

CULTURAL AWARENESS WEEK

JANUARY 20-26, 2025



USA EASTERN TERRITORY
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WELCOME

Greetings from the U.S.A. Eastern Territory! Our territory has been honored to be entrusted to prepare the resources for Cultural Awareness Week 2025. The theme for this year is “United,” based on Colossians 3:10-11 (TLB):

“You are living a brand new kind of life that is continually learning more and more of what is right, and trying constantly to be more and more like Christ who created this new life within you. In this new life one’s nationality or race or education or social position is unimportant; such things mean nothing. Whether a person has Christ is what matters, and he is equally available to all.”

The apostle Paul beautifully illustrates the believer’s new experience as a new creation, inviting us to be constantly renewed by this experience so that we can come closer each day to the fullness of the perfect man, who is Christ. He encourages us to think and behave in a way that reflects the type of conduct that emulates Christ’s character.

Paul then invites us to reevaluate our priorities and to rethink how we often look at things through the prism of our own biases, which may not lead us to behavior and attitudes that reflect Christ or His kingdom.

Perhaps today, we should use the eyes of Christ to begin to look at the things to which we give too much importance.

In this new pilgrimage the apostle Paul helps us see that the love of Jesus unites our spirits and minds in Him for His mission.

What should our attitude, our way of thinking, and behavior be if we claim to experience this new life in Christ?

We hope that the resources and ideas we suggest for Cultural Awareness Week can help guide us in seeking the unity that, as “God’s people,” Christ demands and expects from each one of us.



Major Sunkyung (Sunny) Simpson

Mission Engagement Secretary
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DAILY DEVOTIONS

A 5-Day Devotional Journey



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Day 1

UNITED IN CHRIST

Colossians 3:10-11 (The Living Bible)

“You are living a brand new kind of life that is continually learning more and more of what is right, and trying constantly to be more and more like Christ who created this new life within you. In this new life one’s nationality or race or education or social position is unimportant; such things mean nothing. Whether a person has Christ is what matters, and he is equally available to all.”

This devotional series explores the timeless theme of being United in Christ in a society marked by deepening ideological divides. Colossians 3:10-11 beckons us to reflect on the enduring relevance of Unity amidst today’s tumultuous landscape. The world is experiencing a growing polarization, where differences define and often divide. Against this backdrop, the scriptural truth of our Unity in Christ becomes not just a theological tenet but a potent force capable of transforming lives and communities.

Consider the backdrop of political, social, and cultural discord that characterizes our era. This Scripture delves into the heart of these challenges, seeking to understand how the unifying message of Colossians can breathe hope into our fractured world. The text speaks to the essence of our being—a new creation continually shaped into the likeness of our Creator. It propels us beyond the superficial markers of identity, such as nationality, ethnicity, education, or economic status, asserting their insignificance compared to the all-encompassing significance of Christ dwelling within us. If Christ is living in us, then we know we are one.

Imagine a digital collage that weaves together the diversity of contemporary life. Diverse lifestyles, varied professions, and the omnipresence of technology converge within this collage, symbolizing the convergence of different experiences and backgrounds in the transformative embrace of Christ. It serves as a portrayal of how, despite the complexities of modern existence, Christ remains the unifying thread that binds diverse lives into a harmonious whole. This image mirrors the dynamic Unity found in the spiritual realm, transcending the boundaries that often fragment our human experience.

What does your collage of diversity and contemporary life look like?

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious and Merciful God,

Lord, we acknowledge the complexities of our times, where differences often lead to division and understanding seems elusive. Amidst this, Your Word stands as a beacon of hope, reminding us that in Christ, we are a new creation continually shaped in Your likeness. May Your Spirit guide us as we explore this truth, illuminating the path toward genuine Unity.

We thank you for the diverse tapestry of life represented in the digital collage before us. Each image, a unique reflection of Your creation, converges in Christ, the unifying force transcending worldly distinctions. Help us see this diversity’s beauty and understand that our true identity lies in Christ alone.

Grant us the courage to acknowledge our struggles, celebrate our victories, and seek Your transformative power in every aspect of our lives. Lord, empower us to be agents of change in our communities, workplaces, and families, manifesting the Unity that transcends the superficial boundaries of this world.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Amen.

