting us to. In her book *A Just Mission* (which is a must-read), Mekdes Haddis says, "By laying down power we will gain the ability to embrace mutuality. It is not easy, yet it's the necessary work we must do as Western Christians."<sup>4</sup> When power is chased, division grows. When power is laid down, mutuality flourishes.

*The next generation.* I look at my son and I grieve for his generation because my generation is so focused on the issues and divisions of the present moment that we have little imagination for a hopeful future. The next generation is counting on us, though, to be the church God has called us to be and to be a people who represent Jesus well. When we don't do that, future generations will experience the bad, weak, and divided fruit that will result from our current disunity. What could it look like if we lived with future generations in mind? We could move in a different direction and choose to plant seeds of unity now so the sin of division would diminish as time passes and new trees of unity, justice, love, and freedom could bloom for many generations to come. We may not see the fruit in our lifetime, but the work against division is still worth doing for our children.

*The weary.* Division is detrimental because it leads to isolation, dissension, disunity, harm, lack of discernment, injustice, and sin; and many people are extremely weary of these issues. Whether they are weary from witnessing division and its consequences, or from hearing about it, reading about it, or living it, people are growing more and more weary of being part of a church divided. Consider: Have we added to the noise of social media that would cause people to feel weary? Have we remained silent in churches that need peacemakers to speak up? Have we perpetuated toxic Christian culture that promotes superficial and uniform Christianity? Are there small or big actions we have taken that lead to the problems that make people feel weary about the church? If so, how could we repent, see the harm we have caused, and work toward building hope instead?

*New believers.* We are each other's responsibility. When you gain a new sibling in your family, your job as an older sibling is to protect and take care of the baby; this also becomes your role when someone comes to Jesus

or someone decides to take their discipleship journey with Jesus seriously. Because of our responsibility as older siblings in Christ, we need to acknowledge how division produces a stumbling block for our new or younger brothers and sisters. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul writes about not being a stumbling block for one another. He talks about this in the context of food consumed, but the message of that passage is really about how we should be mindful of how we live, what we do, and what we engage with so that we don't discourage or confuse those who may be younger in faith. In verse 12, Paul goes as far as to say, "Now when you sin like this against brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ." When we are divided, we demonstrate to new believers that we do not actually love each other as we are meant to. If their very first impression or introduction to Christian community is division, dehumanization, and dishonorable disagreement, they will be confused—or worse, they could lose their faith. In 1 Corinthians 14:33 it says, "God is not a God of disorder but of peace." Another word for disorder is confusion. The Enemy is what God is not; therefore, if God is a God of peace, then the Enemy is the ruler of disorder and confusion, and we should not be exemplifying him. When the seeds of the gospel have been scattered and start to sprout in the good soil of someone's heart, may we not behave like the weeds that choke out the growth. May we instead be the ones that help deepen the roots.

## **Division and the Devil**

Beyond the world and the life we see with our eyes, there is a spiritual realm that we live in. Because of that, the question we should be asking ourselves is, "Are the things we've been fighting about worth the division, or should we be fighting someone or something else?" When I think about things Christians disagree on and want to cancel one another for, sometimes it can be things that don't call for unhealthy or dishonorable division but rather just healthy disagreement. For example, in our house we don't celebrate Halloween. No form of it—no costumes, no candy, no outreach. It's just another day to us. And yet, every October, we see an uproar among Christians who argue about whether Halloween should be celebrated. There are certainly demonic things involved with the holiday that Christians shouldn't engage or accept, but to tell someone they aren't Christian for engaging with the holiday ain't it, and this is coming from someone who

intentionally doesn't celebrate it. I could be wrong, but I don't feel like we'll get to heaven and hear Jesus say, "Hey, you shouldn't have celebrated Halloween!" Yet that's how serious we make it—to the point of condemning and dividing. When we make something a salvific and fruit issue instead of a perspective and interpretive issue, I wonder if the Enemy just laughs at us, knowing we've chosen to fight each other instead of him.

At the end of the *Wicked* movie that came out in 2024, the wizard says, "The best way to bring folks together is to give them a really good enemy." In the church, Satan has given us a common enemy—one another—and like the people of Oz, we've fallen for the trap. He has created plenty of opportunities for us to put each other down, call each other names, and hate one another, and he is literally living up to his mission described in John 10:10: "A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." Satan is stealing our discernment, killing our unity, and destroying our churches through division.

He's using his wizarding tricks, and we have fallen for them. So we fight about perspective-based things like Halloween instead of fighting against injustice. We fight about salvation-based things (which are important) like repentance or dying to self while not fighting against the normalization of sexism within the church. We fight about our theological interpretation of Scripture regarding sexuality and not against the homophobia and transphobia that exist within the church and that have harmed so many. We fight about ICE while completely forgetting to grieve who they are hunting and killing. We fight each other so much that we have no strength left to fight the real Enemy who is watching it all unfold just as he desires. There are so many agendas talked about these days, but we have to acknowledge that division is a demonic agenda and it's succeeding.

## **When Division Helps**

So far, we've talked about the harm that division can create and how we need to work toward unity, but there are some things that ought to divide us. As someone who prefers peace without the need to address conflict, I struggle with this concept. But the truth is that peacemaking includes addressing conflict. I often find myself wanting to minister to those who are blinded by the spirit of oppression and the principality of dehumanization,

but if they are not open or ready to hear the gospel truth, I am not responsible nor called to partner myself to them.

Here's what I mean: In Ephesians 5, we are presented with some verses to guide and ground us in this. Verses 6 to 11 say,

Let no one deceive you with empty arguments, for God's wrath is coming on the disobedient because of these things. Therefore, do not become their partners. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light—for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness, righteousness, and truth—testing what is pleasing to the Lord. Don't participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead expose them.

These verses can certainly be used to describe nonbelievers as it communicates that we were all once in darkness, which means some people still are, but now we are children of light and have a different path ahead of us. But these verses could apply to some people who would claim to be Christian right now, because their theology, values, and life exalt and make room for darkness to prevail and dehumanization to flourish. Verse 7 tells us very clearly not to become partners with such people, which means we should not unite with them. This doesn't mean we disregard, dehumanize, disrespect, or dishonor them, but it surely does mean that we discern to stay separate from them. If so, our role is not to participate in their fruitlessness but to expose them.

How do we discern and how do we expose those Christians we should not unify with? Verse 9 guides us in discernment by telling us that the fruit of the light is goodness, righteousness, and truth. The actions, thoughts, principles, and theologies that reflect goodness, righteousness, and truth are of the light. Goodness and righteousness are fairly easy to understand, but how do we discern what is truth? Someone can be saying something that sounds like biblical truth, but if it's delivered in a way that's clearly full of hate, judgment, and condemnation, then it's not truth. Even in Matthew 23, when Jesus is going off at the Pharisees and religious leaders, he is not dehumanizing them but correcting them. Sometimes, we excuse the harsh way we talk to and about people by saying that Jesus was like that, but we are not Jesus, though we are called to be like him. Jesus was talking with authority that was godly and void of any sin. I'm not saying we can't correct, disciple, teach, or even rebuke people even while being someone who sins as well. Clearly that's impossible because every human being sins. What I'm saying is that our sin can get in the way of how we communicate. We may not have the purest motives or the gentlest approach. There is a

way we can say truth and be of truth—by graciously correcting and rebuking one another and being considerate of how we say things, who we say it to, and when we say it. Such an approach is particularly important when dealing with those who have chosen to partner with darkness and dehumanization, especially within the body of Christ.

We might also wisely choose to divide ourselves from those who attempt to cause division. There are Christians causing division through propaganda, slander, misinformation, misuse of Scripture, and lies, even creating lists of Christians not to associate with or listen to because they advocate for the marginalized. But here's what Scripture says in Romans 16:17–18: “Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who create divisions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned. Avoid them, because such people do not serve our Lord Christ but their own appetites. They deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting with smooth talk and flattering words.” Even if such people proclaim to be Christian, they aren't. We must, therefore, distance ourselves from them. Again, some division can be helpful. But not because we don't like someone but because they are perpetuating darkness, destruction, division, and dehumanization.

While you might be wanting me to name specific issues and examples that are worthy of division, I believe it's not about drawing a legalistic line or creating a checklist of dos and don'ts. You have the Holy Spirit to help you discern what is dark and dehumanizing theology that you should distance yourself from and when you're being called to correct, rebuke, and dismantle that theology. We have grown too accustomed to getting answers from Christian leaders, sermons, ChatGPT, and Google, but perhaps if we sit in God's Word and listen to how the Spirit is moving, we would get the discernment we need to see clearly. We must awaken from the lull of false peace we've grown accustomed to. Now is the time to repent and move in a different direction. The gospel truth is a gift that so many people are searching for, and when we have it, we ought to share it and give it out as well. Discerning the truth is just as important as discerning how we hand out that truth. This is why it is important to carefully choose who we listen to, what resources we engage with, and what ministries we support when searching for biblical truth and teaching. We need discernment to search for the truth, listen to the truth, know the truth, and communicate the truth well.

We live in an age of discernment bloggers and heresy hunters, and I don't desire to be either of those; instead, I want to encourage you to trust

the Holy Spirit within you and the community around you. Because the body of Christ should be united in awareness of what is harming the people of God and their witness as well as what's harming the world. I will give you this encouragement through some questions to consider when discerning dark and dehumanizing theology while also discerning distractions in your own life that may create obstacles for your discernment process.

When discerning harmful and divisive theology, ask:

- Is this theology oppressive?
- Is this interpretation of Scripture dehumanizing someone?
- Is the perspective dark- or light-centered?
- Is this theology, idea, doctrine, or perspective using language that dehumanizes or others a group of people?

When discerning the distractions in your life and mind, ask:

- What theologies did I grow up with that I know to be biblically true or Christ-centered, and which were made by humans or are legalistic?
- If I were to engage in a compassionate but corrective conversation with someone in my church, community, family, or theologically aligned world, would I be judged, othered, exiled, or condemned? If so, what is God calling me to do here? To reconcile, rebuke, repent, and/or reform?
- Have I grown to believe things that dehumanize others?

Sit with these questions and seek the Holy Spirit. If discomfort rises, consider why. If you feel defensive, ask what is lying underneath the surface. If guilt and shame arise, lay them at the foot of the cross and turn toward a new way.

## **False Peace Through Silence**

Discernment is a gift from God that helps us test and pay attention to what is true and how to communicate the truth effectively. Knowing that we ought to not unite seems pretty clear, for example, when it comes to the beliefs of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hebrew Israelites, and

other groups that use the Bible for their basis of faith but don't believe the same truth we believe. Other groups use the Bible for their basis of faith but use it to weaponize, oppress, and dehumanize—which is another time to divide. This is a division around the heart of God. If we had lived in the 1700s, as another example, we would clearly not be right to unite with those who were enslaving others. They were sinning against people, God's Word, and God himself by living as enslavers. They were weaponizing God's Word by removing all texts related to liberation and using it to control those they enslaved. They were oppressing image bearers of God by forcefully and unethically requiring them to work and by claiming ownership of their beings. Enslavers were engaging in the deepest form of dehumanization that we can possibly imagine by taking away the dignity of image bearers, and to unite with them would mean complicity in their sin. Isaiah 1:17 says, "Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause." These actions are helpful examples that connect to Ephesians 5:9, which describes deeds that bear goodness, righteousness, and truth (we should specifically not miss the "correct the oppressor" part).

The verse in Isaiah does not say unite with the oppressor or dehumanize them—but correct them. Effective correction often comes through relationship, which is how most people likely will listen. But correction can also include public denouncing and dismantling. In the case of oppressive acts, our role as Christians is to denounce doctrines that dehumanize, and part of our discernment is knowing when and how to speak out. Sometimes, we react publicly about certain things that cause death and dehumanization to people, but then we become silent in our day-to-day actions. For some, it's because we're afraid of what our political party, denomination, race, friend group, or church might think or how they might get upset at us or even exile us for speaking against certain actions or policies, so we choose to stay quiet. In those moments, we're choosing a unity that brings about false peace instead of choosing a unity that brings about liberation and justice.

Are you willing to pay the cost of being misunderstood or suffer the discomfort of being questioned by your immediate or comfortable community for standing for the truth, fighting the Enemy, and living out Isaiah 1:17? This willingness is the difference between understanding what biblical unity is and is not. It's the difference between discerning what

division harms image bearers and what division helps us be witnesses of Christ in this dark world. It's a decision to unify in truth for the purpose of harmony among one another and glory to God. But biblical unity is not just getting along for the sake of peacekeeping and being comfortable. Biblical unity is being one in mind in Christ by living his way, not ours. Biblical unity is choosing to not be divided because of a difference of interpretation of Scripture that is not salvation-based. Biblical unity is walking in the will of God together and living out what Ephesians 5:15–21 invites us into:

Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise—making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So don't be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit: speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

Dividing ourselves from darkness is necessary, and we must choose the path of unity we are going to walk together. Unity is the goal, and we must get there together, discerning what is good, righteous, and true. For as Jesus says in Matthew 5:14–16, “You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” May we be children of light and not of darkness as we discern when division helps and when it harms while remaining on the path of unity.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS**

1. What would you consider dark and dehumanizing actions and ideas that you should distance yourself from and divide from?
2. In what ways has division hurt you in your own spiritual growth?
3. Name a time when you stayed silent for unity's sake and a time when you stayed silent in a way that caused division.
4. What is the Spirit helping you discern right now when it comes to unity and division? How can you call on your community to help you discern well? Or who can you learn from to help you discern?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*Generous God who gives us discernment, thank you for your presence in our life and for giving us the discernment we need to know when division harms and helps. Thank you, Jesus, for living a life that testifies of these differences and helps us walk in the pathway of following you as you lead us through discernment. Help us, God, in our weariness, mistakes, and divisions as we seek to genuinely follow you and reflect you in the world. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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## FIVE

# Discomfort as a Spiritual Practice

Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

—Galatians 6:2

Those who, in the biblical phrase, would save their lives—that is, those who want to get along, who don't want commitments, who don't want to get into problems, who want to stay outside of a situation that demands the involvement of all of us—they will lose their lives. What a terrible thing to have lived quite comfortably, with no suffering, not getting involved in problems, quite tranquil, quite settled, with good connections politically, economically, socially—lacking nothing, having everything. To what good? They will lose their lives.

—Óscar Romero<sup>1</sup>

I love to learn and have been committed to growing and learning throughout my life through school, trainings, degrees, experiences, and certifications, but one of my best teachers has been discomfort. Ultimately, discomfort is for our spiritual formation and it's a teacher that invites us to selflessness, forgiveness, healing, awareness, humility, and—if we let it—unity. I've learned the power of discomfort primarily by being an “other” in a world where most spaces and systems were not made with me in mind. Sometimes this can be really unsettling and uncomfortable, and sometimes I see it as an opportunity God is inviting me into. Because a level of discomfort is normal for me, I have seen how it has matured, encouraged, carried, and humbled me throughout the years. Being an “other” has helped grow my empathy for the marginalized because I am also that marginalized person. Being an “other” has given me a glimpse into why God cares so much about justice because I have experienced injustice. Being an “other” has formed my biblical understanding in a unique way because I'm reading Scripture with the eyes of the people God consistently tells the Bible reader to serve—the marginalized, overlooked, forgotten, and neglected. Being an “other” has spiritually formed me because it has shown me that the purity in God's heart for humanity reflects worth and dignity for all and not just some. One of the ways we can practice discomfort is by becoming the

“other” in spaces and confronting our comfort zones if our comfort jeopardizes the dignity of others or the unity of the church.

Most of us don’t like to feel uncomfortable, but following Jesus is the conscious choice of being aware that we are walking a path that will be uncomfortable. It’s uncomfortable to have to forgive others. It’s uncomfortable to ask for forgiveness. It’s uncomfortable to be selfless and not do what we prefer. It’s uncomfortable to sacrifice our time, rest, and energy to show up for others. It’s uncomfortable to live a life of denying ourselves to follow Jesus. For most of us, comfort is our preferred choice, but discomfort can lead to spiritual growth.

Think about terms the world loves to use, such as “protecting my peace” and “leaving behind anything that no longer serves me.” These ideas spring from a place of prioritizing our own comfort over engaging with certain people, places, and perspectives. To a certain extent and in certain situations, we need boundaries. But if we are honest, we should ask if we have taken those boundaries to an extreme. Have we used them to center our comfort at the expense or discomfort of someone else? In many ways, our choices to live comfortably can intersect with the outcome of someone else experiencing dehumanization or a lack of dignity. For example, it’s ideal to be able to pay \$5 for a shirt, and you can find sellers that pride themselves on those low prices. Yet many of those rock-bottom prices are made possible by companies that mistreat their workers. Our comfort, preference, and ease come at the cost of others experiencing extremely low wages and unsafe conditions, and prioritizing comfort in these situations is not the way to follow Jesus.

There will be times when the values of God’s kingdom go against the ease we desire, and to live in Christlike integrity, we must choose the path of discomfort. This is not a bad thing; rather, discomfort can form and grow us into healthy, selfless, justice-minded, and loving disciples of Jesus. Think about the disciples who followed him during his earthly ministry. Most of them did not sleep in their own homes for three years. Most of them didn’t know when, where, and what their next meal would be. Most of them didn’t know what Jesus would do at any given moment. Most of their theology was challenged as they walked with Jesus, who showed them that some things they had learned growing up were taught wrong or misinterpreted. The disciples were uncomfortable, but they chose that life because the gift of being disciples of Jesus was better than anything else. They understood

the worth and freedom that came with their roles. Throughout this chapter, we'll explore different components and ideologies that keep us in our comfort zone and we'll consider how we can choose discomfort as a spiritual practice that forms us into Christ and invites us to unity with those we don't look like, sound like, or think like.

## **The Reason for and the Dangers of Labels**

In the US census that we fill out every ten years, there's a section on race that does not include Latino/a as an option. I remember the first time I filled out this census, I very quickly checked Black as my option for race. But the community of mixed race Latinos around me were unsure how to answer. I've already discussed in this book that race is a social construct, but even a social construct can bring great meaning to someone's life. I don't know what race I would have selected when I was younger. Some folks in my Dominican community are not too fond of identifying as Black because colonization took a heavy toll across the world to convince folks that Blackness is a bad thing. During my younger years in a high school in a small town in New Jersey, I would get bullied because my skin tone was darker than the sole African American girl in the school. I just didn't know who I was, how to identify, and what that meant for my skin tone, hair, and identity. Once I did fully embrace my Blackness, I held that label with pride. But the thing about labels is that they can be a helpful tool to help us walk in confidence in who God intentionally created us to be, or they can be a dangerous tool used to divide, disrespect, and dehumanize.

Ultimately, labels are a practice of comfort because they help us identify what people are and aren't, but labels also come with baggage and assumptions. Even when you claim certain labels for yourself, others can still mislabel you or argue that you're not who you say you are. Incorrect assumptions make you feel the need to overexplain and prove yourself. The reason some people want to categorize others is because they're feeling uncomfortable with the unknown. To a certain extent, I get it. When inviting people to partner with me in ministry, I want to be mindful of what labels they hold and what they believe, so that even though we may not be in full agreement with our theologies or values, I can be sure we're aligned in our hearts nonetheless. Oneness, not sameness. It's something I need to discern because sometimes labels mean something and sometimes they don't. For

example, not everyone who says they are a Christian believes Jesus is God or that Jesus died and was resurrected or that Jesus saves. Some people who say they are Christian are culturally Christian because of where they live or their family heritage or a desire to win the favor (or votes) of people when it benefits them. So, clearly, saying we are Christian these days isn't enough. It grieves me to say that, but it's true. On the other hand, having to give everyone labels just feels like another opportunity for division. If I say I'm a conservative, then progressives can assume I don't think they're real Christians; if I say I'm progressive, then conservatives could also assume I'm not a real Christian. If I say I'm egalitarian or complementarian, I will encounter a whole line of assumptions of what I think about gender, gender roles, and leadership. Same with when I say I'm a pastor. There's a weight and potential judgment that come with that title, depending on who I'm talking with or who is informed of that title. It seems like there's no winning with labels.

Labels may give us clarity on how to engage or not engage with a person, but is that the sole purpose of labels? Perhaps we can flip our use of them on its head to see labels as an opportunity to disagree with dignity and be curious and open to learning about a person and/or label. I'm writing with the hopes that we can unify in acknowledging the problems and also unify in coming up with solutions. Perhaps the solution is to not assume what people mean when they do use a label. Perhaps the solution is to focus more on the fruit and less on how to label the person. Perhaps the solution is not to be so focused on labels but rather focus on what unites us in order to walk in the things that matter most to God, like justice, freedom, salvation, forgiveness, repentance, love, mercy, people, and peace.

One of the things I think we forget is that not everyone uses the same labels/words in the same ways we do in our little worlds. I remember the first time I heard the word "evangelical." It was 2020 and people were using that word more than ever, and I was confused as to what it meant. In my Christian upbringing, we didn't use that word, and I'd never heard that word while I was working in churches in my twenties, either. Now I hear it often, but I've barely met two people who have defined it the same way. In 2020, it was mainly White people saying it to define the cultural Christian upbringing they had and perhaps were hurt by, or they used it synonymously with being called Christian. Then the terms "exvangelical" and "postevangelical" came on the scene, which referred to folks who

perhaps still considered themselves people of faith but who had walked away from the traditions in the evangelical church they were raised in. For someone like me who didn't grow up with those labels at all, it's been fascinating and confusing to witness how they have been used in so many different ways, pushing and pulling people together and apart. For me, these terms were just never in my vocabulary, and I probably will never use "evangelical" to describe myself because of how much baggage comes with it.

Even if we use labels to try to bring clarity, they can cause great division among people. People can identify however they want and use the labels they desire, but we do have to be honest with ourselves at some point and acknowledge when we have exhausted ourselves of terms to the point of disunity and division. We also have to be honest about the culture and climate of where we are in history. So many words being used these days are being weaponized or no longer have their original meaning—words like "evangelical," "justice," "woke," and "DEI." When we use labels to talk about a group of people or an ideology because that's what makes us most comfortable, we must simultaneously define how we are using the word so there is clear understanding of what we mean. All of this requires extra work that we may not want to do, but this work is practicing discomfort. We choose to be mindful with our words and not be quick to label others. We choose to lay down our power of labeling people and let them claim their own labels. The main idea is to take the time to be curious in our approach to labels and clear in our definitions so we don't fall into the trap of assumptions, which are a root of division.

## **Comfort in Tribalism**

The founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, when claiming to pray and talk to God about the state of Christianity (note, he was likely not asking about it on a global scale but on a local/national scale, which is already a red flag), asked God, "Which of all the sects was right?" Smith claims God said "that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight."<sup>2</sup> What kind of pride does it take to think we have heard that message from the Lord? To receive a revelation that no one else has received in which God claims that millions of people are wrong. We could say Joseph Smith was wrong, that he was an extremist and a false

teacher (he was those things), but many Christians today show the same hubris as he did. There are Christians who practice a version of this prideful posture today through tribalism and the idol of their own theology.

Tribalism is defined as strong in-group loyalty.<sup>3</sup> Notice that the loyalty is not to a leader but to a group. Healthy Christianity is about loyalty and worship to one God; tribalism is loyalty to a group. For some, tribalism looks like being loyal to a denomination, while for others it can be loyalty to a church, a parachurch organization, a specific Christian celebrity's ministry, or a subculture of Christianity. But tribalism isn't of God's kingdom.

Tribalism can show up in the church when people are always in full agreement and never question authority, systems, and structures. It's dangerous because it can perpetuate the sin of pride that comes when you go beyond pride for your own church or denomination and dismiss any and all churches, denominations, or groups who aren't aligned with yours. This dismissiveness is not how it works when it comes to being a human in a diverse world. Just because we are a part of something doesn't mean we automatically oppose something else. Just because we are a part of something doesn't mean we automatically disagree with everything else.

This sense of loyalty is parallel to favoritism and partiality that I described in the section of chapter 4 about spiritual gifts. James 2:8–9 says, “Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. If, however, you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” Here, James is talking about the poor and how we treat them, but this advice can be applied in any context where we are choosing some people over others and creating a tribe around division. First Corinthians 1:10 tells us, “Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.” Paul is not telling us to all be the same but to be in harmony—that is, unity. He's also calling us to unity within the body of Christ, not just a church, denomination, theological camp, or Christian world but the whole global body of Christ.

Tribalism doesn't allow us to practice discomfort because it keeps us comfortable in familiar spaces or theologies we agree with (or have been taught to agree with). This creates a high school lunchroom picture of

cliques based on commonality, comfort, and common ground. But God is not inviting his people to be a part of a tribe; he's inviting us to be a part of a family. A family where everyone is welcome at the table and spaces aren't labeled for specific kinds of people. To live out this vision, we have to start by practicing discomfort and both inviting and sitting with people who are different from us. What a beautiful picture to actually be a family of God that would choose to serve one another and see each other as neighbors despite our differences. It looks similar to the picture of the Last Supper, which included disciples who came from different stories and backgrounds and even one that Jesus disagreed with (Judas), and yet they were all welcomed at the table with Jesus. Practicing discomfort makes more room at the table for other image bearers to join the family of God, and to do that, we must confront our idols.

## The Idol of Our Theology

If there's one thing the Bible talks about a whole lot, it's idolatry. Idolatry can simply be defined as the things we put before God. For some, that's their kids, and for others that's food. For some, that's work, and for others that's money. For some, that's people, and for others that's a dream. An idolatry I see too often but rarely hear mentioned is the idolatry of our theology: when we put what we believe about God above God himself. One (God) reigns supreme and unchanging, while the other (theology) can change as it is based on our human effort to interpret. We may think our theology and God should be one and the same, but they should not be.

We have made idols of our theology, placing our theology both above God and others. We have decided that what we believe provides a reason to judge and condemn others, literally creating a divide between us and them and putting ourselves in our own designated corners when we weren't created or meant to live in a square with corners but in a body with unique parts aligned to one another. We have decided that being comfortable in our little world of agreement is the right and righteous way and become content with Reformed folks being over there, Pentecostals being over there, Catholics being over there, nondenominational folks being over there, and Anglicans being over there. We have created what I've named *beliefism*—the idea of othering and dehumanizing people because of their beliefs. Similar to racism, sexism, and ableism, beliefism can be more harmful than

we may realize because it's not just about a difference of opinion but about disagreeing in un-Christlike ways, employing slander, dehumanization, factions, and othering.

Moving away from an idolatry of theology will require practicing discomfort and theological humility, which allows us to be open-minded, compassionate, and mature about our engagement with other theologies without feeling that our beliefs are threatened. Theological humility doesn't mean we must change our theology, leave our church, or stop believing what we believe when we encounter different ideas; instead, it makes room to actively listen to others with the intent of extending compassion, curiosity, and care because they are individuals sharing a perspective. This is essential because too often we focus only on the belief and miss that it's being shared by a person. We need theological humility because it helps us practice discomfort in the midst of disagreement while still centering unity and honoring God in the midst of the interaction. God doesn't call us to sameness but oneness. Ephesians 4:1–6 offers us a helpful understanding of what oneness ought to look like:

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Paul emphasizes humility, gentleness, patience, peace, and love when talking about unity and emphasizes that we should make an effort to keep the unity among one another. Take a moment to pause and ask yourself, “Have I made every effort to be unified with and within the body of Christ, especially the ones I disagree with or would even consider enemies?” It's essential that we examine ourselves and invite God into our practice of discomfort, so he can show us how to be humble, when to repent, and how to grow in unity. I find Sowers Summit to be such a beautiful picture of this. Those who come share a common ground: We are people hungry for healthy Christianity, justice, diversity, and biblical truth but coming from all different denominational, cultural, linguistic, regional, and theological backgrounds. Our theology is a good tool to help us navigate life as we practice the teachings of the Bible, but if it becomes our idol then it blocks us from living out the greatest commandment of loving God and loving our

neighbors well because it will become more important than both those things.