Day 2

EMBRACING OUR NEW IDENTITY

Ephesians 4:22-24 (NIV)

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

In the age of digital connectivity, where social media threads often impact our identities, we find ourselves entangled in the narratives of the world. This devotional segment beckons us to delve into the profound truth of Ephesians 4:22-24, the acquisition of a new creation—life, an ongoing renewal into the likeness of our Creator, and the revelation of God in its fullness. We navigate the currents of a society where images and societal expectations shape our self-perception.

Consider the influence of social media platforms, where meticulously crafted personas often define our identity. In this context, we explore the radical idea of finding our identity in Christ. This scriptural passage invites us to rise above the superficial layers constructed by societal expectations and seek our authentic selves in the transformative power of Christ. As we contemplate this truth, let us embark on a journey of self-discovery and renewal, freeing ourselves from the shackles of external expectations.

Imagine a split image that includes the mystery of our existence. On one side, the curated life presented on social media is marked by carefully selected images, achievements, and a semblance of perfection. Contrast this with the other side, a portrayal of genuine transformation unfolding in Christ—a life marked by authenticity, vulnerability, and a journey of continuous renewal. This visual representation serves as a reminder that our identity is not found in the world’s temporary applause but in Christ’s enduring transformative power.

Let us reflect on the profound implications of this truth for our lives, acknowledging the tension between societal expectations and the liberating grace of Christ. May this exploration lead us to embrace the challenge of aligning our self-perception with the truth found in Christ, recognizing that our identity is anchored in His redeeming love.

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

As we unravel the layers of our identity in this intricate tapestry of existence, we come before You, acknowledging the complexities of the world we navigate. In a society where curated images often overshadow genuine transformations, we seek Your guidance, Lord.

Thank You for the revelation in Ephesians 4:22-24, reminding us that we have new life in you, and we are continuously renewed in Your likeness, and exposed to the fullness of Your revelation. In a world where social media often dictates our self-perception, empower us to break free from the expectations imposed by society.

Grant us the courage to embrace our identity in Christ, a transformation that transcends the curated narratives of the digital age. As we reflect on the split image—the world’s expectations versus the genuine transformation in Christ—let Your Spirit guide us in aligning our self-perception with the truth found in You.

May this journey of self-discovery lead us to a deeper understanding of our identity in Christ, liberating us from the pressures of conformity. Help us to navigate the tension between societal expectations and the transformative power of Your grace.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who renews and transforms us.

Amen.

Day 3

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Galatians 3:28 (NIV)

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In the difficulty of contemporary society, we confront the pressing issues of our time—the deep-seated challenges of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic differences. Galatians 3:28 stands as a beacon of divine wisdom, challenging us to grapple with the stark reality that the worldly markers of nationality, ethnicity, education, or economic status hold no significance in the grandeur of our new creation—life. In this devotional segment, we seek to explore the relevance of Galatians 3:28 in dismantling prejudice and fostering genuine Unity amidst the diverse fabric of humanity.

Consider the pressing concerns that echo in our world today—the echoes of racial tension, the scars of ethnic divides, and the shadows cast by economic inequality. In this context, we delve into the transformative power of Scripture, addressing these issues head-on. The words of Galatians invite us to envision a reality where the barriers erected by societal constructs crumble in the face of the all-encompassing truth that “it is Christ that means everything.” Let us be open to uncomfortable conversations that lead to understanding, empathy, and authentic Unity.

Imagine people breaking down walls. Diverse individuals representing diverse nationalities, ethnicities, educational backgrounds, and economic statuses stand united in tearing down barriers that separate them. This powerful image reminds us that our shared identity supersedes the divisive categories that often fragment our human experience in Christ. It embodies the aspirational vision of dismantling prejudice and fostering authentic Unity within the body of Christ.

As we contemplate this illustration, may it influence our personal and collective responsibility to break down barriers. May it inspire us to engage in intentional efforts that promote reconciliation, understanding, and Unity, reflecting the transformative power of Christ.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious and Compassionate God,

In the light of Your Word, we come before You with open hearts, ready to explore the depths of Galatians 3:28. In a world marked by divisions, we recognize the relevance of Your truth in breaking down the walls that separate us.

Lord, as we address the contemporary challenges of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic differences, we ask for Your guidance. In this new creation, life helps us to internalize the profound reality that our worldly markers matter nothing. Instead, Christ means everything, as He lives in every one of us.