## Become the Other

We all hold identities that carry different weight in different spaces. That weight could be because of the privileges we hold with our identity or because we are a part of the majority. An example of this is Whiteness, being male, being able-bodied, or not experiencing poverty. Being White is the standard in most spaces and systems in the United States. Men hold privileges that women do not hold. Being able-bodied comes with privileges that those who are disabled do not have, and people who are wealthy hold more privilege than the poor. And then there are the privileges that come from being the majority in a particular space. This experience can vary among people as they move from space to space. For example, the church where I met my now-husband when I was a teenager was 98 percent Dominican, so I was part of the majority in that community and space. Although I had some experiences of being othered there, it wasn't for being Dominican.

Those who hold a privileged identity or are a part of a majority likely don't experience "othering" frequently—or at all. They are considered the standard in multiple ways, so they rarely experience being othered in such a way that oppresses or even challenges them. They unfortunately don't have the built-in opportunity to be spiritually formed by being the other. However, people in this position can practice putting themselves in spaces and circumstances where they are not the majority in the room and where their needs, comforts, and identity don't fit the culture of that room.

When Jesus came to earth, he chose to leave the comfort of his place in heaven and come to earth as the other. He intentionally came in a political time that he knew would be challenging and was born to a poor Jewish family when Jews were still very much living in oppression. He was distinctly different and didn't belong anywhere because he was both human and God. If we read through the Gospel narratives, we see how othered he was for his difference, to the point that he was eventually killed because of it. Choosing to intentionally experience othering is another way Jesus calls us to follow him—to be willing to enter spaces where we feel we don't naturally belong and to learn from the people around us. When we engage

in being with one another with intentionality, we can't help but be confronted by the differences we encounter and by the discomfort we feel from them. When we commit ourselves to sit in that discomfort, we allow the Holy Spirit to hold up a mirror showing us where we may have contributed to or perpetuated the current culture of sameness that exists in Christianity—a culture that others people who are different and maintains the comfort of the majority at the emotional and mental cost of those who have been othered. If we learn to practice discomfort on a consistent basis, confronting our internal biases and judgments, then we can encounter others with the empathy that Jesus demonstrated for us as our high priest as we see in Hebrews. Then, and only then, can division diminish and dignity increase.

## **Learning from Those We Have Othered**

In Jesus's life and ministry, he often called out, healed, and gave special attention to those society othered and marginalized—such as children, women, people deemed unclean or untouchable, the sick, and the disabled. In our modern society, the same categories of people are still seen and treated as less than, despite how much we've "progressed" over time. When we as a society don't protect, dignify, and love the most vulnerable, we have lost sight of what is most important, what Jesus considered important. So let's flip the script and open ourselves to learning from those who are vulnerable and marginalized, humbling ourselves to learn at their feet.

### ***Children***

Our postures and policies when it comes to kids reveal a great deal about what we actually think about children. They tell a narrative of the value or the lack of value we place on kids, based on their age or ability to contribute to the world. Kids are othered every day in different ways. That's something we should stand against, dismantle, and rebuke, interceding for kids because they do matter and we can learn so much from them. If we listen to children speak, we will see that they have an understanding of God, justice, love, and the world that is sometimes more vast and profound than the views of grown-ups. Children have a pure sense and view of the world that often gets tainted too early in childhood. This kind of purity is what we

must embrace as grown-ups and as the church at large. When we can break down our cynicism, our biases, and our pride and learn from children, we take Jesus's words seriously because we dignify children by loving them, honoring them, seeing them, and becoming like them.

Children can also help us learn by helping us return to a mindset that is innocent, compassionate, curious, and full of wonder. This mindset may be uncomfortable for some of us, but unity requires curiosity and purity. In Matthew 18:3–5, Jesus says to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, . . . unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one child like this in my name welcomes me.” We are to be like children and also to welcome children—they are not a burden or distraction but an essential part of humanity. What can we learn from the children in our lives?

## **Women**

Jesus didn't play about his sisters, and in John 21:25 something very interesting is written: “And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if every one of them were written down, I suppose not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written.” Think about that when it comes to all the texts that show Jesus interacting with women. Though there were many things he did that were not written down, the Holy Spirit ensured that the many interactions Jesus had with women were indeed written down for us to read and know. Jesus showed us that he wanted proximity to women as a means of testifying to their dignity for all to see. But within Christianity, because of fights around interpretations of Scripture passages about women, patriarchal worldviews, and the othering of women, we listen and learn from women in selective ways that malform us as believers.

The story of Moses is particularly powerful, too, because it shows God using women to protect Moses, love him, care for him, raise him, and encourage him throughout his lifetime. From the very beginning of his story, even before Moses was born, there were the midwives named Shiphrah and Puah who risked it all to protect the unborn boys Pharaoh was trying to kill (Exod. 1:15–22). Then in Exodus 2 we are introduced to Moses's brave mom, who hid him for a while and had the faith to put him in some treacherous waters and believe he would be okay (Exod. 2:1–3). All

the while, Moses's big sister Miriam watched over him in the water to ensure he would be okay and kept watch until he was found by Pharaoh's daughter and taken to be her son (Exod. 2:4–7). Moses was surrounded by women willing to risk it all, to ensure he would survive and live. Miriam took a risk by even talking to Pharaoh's daughter, and Pharaoh's daughter took a risk by adopting the baby and ensuring he could be nursed well to survive, even while knowing that her dad wanted all Hebrew baby boys to not live (Exod. 2:8–10). Throughout his life Moses is ministered to, rescued by, helped by, supported by, and raised by women. God didn't have to craft the story that way, but he did, and I wonder if it was to show the power of women—especially in a time when women were undervalued, abused, and used (much like today).

God made sure to highlight the story of women in different roles that includes mothers, working women, wives, leaders, and sisters to show he values women in his kingdom. In our womanhood, we are made in the image of God, and we portray God's motherly care, his rescue in times of trouble, his gentleness leading to repentance. We are helpers as he is our helper. We are healers as God is our healer. We are tenacious as God is tenacious. We bleed and suffer as Christ bled and suffered. There is much to learn from women, and there is much for women to teach. In submitting ourselves to learn from, listen to, and elevate women, we can see a whole new side of God we may not have opened our eyes to before.

## ***The Poor***

One group of people consistently discussed in the Bible is the poor. Serving them is a topic seen throughout the Old Testament and sometimes includes a rebuke to Israel for neglecting to see and serve the poor. In the New Testament, we see Jesus and Paul teaching about giving or being generous, which in part means dignifying and caring for the poor. I wonder if their invitation to give to, care for, and protect the poor also has to do with learning from them and putting ourselves in their shoes. James 1:27 says, "Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world." I would think that our "looking after" looks like serving but also just being with people. In being with the poor, we see things from their perspective. We are forced to examine our consumerism and materialistic values. We see that there is much to be received from those

who, according to the world, don't have much to give and that God honors them.

At our church I lead a ministry called the Compassion Team. The purpose of this team is to live out God's heart by extending justice, mercy, and care for others. We just started the team, but we're making plans for the upcoming holiday season to host an outreach event to feed and give to the community. One way we can have proximity to the poor and actually engage with them is by doing what we will do at this event, which is not just serve them food but eat with them at the table. Not just give them items we've collected but actually ask them what they want and need. We offer dignity by extending compassion and by sharing food and stories and looking into each other's eyes to connect. The poor give us a vision of what community can look like, what gratitude can look like, what perseverance can look like, and how mutual care for one another is the heartbeat that carries them every day.

### ***People of Color***

Unless a church or ministry is solely centered around serving one cultural group, many Christian spaces have majority White leadership, so people of color are often in spaces where they are the other and are learning from White Christians. This isn't always a bad thing, but it is bad that the reverse is uncommon. In churches or Christian spaces where the leadership includes more people of color than White people, it is likely that there will be fewer White members learning from this church or ministry leadership.

The story of the Good Samaritan includes powerful messages of justice and compassion, but I also think that Jesus was doing something important when he emphasizes that it is a Samaritan who is serving the beaten man. Through this story, Jesus is teaching his disciples and other Jewish listeners that they could learn from Samaritans (descendants of Israelites who intermarried with pagans). Jesus wants to invite his disciples to learn from the othered, and that is an invitation for all races and ethnicities. Putting ourselves in churches and Christian spaces or friend groups that are different from us culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and racially pushes us to be completely out of our comfort zones and to learn and know God from that place.

This is an invitation for both the White community and people of color who tend to congregate in homogeneous groups. We invited women from

our church to go together to the JUNTAS event in Chicago, and a few women in our group of nine were not Latina. It was beautiful to see them so intentionally and openly attend an event with Spanish worship, Spanish words said here and there, and Latin American flags everywhere. These women humbled themselves to be an other and to learn from other sisters of color.

## ***The Deconstruction Community***

Why are we so afraid of those who have questions? Why do we exile the one who has been harmed in the church and is now doubting their faith? Why do we other the ones who are brave enough to ask why they hold a certain belief and where that belief came from? We don't need to fear deconstruction or those who walk through it; we can actually learn from them and with them. Instead of having a heart of judgment toward them, why don't we listen to them and also repent to them of wrong they may have suffered within the church?

In the same way, we should discerningly and curiously engage with those who have never deconstructed. If they've never had a question about the doctrines, theologies, and beliefs they grew up in and with, they could be perpetuating bad theology that causes division, dehumanization, and harm within the church. This is not to say those who have never deconstructed are the enemy. Nor are the ones who have deconstructed. But we can learn that those who have deconstructed are looking for answers, and just as God consistently and graciously met people with their questions in the Bible, we get to do the same, while also learning from them.

In John 20:25–28, after Jesus has been resurrected, we find the story of his disciple Thomas.

So the other disciples were telling him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "If I don't see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe." A week later his disciples were indoors again, and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Don't be faithless, but believe." Thomas responded to him, "My Lord and my God!"

My friend and pastor Tim Holmes preached on Thomas, and he said,

Thomas doesn't want secondhand faith. He wants to see Jesus for himself. And that's not rebellion; it's honesty. Too often we shame people for doubting, when doubt is often the doorway to deeper faith because faith doesn't cancel curiosity. Actually, Scripture is filled with faithful people who had deep questions (e.g., Job, David, Mary). Jesus then repeats Thomas's own words, proving he'd heard even what was said in private. He meets Thomas exactly where he is. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds, not as a test, but as a gift. And he doesn't rebuke him, he engages him. Jesus shows us that relationship comes before rebuke. He moves from doubt to devotion, from conditions to confession: "My Lord and my God!" That's the most personal and profound statement of faith in John's gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Just as we can learn something from Thomas here, so we can learn from those around us who have questions. We can practice discomfort by not judging those who deconstruct and by walking alongside them in their curiosity. We can learn to examine our own beliefs, question what we've been taught in our church or denominational traditions, and unlearn and learn anew. Deconstructing can feel terrifying because you're opening up to the possibility that what you grew up with, what you've been taught, could be wrong, so another thing we can learn from them is their boldness to sacrifice the comfort of what they've always known in order to find Jesus's truth, even if it's a journey of discomfort. In our practice of discomfort as spiritual formation, what better way to learn than to be in the presence of, read books by, listen to podcasts from those who have done the work and continue to do so? While we may not arrive at the same conclusion, the work of deconstruction is an absolutely necessary part of maturing in faith.

## ***The Neurodivergent and Disabled***

My son has a disability. It's not immediately physically apparent, so he can pass for being neurotypical for a moment or so, and as I'm writing these words, he's about to enter pre-K for the first time. I've been afraid that this world wasn't made for him. I don't fear that for him only in school settings but also, and perhaps particularly, in the Christian spaces he'll be in as our son. And what I mean by "not made for him" is the same fear I have for all groups of people who have been othered by society and the church. The world wasn't made for those on the margins and those who are different. But what if we decided to practice discomfort and remake the world for the ones on the margins? What if we centered their needs and applied them across the board for everyone else? For example, what if we use overhead lighting in worship services instead of concert lights that illuminate the stage, so as not to distress or cause a seizure for those who have sensitivity

to bright lights? What if we include speakers with disabilities in our conference lineups or provide American Sign Language translation and assistive listening devices for those who are hard of hearing at our gatherings? What if we just pay a little more attention to the ways our streets, services, spaces, and society aren't made for the disabled or neurodivergent and try to change some things to show we prioritize them? Maybe we could ask those in our midst who have a disability or who are neurodivergent, "What do you need and how can we make this world a place where you are included in how it's being shaped?" Perhaps it means some of our comforts will be sacrificed or some things we're used to doing one way will need to be done another way. But it's worth it if practicing discomfort means others can be dignified.

## Practice Discomfort

So much would change if we were all willing to practice discomfort for the sake of being formed more into Christ. Jesus's whole ministry and life was done in discomfort, and the cross communicated that he was willing to bear that cost if it meant unified freedom for all of us. So, let's consider practicing this mindset by confronting our own comfort zones, becoming the other in spaces not just in one-off moments but through relationships, placing ourselves in spaces where we aren't the majority, and being willing to be uncomfortable for the purpose of uniting and being one with one another. When we practice this and seek to learn from others, unity will happen organically, and flourishing will be for all.

I want to close this chapter with a portion of a blessing by Sister Ruth Fox that I hope will encourage you to practice discomfort for the glory of God and the inclusion of all people for the purpose of unity:

May God bless you with discontent with easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live from deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, equality, and peace. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. How can you practice discomfort, and what can that look like for you starting right now?
2. How can you actively engage in being the other? What would that look like at church, in your community, at work, and elsewhere?
3. Who are the others around you who are not part of the majority in your life, church, or city? How can you submit yourself to learning from them, and in what ways can you simply be with them or walk alongside them?
4. How does choosing discomfort form you spiritually? What does it show you about yourself, about God, and about others?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*God who left comfort for our liberation, lead us toward practicing discomfort as a discipline that forms us more into you, honors you, and dignifies those around us. May we see the invitation of practicing discomfort as a means of contributing goodness and justice to the world, and may all the ways the Enemy wants to encourage our comfort in things be something we are acutely aware of and are quick to rebuke in your name. This is no easy thing, and we so need you. In your powerful name we pray, amen.*

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## SIX

# Dethroning the Lie of Sameness

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Become mature, be encouraged, be of the same mind, be at peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.

—2 Corinthians 13:11

The church is the church only when it exists for others . . . not dominating, *but helping and serving*.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup>

Since having my son, I’ve been having different kinds of conversations with people about raising him in New York City and the variety of places people prefer to raise their children. The majority of people I have talked to have decided they want to raise their children in a more suburban area. This has come up in conversations with both people who already live in suburban areas and those who lived in New York City and then decided to move to a suburb outside of the city or to another state altogether. While I understand their thinking, my husband and I are intentionally choosing to raise our son (and any future children we may have) in New York City. For some people, that choice is startling, and instead of approaching our perspective with curiosity, they try to convince us to make the same choice they did and to raise our kids in the suburbs. While we are all entitled to our perspectives and ways of wanting to raise our kids, at times I wish someone would just say to me, “Tell me more about why you want to stay and raise your son here.”

We have lost the art of considering another perspective aside from our own, especially when it doesn’t line up with the majority view. But when we lose sight of the truth that there are many different, plausible, and positive ways to approach almost everything in life, we see only “right” or “wrong” ways of doing things rather than seeing “your way” and “my way.” When everything becomes a matter of right or wrong, we standardize our own choices as right, and everything else as wrong. This is what we have done within the church. We have standardized one majority way of being a

church and of being a Christian. Thus, anything outside of that way is considered different, weird, or even heretical, as if God didn't create unique beings but made everyone the same. The lie of sameness tells us that there is only one good way to be, live, and believe. It demands uniformity, assimilation, and conformity, and it is a lie. Conforming to the demand for sameness is actually sinful and leaves us far from the biblical principle of unity.

Unity is about embracing oneness while pursuing collective harmony. The consistent narrative we see in Scripture is of God calling his people to one mind, not one way of being.

Now may the God who gives endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, according to Christ Jesus, so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice. (Rom. 15:5–6)

Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. (1 Cor. 1:10)

If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. (Phil. 2:1–2)

As citizens of heaven, live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, in one accord, contending together for the faith of the gospel. (Phil. 1:27)

Finally, all of you be like-minded and sympathetic, love one another, and be compassionate and humble, not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult but, on the contrary, giving a blessing, since you were called for this, so that you may inherit a blessing. (1 Pet. 3:8–9)

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Become mature, be encouraged, be of the same mind, be at peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. (2 Cor. 13:11)

These Scriptures emphasize the importance of being of the same mind, of one Spirit, and what does that mean? It means to be the same mind of Christ. In other words, we're to be like Jesus, not each other. Sameness is not only a lie, but it perpetuates idolatry, celebrity culture, and the erasure of the very identity God intentionally gave every single one of us. God made me Black, Latina, woman, Brown, curly-haired, English- and Spanish-speaking, Dominican, and a daughter of immigrants on purpose. To dismiss any part of that is to dismiss his purpose and plans in my creation.

That, then, is dismissing God as I'm made in his image. Therefore, we sin when we believe and promote sameness as biblical truth.

I was reading a book recently that suggested that because race isn't in the Bible, we therefore don't need to focus on racial reconciliation or race at all. Imagine if we took that approach with every concept that doesn't explicitly show up in the Bible! It's an irresponsible, incomplete, and dismissive thought. I bring this up to note that although race and races are not discussed in the Bible, ethnicities surely do exist, and not only do they exist, they also really matter to God! We know this because of two things:

1. God created every single image-bearing human being on earth, and he made us all different, including our skin tones and where we would be born, which influences our ethnicity and eventually race.
2. People's ethnicities are consistently mentioned in the Bible. God thought it was important to record the ethnicity of many people mentioned in Scripture, noting that the eunuch in Acts 8:26–40 is Ethiopian and the good neighbor in Luke 10:25–37 is Samaritan. In Ruth 1:4 we learn that Ruth is Moabite, and in Acts 16:1 we learn about Timothy's background, which included a Jewish mother and Greek father.

So, if this is true and consistent, why have we convinced ourselves that people's cultural backgrounds don't matter? I think the answer is simpler than we may realize: Because it's comfortable for the majority or privileged to downplay cultural context. Comfort may seem like such a benign thing, but historical events show us that prioritizing one people group's comfort over another is sin that has led to the glorification of uniformity over unity.

The idea of what we today call "race" developed around the same time as the transatlantic slave trade and had a lot to do with those who at the time proclaimed to be Christians. Therefore, race and religion were not separate from one another when the concept of race was being developed. I think it's far more important for you to research this topic on your own, since it's such a significant matter in culture and Christianity. But I want to provide a short synopsis by Travis Harris of the International Black Freedom Alliance:

Religion empowered the British to go to unknown lands, enslave and colonize Africans, destroy Indigenous nations, and develop a new country. They were able to justify their

harm to the Indigenous peoples because they saw them as savages. Colonists were able to enslave Africans because they were heathens. The English's religious views led to ecclesiastical governance in the colonized world. Education in colonial America focused on Christian education, whether it be training ministers in college, educating the English people about proper theology, or teaching those they saw as heathens who the true God was. While there was definitely an economic interest and a desire for wealth and power, even how they viewed that money was through a religious lens. How they lived their daily lives was governed by religion, from the clothes they wore to the church being a public meeting place.<sup>2</sup>

Further, when the doctrine of discovery rose to prominence in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, it amplified colonialism and racism—concepts that are founded on the idea (sometimes even defended as a Christian idea) of the superiority of one group or country that then becomes the standard everyone else must assimilate to or die. In Soong-Chan Rah and Mark Charles's book, they explain it like this:

The Doctrine of Discovery, first directed towards Portugal then directed towards Spain, affirmed the imperial ambitions of these two European powers. It gave theological permission for the European body and mind to view themselves as superior to the non-European body and minds. The doctrine created an insider perception for the European while generating an outside, other identity for non-Europeans; it created an identity for African bodies as inferior and only worthy of subjugation; it also relegated the identity of the original inhabitants of the land “discovered” to become outsiders, now unwelcome in their own land.<sup>3</sup>

If you've ever considered why some people within the Latino/a and Black community don't come to know the real Christ of the Bible and instead center their faith on ancestral or cultural worship and still believe Christianity is the White man's religion, it's because of this history and because the continued uniformity in the church convinces them that the lie and sin of sameness is still being elevated and perpetuated today. We've been given an image, for centuries, of a Christianity that emphasizes assimilation, erasure, and uniformity. Not just during active colonization centuries ago but even today. There are pastors and leaders in Christianity that call for assimilation and promote colonization ideology among those who are deemed “other.” Meanwhile, influential pastors proclaim a message of uniformity, assimilation, and erasure of culture that essentially aligns with the doctrine of discovery, without even trying to disguise this fact. They address all the sins under the sun but never or rarely address the sin of racism. Unfortunately, these voices are not the exception. Their racist tropes

can be found in many American churches today—though sometimes partially concealed under a false sense of belonging. This is not unity. It's the lie of sameness that should be repented of and removed from the church to make room for real unity.

God cares about our unique makeup—our ethnicity, gender, gifts, personality, and everything else that forms our identity. He made us this way; therefore, it matters and should be considered, celebrated, and welcomed. When we push to assimilate someone, we are sinning against God because we are dismissing his intentionality and creation. Sameness is a lie that can be dismantled with the help of the Holy Spirit, though we have a long way to go.

In response to racism and dehumanization, we want to guard ourselves against reacting to divisiveness with more divisiveness. Though someone might be communicating racist rhetoric that is dehumanizing, our role is not to dehumanize in return. We can call out what they are doing for the sin that it is: racism. But to call them out in a way that diminishes their dignity is to become like them. We don't need to act like our enemy. Instead, we love them and pray for them. Yes, we rebuke their sinful behavior, but we always dignify the image they bear by praying for them, as we see in Matthew 5:44. If we become like our enemies by centering divisiveness over unity, we will have fallen into the trap of the Enemy.

## **Acts 2 Dismantles Uniformity**

Pentecost, which takes place in the beginning of Acts 2, is the celebration of the gift Jesus promised (John 14:26): the Holy Spirit. It also marks the start of the church and the welcoming of gentiles into the family of God. Through the preaching of God's Word, prayer, and the rushing in of the Holy Spirit, people began to speak in tongues of different languages. In Acts 2:8, witnesses ask, "How is it that each of us can hear them in our own native language?" Pentecost itself was happening when there were people from all different areas, representing various ethnicities, and speaking different tongues who were gathering in Jerusalem for a Jewish harvest festival called Shavuot. In Hebrew, this means the Feast of Weeks, which is fifty days after Passover/Holy Week.<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:7 says, "They were astounded and amazed, saying, 'Look, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?'" which tells us that the apostles were all from similar areas and spoke the

same language, so it wouldn't make sense that they knew all these other languages. This was the start of dismantling any uniformity in the early church; it was also a framework to dismantle any uniformity that may exist today.

God's plan, all along, was to include gentiles in the family of God. His plan, all along, was unity through diversity. His plan, all along, was a tapestry of every tribe and tongue worshiping him together in their own language. We need to understand the difference between spaces that claim to be diverse and biblically diverse spaces. One is performative and sinful because it distorts God's plan, and the other is Christlike because it reflects God's heart for humanity. Because not all seemingly diverse churches are diverse.

In 2016, I worked for a church in Harlem that was at least 80 percent people of color and led by a young White couple. Though the congregation was mostly people of color, you would not see diversity in the leadership, worship style, or any aspect of the church other than the membership. For example, we never sang worship music in any language other than English or any genre other than contemporary Christian music. When the staff asked if we could begin to include gospel music in our worship on Sundays, the pastors responded by saying, "We don't do that here." What they meant was, "That's not our music, so even if it's yours, we will not be including that on Sundays." They were ignoring that they had planted a church in a historically Black community yet were only willing to play the kind of music they were comfortable with. For those leaders to deny their congregation the gift of worshiping in the style that spoke to the congregation's culture was a sin against the people, a selfish and conceited pursuit of comfort. Sometimes we inadvertently communicate that our preferences are what God says is the better thing.

But Philippians 2:3–4 invites us to "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others." To look first to the interests of others would be transformative for the church because it would lead to less erasure and comfort and more embodying Pentecost. Dr. Sarita Lyons says, "Preserving comfort is at the root of most disobedience. Comfort is the socially acceptable drug that many are addicted to. But has the idol of comfort made us cowards?"<sup>5</sup> Comfortable cowards don't follow the way of Christ. They

perpetuate and promote uniformity in churches, workplaces, friendships, and communities to preserve their culture, bank accounts, lifestyle, and theology at the cost of creating a false gospel that excludes people who would confront that comfort because of their culture, language, disability, gender, testimony, struggles, and finances.

Advocate Mekdes Haddis says, “God doesn’t erase culture, language, or identity—He preserves it. Every time I see the nations mentioned in the text, I’m in awe. The diversity of God’s people isn’t a footnote in the story—it’s part of the climax.”<sup>6</sup> She’s communicating a powerful truth that God preserves what he purposefully created. He wouldn’t necessarily have to preserve diversity if it wasn’t his idea. But all of our cultures are his intentional idea in his creation of us. So what does it look like when we preserve and celebrate culture in our churches? It looks like inclusion, invitation, and intention. Inclusion is the act of creating a space where all people can belong and feel seen, included, thought of, and valued. Creating a space of inclusion means we think about how people with physical disabilities would feel if we designed a space specifically to mitigate their limitations or how neurodivergent folks might feel if we adapted the conversation in our small group or how people who speak English as their second or third language would feel celebrated if we included their language in worship songs and prayers. Invitation looks like actually inviting people to be at the decision-making table, to lead, to be a part of something—not as a token or representative—and to invite them into spaces that are being made for them too. And being intentional is seen in how we plan, pray, prepare, and proactively pursue unity, diversity, and oneness so all can feel at home.

## **A Beautiful Picture of Unity in Acts 2**

At the end of Acts 2, we come to verse 42, where it says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.” These were the priorities of the early Christians, and it was likely a daily lived experience for them. Theologian Craig Keener notes, “Most special groups in antiquity ate together. Many Greek associations met for communal meals only once a month; however the earliest Christian practiced daily meals.”<sup>7</sup> If we want to see a concrete example of what unity in the midst of diversity can look like, we can look

to this early church example. Acts 2:42 is proof that it's possible for humans to be united through the Holy Spirit.

I know it feels like a daily practice of breaking bread and fellowshiping is an impossibility these days because of our busy schedules, and perhaps the lack of this daily contact is where the problem of uniformity and disunity began. With the busyness of our modern lives, we began to see each other less and less, which eventually created a distance. The distance then developed into a comfortable convenience of gathering around the table only with people who look like us and think like us by virtue of where we live, who we choose to include in our lives, who goes to our church, who is part of our family, or who we decide to befriend.

I don't know exactly when this shift happened or all the factors that contributed to it, but I do know from my own life experience that this distance is more common in American or Western culture and less common in Dominican culture (and perhaps other places outside the US as well). A lot of my family in the Dominican Republic see each other every day, and even church people in the Dominican Republic see each other every day. This daily contact can certainly become tribalistic and cultish if not done in a healthy way, but this closeness seen in the global church can teach many lessons to those of us in the US—if we can open ourselves up to learning them!

Proximity changes everything. It's hard to hate you if you're sitting right next to me having a meal. It's hard to hold unforgiveness toward you if I'm taking communion with you every week. It's hard to think only negatively about you and your lifestyle if I'm actually in your life. It's hard to create a homogeneous space where everyone is the same if we intentionally include all different kinds of people in our lives, church spaces, and community. The picture of Acts 2 helps us see the power of proximity and consistency as healing tools to help us be more like Christ and love up close. This practice of loving close up hopefully leads us to love from afar with more ease and develop deeper compassion within ourselves, especially for communities that we don't have access to.

Uniformity finds itself perpetuated in so many ways in our culture, and we need to return to being Christlike by giving others freedom to be unique and not force uniformity, which really is erasure, assimilation, control, and selective dignity. My prayer is that we would realize there should not be sides in the first place and that we would prioritize proximity and dignity as

we all consider coming to the table together, breaking bread and fellowshiping, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

## **Learning from the Trinity**

The Trinity is a theological term that describes God as three persons in one. This is evident throughout the biblical text as we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all as God and all as unique persons. God the Father is exactly that—our Father in heaven (Matt. 6:9). Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father (1 Pet. 3:22) and is our Savior (Acts 4:12). And the Holy Spirit dwells within us (Rom. 8:9) and is a gift to us (John 14:15–17). They are not the same persons, but they are one God. This is a beautiful picture of unity and also of how uniqueness matters to God. The Trinity is a powerful picture of what healthy unity looks like when everyone is being themselves and not trying to be like others but walking in their own unique purpose. The common label is “God,” but God is communal, united, and one all at the same time. Same for us: Our common label gets to be “Christian,” but the label shouldn’t come with the erasure of who we are. We can be uniquely ourselves with our unique beliefs and perspectives (as long as they don’t marginalize and harm others) and still be united in spirit and mind. We can love being Christian and be proud of our racial background. The two don’t have to compete. Saying I’m a “Black Christian” or “Latina Christian” doesn’t mean my Blackness or Latinidad is above my Christianity. It’s just how grammar works. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we ought to lay down our offenses, expectations, and demands for sameness to honor the diversity with which God created the body of Christ. This leads to a church that looks like God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit—being people of love in how we live, invite, think, act, and speak.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS**

1. Take a moment to observe modern Christianity; in what ways do you see uniformity thriving? What can you do locally and in your day-to-day life to dismantle uniformity?
2. How have you benefited from or perpetuated uniformity? How can you acknowledge that and move in the direction of unity?

3. What does “be of one mind” with other Christians look like for you in your context?
4. How does diversity help break the lie of sameness? What discomforts and inconveniences do you experience and how can you invite the Spirit to teach you in those moments?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*Triune God, we thank you for forming us all with such intentionality and purpose. It is beautiful to be formed so thoughtfully by you. Holy Spirit, help us not just see that beauty in ourselves but in others, too, as we seek to love, see, welcome, and embrace our neighbor even if it costs us our comfort. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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## SEVEN

# Disunity Breeds Injustice, Unity Feeds Justice

Freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. . . . I don't believe you can stand for freedom for one group of people and deny it to others.

—Coretta Scott King<sup>1</sup>

If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, his religion is useless and he deceives himself. Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

—James 1:26–27

The year 2020 came and went and somehow the word “justice” became a bad word in some Christian spaces. Some people were asking what justice had to do with the gospel and whether it was a ploy of what some would call the “liberal agenda.” Unfortunately, this is what happens when we don't think with a gospel mindset and live in reaction and generalizations instead of sifting through the issues of the day with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a way to be nuanced and to respond, not just react, to the ways, the horrors, and the grief of this world. But we're too quick to react, which is really just a temporary fix to our guilt; or we waffle, unsure of what's required of us; or worse yet, we think that justice is too “woke” and we would rather be asleep, unable to see that it is a crucial part of God's redemption of the world.

We get caught up in arguing about whether being woke or having empathy is biblical (hint: yes, they are) or intellectually discussing the spiritual forces of good and evil in this world without being able to see that keeping us divided *is* the agenda of those very spiritual forces. We become so distracted by how different we are that we end up ignoring the ways we're already unified. We're so busy arguing over who's right and who's wrong that we end up not living out God's greatest commandment to love him and our neighbors as ourselves.

When we make an idol of our theology, nurture our ego with a desire to just be right, lack a posture of humility, and focus on theological differences that aren't salvific, disunity happens and injustice thrives. We can see the fruit of these actions when we think about how differently people responded to the events of 2020 and consider how divided the church was. While many cried out when Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were killed, many others decided that fighting against the Black Lives Matter movement was more important. Others thought that questioning whether racism was a factor in these murders was more important. Others decided that people's lives didn't matter enough to unify in the way of dignity. They chose to believe that America is no longer racist and wanted to spend more time looking into this Black Lives Matter organization instead of looking into Scripture to see what it says about our response to injustice.

In Matthew 23, Jesus warns the disciples and the crowds about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and the truth is, it should make us tremble because Jesus would be talking to so many of us now in this way. So many people who think they are fighting against so-called wokeness and empathy and "fighting for" the gospel, "fighting for" righteousness, and "fighting for" truth would tell you they are doing God's will and edifying the church. But if we look at Matthew 23, we see a different response of what Jesus would think about these people. Because why fight for the gospel if you dehumanize who the gospel came to save? Why fight for righteousness if you vote for people who will oppress and deport people you're requiring to be righteous? Why fight for truth if you have made an idol of the truth you believe and if you ridicule anyone who has a different theological or cultural perspective than you do? Why fight for all these things but not fight for the things Jesus says matter most in Matthew 23:23–24?

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, and yet you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These things should have been done without neglecting the others. Blind guides! You strain out a gnat, but gulp down a camel!

How can we fight for what is theologically right while using our tongue to tear down other image bearers? James 1:26–27 says,

If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, his religion is useless and he deceives himself. Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

These religious and selective approaches to Christianity are not the way of Jesus; they are the way of disunity and bear the fruit of injustice. The more we pay attention to secondary and tertiary issues, the less we pay attention to injustice and act performatively. The fruit? Death, division, and dehumanization. The world's injustice should primarily be addressed by the body of Christ because justice is the heart of God, and we are his followers. Instead, we are so distracted by theologies, the need to be right, and arguments that we let our disunity perpetuate dehumanization. Woe to us! We should be grieved, not just to the point of feeling sadness, which is important, but grieved to the point of action. That action can look like repenting, apologizing, forgiving, or changing our minds so we can reorient ourselves to the priorities of Jesus, which are:

- Proclaiming the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:1–12; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43)
- Loving God and others (Matt. 22:37–39; John 13:34)
- Serving the marginalized and lost (Mark 2:17; Luke 4:18)
- Obeying God's will (Luke 22:42; John 4:34)
- Making disciples (Matt. 4:19; 28:19–20)
- Helping others walk in freedom (Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10; John 3:16)

When we prioritize what Jesus prioritizes, we will walk in unity.

## **Unity Feeds Justice**

We are a church today because of God's plan for Pentecost that actually was being built up all throughout the Old Testament. In the New Testament during Jesus's earthly ministry, he was preparing a way and setting up the foundation for what we would come to know as the church. He spent years teaching, correcting, edifying, and encouraging his disciples for this purpose. So, when we get to the book of Acts in the Bible, we are presented with a new plant that had old roots. The church. Within the book of Acts we get to learn about the beginning of the church, how its members functioned, the challenges they went through, how they grew, what they learned, and what they established—all rooted in Jesus's teachings, God the Father's heart, and the Holy Spirit's presence. When we get to Acts 4, we see something special happening among those who claimed to follow Jesus:

Now the entire group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. With great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need. (Acts 4:32–35)

Many see these verses as solely about generosity, but if you really read closely you will see that they're about generosity through unity and justice. Verse 32 begins by saying that the "entire group," meaning all the Christians, were of one heart and mind. That is the definition of unity that we've seen throughout this book and in other passages of the Bible that speak to unity. That same verse continues on to speak to a humble and grateful posture people had with their belongings—so much so that they were willing to share them. It's important to note that unity is being defined here first, before any mention of people sharing their possessions. Unity was the motivating factor for people to all agree to share their things.

Verses 34–35 continue the message of this passage and affirm the power of unity and how it produces justice for others. This act of communal generosity comes from a united people to do good work, and it's done together with one mind and one heart. There is a Tagalog word, *kapwa*, in the Filipino language, and in *The New Testament in Color: A Multiethnic Bible Commentary*, Jordan J. Cruz Ryan says, "Kapwa theology is driven by that same sense of shared identity with others, leading us to seek the best for the community on the basis of self-sacrificial Christian love and our sense of unity with others, a concept that reflects the sense of unity in community seen in Acts 4:32."<sup>2</sup> This is how we are meant to see one another: as extensions of ourselves.

The house my family recently purchased is attached to other houses. If something were to happen to the roof or basement of our house, it would likely affect our neighbors whose houses are attached to ours; we are intricately bound to one another, just as Scripture tells us:

So, if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. (1 Cor. 12:26)

Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2)

My lived injustice is your lived injustice, whether you look like me or live where I live. Martin Luther King Jr. said it like this in “Letter from Birmingham Jail”:

I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.<sup>3</sup>

When we finally realize we are “in an inescapable network of mutuality,” we can accept the responsibility toward becoming united in order to bring justice and flourishing to all. A number of examples in the Bible show people coming together and how their unity brings justice toward others. We see in the book of Esther where Queen Esther intercedes before King Xerxes to save the Jewish people from annihilation. Esther risks her life and mobilizes the Jewish community to fast and pray for deliverance. In Acts 6:1–7, the apostles appoint seven men to oversee fair distribution of food to widows, ensuring no one is neglected. They first listened and then came together and organized to ensure they provided equity and justice for vulnerable members. In Exodus, Moses (alongside Aaron and his family) leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt after confronting Pharaoh. God calls Moses to act as a deliverer, and the Israelites unite to demand their freedom from oppression. In the books of Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, we repeatedly see these prophets call the nation to defend the rights of the poor, the widow, and the orphan as a collective moral responsibility to seek justice. Time and time again, God invites his people to step in together and do the work of justice, choosing obedience and taking action that will lead to the liberation of others. There is great power in unity when it comes to the work of justice.

So what does living justly in community look like? In the church, we often fall into the temptation of giving the responsibility of learning and acting in justice to our pastors or leaders or even Christian influencers and activists. “Tell me what I should care about,” we say, yet we miss the actual life of living justly every day right where we are. We follow campaigns, do one-day service projects, and feel good about ourselves when, in reality, we are practicing justice reactively, performatively, and seasonally instead of consistently.

What's the point in doing that service day at my church one time a year if nothing else in my life reflects justice? What's the purpose of being aware of human trafficking if I still shop at places that are unethical? What's the heart behind fighting for unborn lives if we fight against born ones that are undocumented? Justice and living justly have to be consistent narratives in our lives if we really want to reflect Jesus, and we can't do that while we're fragmented. We must choose to be like the church in Acts 4, where they saw believers in need and chose to come together, to be of one heart and mind, and to live justly. In doing so, they eradicated poverty among themselves. Again, kapwa encapsulates this idea. I like how Amanda Kliora explains it in this *Chasing Justice* blog post:

Kapwa has no English equivalent. The closest equivalent is "neighbor" or "kindred." To live in kapwa is to share an inhabited physical and spiritual space where there is unity and the moral obligation to care for our fellow human. It is characterized by the fundamental recognition that I have a shared identity and a shared self. I can never fully be me without you. It is reflecting the image of God more fully because we are together and united in love. Kapwa is who we are called to be.<sup>4</sup>

We must learn from our Filipino brothers and sisters and embrace the idea of kapwa. Doing so leads to a life of justice, where we aim to eradicate the injustices that harm the marginalized and hurt the whole body of Christ as a result. It might feel like it's impossible to live the kapwa way when we look at how divided we are, but then we must remember Pentecost. It probably felt impossible that people from all different tongues and tribes could be united then too, but when the Spirit moves, nothing is impossible. The Spirit of Pentecost is the same Holy Spirit that lives in us today. It will not be by our own willpower that we become united but by the power of the Spirit. Disunity distracts us from prioritizing justice. Unity helps us consistently make room for justice in our life.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. What does living justly look like where you live and in your community and/or church?
2. In your world (your community, church, etc.), have words like "woke" or "empathy" been weaponized against other people? How do you feel

it has affected your view toward the words and the actions these words are connected to?

3. In what ways do you see how disunity breeds injustice? In what ways do you see how unity breeds justice?
4. How can you embrace the kapwa approach to living more in your life?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*God of justice, forgive us for our performative justice. Holy Spirit, lead us back into your everlasting way and kingdom that cares for and moves through justice. Convict us toward change and help us do this together for your glory and the flourishing of humanity. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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## SECTION THREE

# Returning to the Gospel, Unified

We started the book talking about the heartbreak and devastation of the anti-gospel of uniformity and how we must reject it. Then, we talked about how we can practice what Jesus preached—discerning when division harms or helps, practicing discomfort for our spiritual formation, dethroning the lie of sameness, and living a life of justice. Now we return to the true, liberating gospel truth that saves us all. In the last three chapters, we'll be discussing what things do unite us and how unity leads to freedom and peace.

Chapter 8, “Dignity in the Midst of Doctrines and Disagreeing.” This chapter walks through some of what is known as theological triage and the concept of what to die for, divide over, debate about, and decide on. I also offer four practices that lead us to embracing dignity as a unified body of Christ in the midst of doctrinal differences and disagreements.

Chapter 9, “Dynamism of Freedom and Peace.” This chapter invites us to a conviction regarding real freedom in Christ, what real peace looks like, and our energy and strong desire to center and prioritize unity in the Christian life.

Chapter 10, “Delighting in the Power of Oneness.” This chapter offers a gentle, powerful, and reflective invitation to delight in oneness together as a path forward and to distance ourselves from division.

We wrap up with a closing benediction to bless us as we go out to do this faithful work with God and others.

## EIGHT

# Dignity in the Midst of Doctrines and Disagreeing

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him.

—Judges 21:25

Friends become wiser together through a healthy clash of viewpoints.

—Timothy Keller<sup>1</sup>

One of the reasons we seem divided and unsure how to discern what to fight against or for is because we often forget the things that are worth debating, disagreeing about, or dividing over. We've fallen into the trap of believing that anything we disagree on automatically calls for division, and that's not the most helpful or healthy way to see division and unity. Examples are all around, including many that are rooted in and amplified through social media, where people can easily be targeted for speaking out. Differences of opinion are used to dehumanize and degrade, which harms individuals as well as the church.

A framework created by Gerry Breshears helps people unify in the midst of difference by collectively considering which differences we should be ready to die for, divide over, debate about, or decide on.<sup>2</sup> “Die for” is the category that usually centers around biblical or salvific essentials that are not up for debate for anyone who claims to be a Christian. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity, the lordship of Jesus, the way to salvation, and the gospel message would belong in this category. “Divide over” includes theological perspectives that are not salvific, generally, but that are deeply important theologies to people, including sexuality, women's roles, cessations of gifts, denominational differences, theological camps, and things that we pick “sides” for rather than simply express interpretive perspectives. “Debate about” speaks to theological differences that aren't necessarily positional or don't have clearly delineated “sides,” such as

worship styles, baptism, sacraments, and church structure. Finally, “decide on” are noncritical issues or nontheological decisions that are more about preferences, such as how Sunday services run, what instruments and lights are used during worship, and so on. Breshears’s framework is very similar to the idea of theological triage, which is the concept of recognizing primary, secondary, and tertiary theological issues to help Christians stay unified in the primary things while also staying compassionate, curious, and loving in the midst of differences in the secondary and tertiary categories. It’s basically living out the well-known saying, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”<sup>3</sup>

By utilizing these frameworks, I grew in my compassion, curiosity, and conviction in many areas, as well as in my communication around certain biblical and theological topics. They helped me discern what to fight for and not. What to fight against and not. It helped me be on social media with a different presence and perspective. It helped me discern concepts beyond just what someone is saying. It helped me use a more Christlike approach to see my brothers and sisters in Christ. It helped me stress less about things that used to give me anxiety around believing the “right” thing.

I would like to offer an additional framework based on my own lived experience and biblical interpretation that plays off the four D’s. My framework is built on the terms dethrone, dignify, dismantle, and discern. I offer these terms to add more context to the Christian life as we consider doctrines, disagreeing, and dignity in the midst of our different interpretations of theology with the purpose of uniting. We can die for, divide over, debate about, decide on all we want, but if we don’t dethrone idols, dignify people, dismantle norms, and discern our theologies, then we will continue on this divisive path where difference feels like a threat, justice is overlooked, and unity is minimized in the context of theology and the desire to embrace unity.

## **Dethrone**

To dethrone means to remove from power. Collectively, dethroning all theologies and perspectives that would take the place of God’s truth is a means to ensure we submit our theologies and perspectives to the True One who sits on the throne. This framework would walk us through a process that invites us to live out these two verses:

We demolish arguments and every proud thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ. (2 Cor. 10:4-5)

Submitting our theologies and perspectives means we submit our interpretations and thoughts to God and allow the Holy Spirit to help us dethrone anything that would rise up against the knowledge of God and dethrone him in our lives.

He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.” (Matt. 22:37-40)

When we dethrone powers we have submitted ourselves to, we gain more awareness, purity, capacity, and ability to actually live out the greatest commandment of loving God well and, as a result, loving others well too. When we don't dethrone but actually position our theology and perspective on a throne, we make no room to love others and submit to God. Therefore, the church must embody dethroning as a norm in order to put even a helpful idea like theological triage in its rightful place. This is what we are called to do as the church, and it consecrates us in a world that misuses power and prioritizes power that doesn't lead to collective flourishing. As the late Walter Brueggemann said, “The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.”<sup>4</sup> We can't carry out these prophetic tasks if we are busy placing our theologies, political parties, perspectives, denominations, churches, doctrine, and so on in the seat where Jesus belongs. In many ways, dethroning the idols we've built up for ourselves is an invitation to prioritize what God prioritizes. The golden calf of our theologies, perspectives, Christian celebrity culture, tribalism, and projections of who Jesus ought to be must be destroyed in order to place Jesus in his rightful position above any and all idols we have created, including our own privileges, politics, and perspectives. This dethroning is something we must unite on, or our idols will grow and our unity will die.

## Dignify

To dignify means to give someone honor and respect by affirming their worth. Collectively, nurturing dignity has to be a part of how we function as a church in the world. The world is not feeling dignified through us, and it's hurting our witness. We can have our theological triage all we want, but if dignity toward others is not prioritized, then our theology doesn't matter and falls short. As I write these words, people are being hunted in this country by ICE, and there are Christians who are defending agents' inhumane behavior because they believe in sending "illegals" back to where they came from. Identifying them as "illegals" is the first step in diminishing dignity. Some minds justify hunting and dehumanizing immigrants in this country because of this diminishing language, but how could that be? It's never okay to hunt and dehumanize anyone.

Dignity is essential when walking in unity, but we need to agree that dignity is essential and not an afterthought. We must agree that dignity is God's heart for people, and that means it's most expressed through his body, which is us—the church. We must agree that dignity is the way of justice and the gospel. This is not to debate about, decide on, or divide over. If we feel we need to debate, then we have a theology issue; if we feel we have to decide about it, then we have a heart issue, and if we feel we need to divide over it, then we have a power issue. They aren't "illegals"; they are image bearers. Period. And this is just one of many issues where Christians in our country have found themselves on opposing sides, as if dignity has two paths. It doesn't. There is the path of dignity, and the opposing path is dehumanization. There is no nuance when it comes to this.

## **Dismantle**

To dismantle is to pull apart or get rid of a system. If we can get on the same page and work in unity, so much dismantling could be done in the areas of injustice, weariness, church abuse, and othering that would promote change within the church. There are norms we have accepted within Christianity that have come from either the world, evil people, or the devil himself, and we've embraced them within the church instead of dismantling them. These norms include celebrity culture, racism, sexism, uniformity, unaddressed sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, ableism, political idolatry, division, dishonoring women, prosperity teaching, and injustice. These are not the ways of the kingdom of God. These are the ways of sin,

oppression, and corruption, and whether they came before our time or unfolded right before our eyes, we have accepted them and in many cases perpetuated them.

Actually, together, we can end these sinful norms. But it takes all of us. It takes all of us acknowledging the sin and the problems that have been created as a result. It takes all of us burdened enough that we do something about it. We aren't just called to unify in order to build things up but also to break things down that are tainting the church and confusing the world. This dismantling is essential in embodying unity and living out our theology because it acknowledges that all these things are separating us from God while also separating us from one another. That's what sin does. What does it matter to have a doctrine and understanding of sin if we don't actually try to dismantle it systemically or internally? What good is understanding the gospel and the liberation we think we walk in while ignoring the chains we're still wearing because of the collective sins we have normalized or accepted within the body of Christ? What good are any frameworks or theologies if sin still flourishes and has power over us?

## Discern

The final concept I'm offering in this framework for how we can live out Scripture faithfully and embody true unity is discernment, a topic that we covered in chapter 4. I'll just add a few more thoughts as it relates to this chapter's focus on unifying in the midst of disagreements. Discernment is often used in Christianity, but perhaps because it's so overused, we've lost the art of it. We have allowed our discernment to be robbed by thirty-second sermon clips or discernment vloggers on YouTube, or because we ignore the Holy Spirit. Whatever the reason, we are becoming more divided, wearier, weaker, and more distracted. We're losing sight of what's good and true and right. But in Galatians 5:7–15, Paul gives us a word and a warning:

You were running well. Who prevented you from obeying the truth? This persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough. I myself am persuaded in the Lord you will not accept any other view. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. Now brothers and sisters, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. I wish those who are disturbing you might also let themselves be mutilated!

For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled

in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.

Discernment in knowing what is true will affect how we walk in freedom and how we love our neighbors. To grow in discernment and not let our views be changed by those trying to cause us to stumble is what we need as we seek to walk in unity. We need one another to do this. Not to discern *for* one another but to discern together.

In an interview, actress Miriam Margolyes said this in response to what was happening in Gaza because of the Israeli government: “My heart is broken and the terrible thing I think I have to face is that Hitler won. He changed us, he made us like him.”<sup>5</sup> This statement struck me as I thought of how much we have allowed demonic leaders, ideologies, theologies, and perspectives to oppress us to the point of becoming like these leaders, ideologies, or theologies. We have become like zombies, only half alive and awake to agree that just because our favorite Christian leader or our church said so, it should be okay to support policies and leaders who dehumanize, kill, and disregard the dignity of people again and again. We have put our trust in proverbial kings, and we have been robbed of our own discernment. We mistake evil for good, dehumanization for order, and manipulation for truth. We allow people to use Scripture to justify evil, and then we perpetuate the evil or become it ourselves. But Isaiah 5:20 says, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.” When we love a Bible teacher, doctrine, denomination, or church so much that we can hear them speak evil and call it good, we have surrendered our discernment in exchange for belonging. Any Christian space that requires you to have allegiance to the space in exchange for belonging is no Christian space at all; indeed, it is a cult that is perpetuating uniformity and doesn’t care to learn from you but wants to use and control you.

I close this section with a quote by Octavia Butler from her book *Parable of the Talents*:

Beware: All too often, we say what we hear others say. We think what we’re told that we think. We see what we’re permitted to see. Worse! We see what we’re told that we see. Repetition and pride are the keys to this. To hear and to see even an obvious lie, again, and again and again. May be to say it, Almost by reflex. Then to defend it. Because we’ve said it and at last to embrace it. Because we’ve defended it and because we cannot admit that

we've embraced and defended an obvious lie. . . . thus, without thought, without intent, we make mere echoes of ourselves—And we say what we hear others say.<sup>6</sup>

In order to dethrone, dignify, dismantle, and discern, we need one another, and this is why sameness doesn't help us but harms us and the body of Christ. Sameness dulls our minds so that we don't think critically; we let others tell us what truth is instead of hearing from Scripture, we worship idols instead of God, and we sin against one another instead of loving one another as God has loved us. Sameness causes us to forget our identity, perspective, and contribution. But oneness helps us pay attention to the Holy Spirit's presence and discernment as we walk with other brothers and sisters in harmony and unity.

We don't all have to agree, and in our differences, we can still honor one another. Outside of the primary tenets of our faith, we can respect how we each interpret Scriptures differently, how we live out our faith differently, how we do church differently. To be of the same mind and heart means that our words, our actions, and our lives are grounded in the greatest commandment: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. When we do that, we are united.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. How does learning about the four D's framework (die for, divide over, debate about, decide on) or the idea of theological triage help you see people who believe differently than you with compassion? How can that inform your own theology?
2. Out of the four D's framework that I provided (dethrone, dignify, dismantle, and discern), which one do you most need to grow in? Which one do you already embody?
3. Whose dignity have you dismissed? How is God inviting you to repent and change your heart toward them?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*God who has called us to be a unified church, forgive us for doing the opposite. Help us, Holy Spirit, be people who dethrone our idols, dignify all image bearers, dismantle systems*

*and inner ideologies that don't align with you, and discern what your word says and how you want us to live. In your heavenly name, amen.*

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## NINE

# Dynamism of Freedom and Peace

Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. It is right and it is duty.

—Óscar Romero<sup>1</sup>

For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.

—Galatians 5:13–15

I love the phrase “free people free people” because it communicates that freedom has a ripple effect, but it also convicts us. If we don't want to set others free, are we free ourselves in the first place? If I delight in the freedom that God has given me through Jesus's death, resurrection, and forgiveness, and I don't want that freedom for others too, am I really free? Do I really love God? Do I really want to follow Jesus? I'm not saying you should question your salvation, but we should certainly consider if we are actually walking in freedom if we don't have a strong desire to see others walk in it too. Do I love those around me enough to help them walk away from sin and walk in God's full liberation? Do I care enough about people that I want them to be free of addictions, habits, and ways of being/living that disconnect them from God and keep them bound? Do I actually care about people enough to want to see them free? Do I care about them enough to do more than just prevent them from going somewhere specific after death but instead seek their good even now?

Jesus did and does. This is why he went to the cross for us because he wanted to defeat sin and death in such a way that we would walk in a liberation that we ourselves could not set up, die for, or work toward. No self-help, therapy, or deliverance could do what Jesus did on the cross for us. Not that those things don't matter, but he took our freedom so seriously that he died for it. Do we feel the same about the liberation of others?

Dynamism is an energy and a strong desire to make something happen.<sup>2</sup> When we learn to embody unity, it creates a dynamism of freedom and peace. First Timothy 2:3–6 says it like this: “This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time.” These verses remind us that this salvation is for us all. Jesus wants all to be saved and walk in freedom, but do we? I can’t want freedom for you and dehumanize you at the same time. I can’t want freedom for you and condemn you for the sins you struggle with. I can’t want freedom for you and never pray for you. I can’t want freedom for you and hate you. We should want freedom for all people whether we agree with them or not. But it feels like the way we disagree with one another and the things we divide over are communicating a different message. It’s not communicating, “I want you to walk in liberation.” Instead, it’s communicating, “You should believe this and that because I interpreted it this way and biblically that’s the only way to see it.” Freedom, like peacemaking, is not about being right but about helping people follow the One who gives this freedom.

When we see our freedom as individual and not collective, we are missing a big piece of the gospel and even of the story of the entire Bible. Almost every time God talks to someone in the Bible and tells them to do something as an individual, he is calling them to do something that would give him glory but would also likely benefit others. When Moses was called, it was for the freedom of a nation. When Mary was called, it was for freedom for all of humanity. When Paul was called, it was for the freedom of the churches he would find, minister to, and lead. When Lydia was called by opening her home to Paul, her whole family experienced freedom by giving their lives to Jesus (Acts 16). When someone obeyed God’s call to the Great Commission and invited my mom to church when I was five years old, my life and my family’s life was forever changed because that person cared enough about us to invite us to church, which led to the invitation to have a relationship with Jesus, repent, and walk in freedom. God calls and we respond because we love God and want to obey him, and one way we make that evident is by loving our neighbor and wanting to see them walk in freedom.

# The Bible's Call to Unity

Book after book in the Bible, we see a narrative of a people, not just a person—a people God loves so much that he doesn't want to just save them but also wants to unify them. If that were not the case, God would not have sent his son, Paul would not have written letters to the churches, and John would not have received the book of Revelation as a message to several churches. In preparing for an upcoming Revelation sermon series, the pastoral team at my church came together to begin studying that book, one that I've previously seen as too complicated to mess with. But I've been learning how this is a book of hope, even if it's complicated. This message of hope is not necessarily one that says, "Things will get better," but is one that says God is with us in all of it and has a rescue plan for us all.

Revelation 1:13 says, "And among the lampstands was one like the Son of Man." The lampstands represent the churches named in Revelation, and the Son of Man being among the churches affirms what Matthew 1:23 says: "See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated 'God is with us.'" God with us is the message of Jesus's life, and in being God with us, he is also the Holy One we can depend on because he holds it all together. The book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, and although that word "apocalyptic" has become scary for us in this modern era, Reta Halteman Finger in *Sojourners* explains, "An apocalypse purports to be a vision of a realm beyond our normal senses, where God is in control and will eventually break in to rescue the faithful from oppression. Apocalyptic literature is intended to bring hope during times of political uncertainty or persecution."<sup>3</sup> This, my friends, is good and helpful news.

In the book of Revelation, churches are being persecuted and oppressed because they believe in Jesus, and while some are partnering with the empire, many aren't, and they are experiencing consequences because of it. They are walking boldly in their freedom but also struggling because they are humans in need of Jesus. The power of this book, along with the letters of Paul, is that they are all written to a group of people—to the church. The church isn't a group of people who agree on all things or all look and sound the same, but a people who are choosing to be the body of Christ together and who are willing to be corrected and rebuked together and also

encouraged and ministered to together. It is a vision of community and collective freedom and leads to collective flourishing and living in peace.

God wants to set you free and to also set the church free. He wants freedom for all and not just some. Do we want the same for everyone also? Do we want what God wants for humanity? Do we want liberation for all? If we do, we will take unity seriously, and we will fight for it more than we fight to stay divided. Free people free people, and this is a calling, as we see in Galatians 5:13–15: “For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.”

Walking in freedom with Jesus means we serve one another in love and love our neighbors because if we don’t, the alternative can only be to devour one another. There is no middle ground. We either love each other or we don’t. We either pray for our enemies or we don’t. We either choose unity or we don’t. But if we don’t, we will be a house divided, consumed by one another.

## **Freedom Fighters Are Peacemakers**

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us just want peace. We want to live in peace. We want to experience peace. We want to live in the peace of God. We want shalom. These aren’t bad things, but sometimes we mistake false peace for real peace. We want a peace that gives us comfort, contentment, and consistency without having to work to get there. But that’s not what true peace is. To achieve and experience true peace, we actually have to go through discomfort, unpack the truth, and embrace dignity—sometimes even in the midst of disagreement. This is how we get to a place of shalom within ourselves, with others, and with God. We have to work for it, and it’s always been this way.

In the beginning of Genesis, we see a formless, chaotic, and void world; God works to create what is needed in that space. He spent time creating life, creatures, plants, and putting everything where it needed to be, including humanity. He was with his people and there was complete peace. Then along came a temptation that would introduce a false peace—a peace that says knowledge of God is more important than unity with him. Genesis

3:5 says, “In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

With all the demonic confidence in the world, the serpent tells Eve a lie and she falls for it. Even knowing what true peace is, she thought she was going to get more of something by becoming more knowledgeable and being like God. It was seemingly the more desirable path. But she didn’t realize that because she was made in his image, she was already like God. This is what false peace does: Even having experienced true peace, we seek to have another version of it because it’s not enough for us. Sins of pride and idolatry get in the way of peace. We see effects still today: The sin of pride puffs us up and makes us think that our knowledge is more accurate than the knowledge of those people “over there,” and the sin of idolizing our theology keeps us from being ecumenical in our approach to engaging with those who hold other theologies. We think we can all be unified without having to repent or change, and so, sin is basically at the center of our division.

We would like to think that we achieve peace when we are at our happiest or stress-free, but that’s not real peace. Happiness and stress levels are outer things that we should not allow to dictate whether we feel peace. The use of the word “peace” is not foreign to us, yet if its presence is so common, we should witness its fruit in action. Instead, we see consistent wars, racial divides throughout the centuries, abuse within the churches rising, people dehumanizing others, and so many other examples of growing conflict. And within that growing conflict, we see people reacting in an unhealthy way or ignoring it completely. But humanity is not completely lost, and life is not all bad; there is plenty of good fruit produced in the world. Yet we see so much persistent conflict that creates peacekeepers and division creators who perpetuate a false peace instead of the amplification and normalization of peacemakers who would create healthy conflict while remaining unified within the church.

This is why we need a dynamism for peace through *peacemaking*, not *peacekeeping*. To help us get a clearer picture, here are some descriptions of peacemakers and what they do:

Peacemakers are those who work for right relationships at the expense of their comfort.<sup>[4](#)</sup>

Entering into conflicts and working creatively to open up a just and generous path forward for others.<sup>[5](#)</sup>

And here's my definition:

Peacemaking is the action of not trying to be right but making things right.

This action is uncomfortable, but it's worth it for the sake of a healthy and unified church. Because if peacemakers don't rise, peacekeepers will remain our leaders and create a passive culture in the pulpit. Because if peacemakers don't rise, division creators will continue to get views on YouTube and plant seeds of discord and demonization among the people of God. Because if peacemakers don't rise, what is wrong will remain and what is right will become an afterthought.

What does it look like to become a peacemaker? Here are six essential actions to help bring real peace and dismantle false peace in the world.

1. *Stay discontent.* We need to stay discontent with the chaos, division, injustice, and unhealthy conflicts that surround us while desiring reconciliation between people and God, people and systems, and people with other people. As long as we remain content with the current state of the world and church, nothing will change. But discontentment provides the fire that brings about repentance, righteousness, and the hope of reconciliation. Bringing reconciliation between people and God comes through discipleship grounded in Scripture, by helping them repent of division and discord and turn to the ways of unity. Bringing reconciliation between people and systems happens through justice workers and advocates protesting against systems that perpetuate greed, racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other dehumanizing sins that gatekeep dignity from people. Sometimes the systems are world systems, and sometimes the systems are within the church. Bringing reconciliation between people happens when we agree that we don't all have to agree but should certainly walk in unity with one another. Finally, this approach to becoming a peacemaker through discontentment also means we grieve and lament the chaos and division we see before us. We should fight against it, but we can also grieve it.
2. *Disrupt.* While we grow in discontent, our peacemaking will then lead us to disrupt false peace, unaddressed conflict, lies, superficial relationships, oppression, and systems that marginalize people—all with the goal of having and creating harmony. The thing about being a

peacemaker who disrupts is that we won't always be received with joy or gratitude, but the actions are essential. Division needs to be disrupted, and injustice and oppression need disrupters to break them apart. Being a disrupter doesn't mean we go in and cause more chaos but that we disrupt with gentleness, mindfulness, intentionality, compassion, wisdom, mercy, and love. To disrupt without having those qualities in mind makes it about us, but to disrupt with those qualities allows disruption to be done for God's glory and the flourishing of humanity. Jesus disrupted a lot of situations and spaces—not for fun but for the flourishing of people.

3. *Dignify with accountability.* Treat all people with dignity regardless of whether they caused conflict or they are our enemies or they are just difficult to talk to. Dignity is something we must take accountability for in order to make unity real. My friend Danielle Coke Balfour says, "True unity follows accountability. . . . Unity without accountability is a lot like false peace. Things may feel calm, but there's no true repair taking place. We sit in the face of pain and choose to 'grin and bear it' so we don't seem disruptive. But true peace requires repairing what's broken, having uncomfortable conversations, and stirring the pot."<sup>6</sup> Those who have not dignified others but have instead abused them, slandered them, used them, dehumanized them, othered them, oppressed them, or perpetuated the oppression of others will be held accountable. Unity is not the call to passive togetherness but the call to profound harmony that requires deep change. For example, the way many in the deconstruction community feel about the church and Christians calls for an accountability for the church. The same accountability is due for so many communities who have experienced abuse at the hands of those who claim to follow Jesus, such as the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities. Unity through dignity requires this process; without it we will create a false peace that continues to put bandages on what requires a real surgical operation. Peacemakers are called to make room for this to happen.
4. *Discern.* Discernment helps us know what to do in conflict, how to do it, when to do it, or whether to do anything at all and instead leave it to God. Let's be very clear, peacemaking is not saving. Peacemakers aren't perfect people who are called to save others. That's only for Jesus. But peacemakers are called to be wise about when to intercede,

inject, and investigate in order to know whether God is calling them to speak up or do something. I learned this early on through burnout—from trying to fight every battle and growing hopeless and weary of all the peacekeeping happening. Wisdom through discernment is a gift we get to embrace; it will require a nearness to God so we can hear his voice, sense when the Spirit moves, and move when prompted.

Wisdom leads us to become peacemakers who stay the course.

5. *Disciple*. This is our call at the end of Matthew 28, and we ought to take it seriously in our effort to be peacemakers. Just as we need wisdom, we also need one another as we grow spiritually. We need to be led and to lead. It can't stop with us; it must be passed on. Unity continues when we disciple others into becoming peacemakers.
6. *Depend on God*. The Holy Spirit must be included in our interactions when it comes to peacemaking. Because our flesh will want to react, blame, or maybe even disrespect someone in a conflict, we need the Holy Spirit to help us produce the fruits of the Spirit. If we depend on him, we will get the help we need to extend peace, exude joy, love generously, practice self-control, walk in kindness, embody patience, embrace goodness, make every effort to be faithful, and be gentle as much as possible. Depending on God in peacemaking means we see our efforts as another means of giving glory to him and not ourselves. Depending on God in peacemaking means we don't rely on our trauma, education, or even experiences to be the determining factors of how we will make peace but that we trust God who is peace and is the ultimate peacemaker.

Learning to embody unity creates a dynamism of freedom and peace. There will be a conviction and an energy of wanting to free people because we ourselves have been freed. We get to be peacemakers and freedom fighters because God has united us to him through Christ, thus making it possible for us to be united to one another. Unity makes us come alive and makes what we thought impossible possible. Peace in this world? Possible. Freedom and flourishing for all? Possible. Left to ourselves, it would be impossible, but with God, through his Spirit, all things are possible.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. When you hear the phrase “free people free people,” what do you think of? Does it compel you to some sort of action?
2. Who do you consider your enemy? Do you want freedom for them?
3. Do you consider yourself a peacemaker? If so, what does that look like in your life? If not, what do you feel you need to change or grow to walk in that direction?
4. What aspects of peacemaking or freedom fighting do you feel are hard? How could you be encouraged by what Christ has done for you so you can persevere?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*Peacemaking God, thank you for liberating us and giving us the opportunity to walk in a freedom that we could not earn or work for but that you gave to us because you love us. Help us, Holy Spirit, live active lives of freedom that display a love for others so strongly that it is evident that we want them to walk in freedom too. Guide us, Lord, toward renouncing peacekeeping but desiring to be peacemakers for the sake of unity and freedom for all. In Jesus’s liberating name, amen.*

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TEN

# Delighting in the Power of Oneness

Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another.

—Proverbs 27:17

I have seen that in any great undertaking it is not enough for a man to depend simply upon himself.

—Lone Man (Isna-la-wica), Teton Sioux<sup>[1](#)</sup>

I love walking the streets of NYC; there's always something going on. But my favorite event to witness is a family reunion—especially when I see an African American family engaging in that tradition. Often they'll have matching T-shirts with the family name on them. There are people of all ages, extended family members and significant others, gathered simply to be together. Some have traveled far, from different parts of the country, and they come together because they're tied by blood, by love, and by family name. It's a way I see unity on display—the shirts remind me of the power of the Holy Spirit bringing Christians together in the family name of Jesus, in whose name and through whose blood we're bound together.

A huge component of walking in unity and embracing oneness is doing things together that lead toward justice, community, peace, intercession, and obedience. Praying and being in Scripture in community is a way to maintain a healthy body of Christ and reflect Jesus well in the world. No matter our differences, we all need the Holy Spirit to help us, and we all need to rely on Scripture and prayer. Without these things, we go astray, lose our way, and fall apart.

## Prayer in Community

In the book of Acts, we see a consistent presence of prayer in the intentional forming of the structure of the church. In Acts 4, Peter and John are experiencing levels of threat and persecution from the Sadducees and Jewish leaders and upon returning to their congregation they begin to pray over it. Verse 31 says, “When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.” There were consistent shifts when they prayed and not just outer but also inner. The very next verses, 32 to 35, say,

Now the entire group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. With great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need.

Prayer ushered in the power of the Holy Spirit, and we see that his presence and empowerment within this community in Acts 4 moves them to be a generous, just, and communal people. This movement is not of their own doing or moral compass but because the Holy Spirit is with them, teaching them, and showing them what it means to be the people of God. Back at the end of Acts 2, the same thing happens after new believers get empowered by the Holy Spirit. So, it isn’t just one occurrence but actually a culture they create among themselves because of the Holy Spirit.

By ignoring the Holy Spirit within us, we don’t allow him to convict us of the importance of unity. But his very presence empowers us to be people who live justly, who seek to be compassionate toward others, and who create systems like the early Christians did to ensure all things were shared and no one lacked anything. In Psalm 23, we read at the very beginning, “The Lord is my shepherd, I have what I need,” and although that can describe spiritual necessities, which is what we have through salvation through Jesus, I believe the verse is also about what we need practically every day. And I believe God fulfills Psalm 23:1 by providing directly through himself and also directly through his people. I see its connection to the Acts 4 church in how they ensured that those around them were not lacking anything, and I wonder if we, too, could be of one mind and have all things in common, so no one is lacking.

For much of my adulthood, I didn't think home ownership was an option for me, and honestly, there were times I didn't really want to go down that path. Although some people would like to project it to be so, home ownership is not the path for everyone, and in New York City, it's definitely not the path for most because of the cost of living. But in early 2025, my mom, husband, and I sat down to talk about moving in together. We boldly began to talk about owning instead of renting and started writing down the things we considered priorities and preferences when it came to buying a house. At the end of the conversation, I was shocked at myself for even being willing to engage in such conversation and really just thought it was nice to have talked about it together but still didn't think it was possible. A week later, I went on a silent retreat and experienced God's care in a tangible way. I had been feeling a silence from the Lord at the retreat and couldn't concentrate on the activities the retreat leaders were guiding us in. I felt discouraged, like I was doing something wrong. I prayed God would show himself, and the next day during lunch, something beautiful happened. I was the first to arrive to the lunch space and was about to start eating when a woman came in. As it was a silent retreat, we were expected to be silent so we would just smile at one another and eat our meals. But just a few seconds later, the woman came up to me, took my hand, hugged it, and smiled at me. I started crying and felt the Lord say, "I see you and hear you." After that, something in me changed, and I felt ready to earnestly start the home-buying process. Still, I prayed that while I was willing to give this a try, I would need his peace.

From the start of the process, I felt God's presence in how he provided for us in the details. Many realtors in New York won't even show a house if you don't have a bank preapproval, but out of God's sovereignty a realtor was willing to show us two homes even though we didn't have the preapproval yet. The loan process itself was a journey, a four-month process that included a lot of paperwork and unexpected requests and required us to ask a lot of questions and advocate for ourselves. But in the end, it happened. Unfortunately, we were shocked when hit with the closing costs, which were double the down payment. It was far more than we had expected or had saved up. But through God's peace, a thought came to mind: Why don't we ask our community for help? When people are going to have a baby, they have a baby registry. When people get married, they

have a wedding registry, so why couldn't we invite people to "have all things in common" with us and share in this process?

We needed to raise \$37,000, so I created a fundraising page on my website and sent a massive email to friends and supporters we had made over the years to see if they would join us in buying our home. The first person to give was Rachael Wade, my good sis who leads a ministry called Olive Us, and I'll never forget what she said: "This ask is bold and Kingdom. Thanks for including me." She was right. This was a bold ask that could have only come from the Holy Spirit who gave it to us. And I loved that she said it was kingdom, meaning that it was the way of God's kingdom, where community comes together to share and to seek help and receive it. That message from Rachael made me realize that this ask was an opportunity for people to walk in unity with us. Not everyone who gave was even Christian, but they were of the same mind and heart, coming together to provide a *casita* ("house" in Spanish) in the Bronx for my family that would be a sanctuary, a place that would glorify God, and an offering to the neighborhood and people we get to witness to. This would be a place of unity.

This is what unity gets to look like—to live in community with one another, where we share what we have, receive what is given, and work together for the good of the body. Even in the unjust housing system in our country, people united to make a way for my intergenerational family to own a home in the Bronx. Very few problems, obstacles, and injustices in the world can be resolved simply by trying to do something ourselves. Anthropologist Margaret Mead says, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has."<sup>2</sup> In our case, we are citizens of the kingdom of God and are meant to be the very presence of God in this world but also with one another. It always makes me think of Teresa of Ávila's poem:

Christ has no body but yours,  
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.<sup>3</sup>

When we come together, give of our time and treasure, and have a heart to live in oneness with one another, so much can change for good. I'm writing these words while sitting in the very miracle that is our house because people decided to unify.

At the end of Acts 4, we are told about Barnabas, also known as Joseph the Levite, who sold land he owned in order to contribute to this unity of having "all things in common." Then, in Acts 5, we see an example of someone living in rebellion against this cause and invitation from God. Acts 5:1–2 says, "But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet." What we see here is that there will always be consequences to our actions—we can either unify for good, as we saw in the story about buying our home, or we can unify for evil as we see in Ananias's story. When confronted by the apostles, both Ananias and Sapphira drop dead, and this shows that unity bears fruit either way. Matthew 7:19 tells us, "Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Unity for the good of the collective will be sweet to the soul, whereas selfish reasons under the guise of unity will always bear death—perhaps not literal death, but death to the soul, death to our witness, death to the collective good.

Therefore, good fruit equates to living justly. Good fruit equates to loving our neighbor. Good fruit equates to being generous and forgiving people. Good fruit equates to embodying compassion and empathy every day. Good fruit gives God glory when it's good for all people. I can't celebrate detention centers and the hunting of immigrants and claim to be producing good fruit in my life because I came to church today. I can't dehumanize my neighbor and claim to produce good fruit in my life because I went on a plane to a different country and did a mission trip last year. I can't support a genocide and claim to produce good fruit in my life because I donated some clothes to a children's shelter last week. I can't withhold my generosity from someone I think doesn't deserve it and claim to produce good fruit in my life because I gave an offering at church on Sunday.

Good fruit is consistent. Good fruit is not two-sided, confused, unjust, lacking dignity, or partial. If it's good, it's fully good, for me and others. And good fruit comes out of partnering with the Holy Spirit to abide in him, listen to him, acknowledge him, be led by him, and submit to his will and

way. Our own flesh will lead us to live like Ananias and Sapphira, but the Holy Spirit will lead us to live lives like Barnabas and the apostles, committed to the well-being of others and the spread of the liberating message of Jesus.

## Scripture in Community

Further in Acts, we see how important Scripture reading and understanding is to the work of unity. Acts 17:10–12 says,

As soon as it was night, the brothers and sisters sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. Upon arrival, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. The people here were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, since they received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Consequently, many of them believed, including a number of the prominent Greek women as well as men.

Too often our time in Scripture is our quiet time alone, but one way we can work toward a collective understanding of God's Word is to study it with others. This gives us an opportunity to discern, learn, grow, and hold one another accountable. It gives us an opportunity to see different perspectives and another opportunity to practice discomfort, learn together, and see how diverse perspectives give depth to understanding how God is speaking to us today through Scripture. Perhaps if we approached Scripture as the life-giving source it is and not as a weapon, we could see that the Bible wasn't given to us to debate and prove each other wrong. God's Word is a guide that takes us to the heart of God and teaches us how to live that out in the world.

## Love in Action

Prayer and reading Scripture in community lay the foundation for us to love in action. John 13:35 says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." What does love in action look like? This is how we would live and be:

Let love be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good. Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another. Do not lack diligence in zeal; be fervent in the Spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer. Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality. Bless those who

persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord. But

If your enemy is hungry, feed him.  
If he is thirsty, give him something to drink.  
For in so doing  
you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.

Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good. (Rom. 12:9–21)

Loving means we extend generosity and see life with others as having “all things in common.” Loving means we even give to our enemy what they need as a means of partnering with God to live out Psalm 23:1 in ensuring no one is lacking anything. Loving means we detest evil. Loving means we love God's Word enough to obey it. Loving means we love God enough to love our neighbors well. And loving means we choose unity. May we not just proclaim to be people of love but be people who put that love into action together.

What would it look like if we delighted in being with one another? Despite our differences and discomforts, that we would choose such a path beautifully illustrates the intention of God of creating a humanity that is good (Gen. 1:31). Because to be good is to reflect God. It's not to be nice or think we have to do good things but to actually reflect heaven and Jesus on this earth with our lives, words, actions, thoughts, prayers, and presence. To be like the early church in their willingness to share all things for the sake of no one lacking anything. To be like Moses, who even with excuses and hesitations, chose to partner with God and Aaron to help liberate others. To be like the prophet Isaiah and be willing to say the hard thing if it means the people of God walk in truth, liberation, and real peace. To be like Paul and empower women and address what's not working so we can get to a place of flourishing and health. To be like Jesus and live compassionately, truthfully, obediently, and mercifully.

Let's follow the path of our biblical ancestors, who—except for Jesus—were not perfect people, yet chose to be used by God for his glory and the good of others. False peace is not our ministry or portion; it's just what

we've normalized. Let's move on a different path of oneness that leads to a real peace that includes humility in the midst of perspectives, diversity in the midst of community and spaces, and unity in the midst of varying lived experiences. We can do this. I believe in us. Let's partner with God and one another to walk in the path of peace, unity, and diversity for his glory. Division doesn't need to be the norm. It's not working for us, nor is it glorifying God. Let's walk together unified toward peace.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTION STEPS

1. Have you prayed for anything audacious that only God could do? If so, how has God answered that prayer? If not, what is keeping you from it?
2. What does "all things in common" look like for you in your present life?
3. In what ways have you been the community that someone else needed? In what ways has community (however you may define that) provided for you?
4. As we learned about the early church in Acts, what was meaningful to you? How can you live out the same heart and mind that they had in your life today?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord who answers prayers and shows up in Scripture, help us to listen to you, to understand your heart, and to obey you more. Help us to have a posture of having "all things in common" with others—not just with the ones we love and like but especially with those who are outside our circles, strangers, or those in need. May we not settle for living that way just some of the time but may we strive to live that way all the time. In Jesus's name, amen.*

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## **Closing Benediction**

# **For Our Collective Flourishing, Freedom, and Fruitful Path Forward**

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May his face shine upon you and be the only face you gaze on as you choose to walk in obedience to his word. May the rest of your days include your intentional choice to practice discomfort for the sake of unity and loving your neighbor. May your church be different because you took these words and felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit to offer up more Christlike approaches to being a diverse and unified church. May those in your life who think differently from you experience Jesus through you and your conversations with them. May those you have struggled to love before because of their different theologies and opinions look different to you now and may you see them as Jesus does. May false peace be dismantled by the way you live, talk, and think. May God's seriousness about unity become your story too. May peace abound wherever you go because of how much you want to be a peacemaker and choose to resist peacekeeping. May the normalization of division be broken in spaces you lead, relationships you have, ministries you engage with, and the life you live for the glory of God. May every person who doesn't believe in Jesus encounter a different experience of Jesus because of how they see you live with and engage with other Christians around you. May you carry the burdens of your brothers and sisters and love your neighbors in ways that go beyond what's expected. May your generosity to want to have "all things in common" help people see Jesus more and more clearly. May the world radically

change because you didn't choose to try to be Christian by yourself or with those whom it's easiest to love and be Christian with, but because you chose the narrow path of discomfort for the sake of unity. May it all be so for his glory and the flourishing of others. In Jesus's name, amen.

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A benediction simply means a closing blessing, offering, or prayer over the people who are hearing it.

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**PRICELIS PERREAUX-DOMINGUEZ** (MSW, MEd, MA) is a Black Latina and daughter of immigrants who's committed to truth telling and helping the body of Christ be pro-neighbor. She is the founder and CEO of Full Collective, creator of the annual Sowers Summit in New York City, and author of *Being a Sanctuary: The Radical Way for the Body of Christ to Be Sacred, Soft, and Safe*. She is on staff at the NYC chapter of Safe Families for Children and is an associate pastor at Renovation City Church in the Bronx, where she lives with her husband and son.

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## **“To be different is beautiful. To be one is necessary. To be both is the gospel. Pricelis is showing us the way.”**

Too often, what we call “peace” in our churches and communities is really just shallow unity—while below the surface, division is growing. But what if true Christian unity *embraces* differences instead of erasing them?

In *False Peace*, Pricelis Perreaux-Dominguez helps us recognize shallow approaches to unity that are rooted in colonialism and comfort. Through her pastoral wisdom, you will learn to reject surface-level uniformity, embrace courageous conversations, and build diverse communities of resilient love. Because unity doesn’t erase difference or dismiss theology—it’s transformed by them.

“Surely, we must know or can at least imagine the difference between true and false peace. The false version wears unity’s clothes without the power and authenticity to walk upright. Pricelis exposes the ways sameness has been mistaken for oneness. To be different is beautiful. To be one is necessary.

To be both is the gospel. Pricelis is showing us the way.”

—**Jackie Hill Perry**, author, Bible teacher, and artist

“Pricelis presents a bold imperative for the church today to reject cheap forms of peacemaking and unity that are superficial and showy. She brings to the conversation the maturity of an experienced pastor, the boldness of a prophet, the liturgy of a poet, and the practical questions and next steps of a community leader. This book gives me fresh hope for gospel unity in a viciously divided world.”

—**Nijay K. Gupta**, professor, Northern Seminary; author of *Strange Religion*



Author photo: Carolina Ramirez

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