We bring before You the scars of racial tension, the echoes of ethnic divides, and the shadows of economic inequality. In the power of Your transformative love, empower us to be agents of change. May our actions align with the vision of breaking down barriers, fostering understanding, and cultivating genuine Unity within the body of Christ.

As we navigate uncomfortable conversations, grant us wisdom, humility, and a heart filled with compassion. Let Your Spirit guide us in dismantling prejudice, promoting reconciliation, and being vessels of authentic Unity in a fragmented world.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who unites us all.

Amen.

Day 4

LIVING OUT UNITY

Colossians 1:16-17 (NIV)

“For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

In this digital age, where the boundaries between physical and virtual worlds blur, we stand at the crossroads of opportunity and challenge. Colossians 1:16-17 pierces through the digital noise, proclaiming the timeless truth that everything finds its ultimate meaning in Christ. In this segment, we delve into the practical aspects of living out Unity in a digital age, where online interactions, social media, and digital platforms become arenas for promoting understanding, empathy, and Unity among the diverse tapestry of individuals.

Consider the vast landscape of our digital existence—a space where voices echo, ideas collide, and communities form. In this context, we seek to understand how the core message of Colossians 1:16-17 can be translated into intentional actions within the digital sphere. The Scripture prompts us to recognize Christ as the common denominator that unites us all and to infuse His transformative love into our online interactions. It challenges us to use the tools to foster a digital community that reflects the richness of our diverse yet unified identity in Christ.

Think of an infographic that vividly depicts a diverse digital community engaged in positive interactions, meaningful discussions, and mutual support. This infographic captures the essence of living out Unity in the digital space, showcasing the potential for genuine connections that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The infographic becomes a visual roadmap, inspiring individuals to contribute to a digital environment characterized by understanding, empathy, and the transformative power of Christ.

This infographic should serve as a catalyst for practical reflection. How can our online presence be a testament to Christ’s love? How can our interactions promote Unity and understanding in a world often marked by digital discord? These questions guide us in translating the message of Colossians 1:16-17 into tangible actions within the digital landscape.

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Amid the digital tapestry that defines our age, we bow before You, acknowledging the profound truth embedded in Colossians 1:16-17. In a world where online interactions shape our relationships, we seek Your guidance in living out Unity, reflecting the transformative power of Christ.

Lord, thank you for the tools and platforms that connect us globally. As we navigate the digital sphere, may our online presence be a testament to the truth that Christ means everything. Empower us to use these channels intentionally, fostering understanding, empathy, and Unity among the diverse individuals we encounter.

As we envision a diverse digital community engaged in positive interactions, discussions, and support, inspire us to be agents of change within this space. May our words and actions online be guided by Your love, promoting Unity in a world that often experiences division.

Grant us discernment, Lord, in navigating the complexities of the digital age. May our interactions reflect the Unity we share in Christ, transcending the limitations of the virtual world.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives in every one of us.

Amen.

Day 5

UNITY CANVAS

As we delve into the essence of Unity portrayed in Philippians 2:1-5, let's transition from reflection to active engagement. Our final segment invites you to embark on an interactive activity – the Unity Canvas. This goes beyond mere contemplation; you are encouraged to participate tangibly, expressing and sharing your understanding of Unity and leveraging the power of technology for a global impact.

Philippians 2:1-5 (NIV)

“Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:”

In understanding Philippians 2:1-5, we recognize the transformative nature of our new creation life in Christ. This devotional journey has illuminated the insignificance of worldly markers and emphasized the all-encompassing significance of Christ dwelling within you. Extend this understanding beyond personal reflection as you engage in this interactive activity.

INTERACTIVE ACTIVITY

Use a sheet of paper, a blank canvas, or a computer screen and design a visual representation of your interpretation of Unity. Whether through colors, symbols, or words, let this canvas become a collective expression of your shared identity in Christ. The diversity of your interpretations mirrors the richness of interconnected lives.

This is not confined to physical space. We challenge you to share your Unity Canvas on social media platforms. In doing so, you harness the power of technology to unite believers globally. This is more than a symbolic gesture; it's a tangible demonstration of your interconnectedness, reflecting our digital age.

As you engage in this activity, remember the significance of online interactions. In a world where technology often amplifies division, we urge you to use online platforms with love and respect. Foster conversations that exemplify the Unity we share in Christ. Let the Unity Canvas not only reflect our collective identity but also a catalyst for positive interactions in the digital realm.

CLOSING PRAYER

Write a prayer to encourage others to be united in Christ in all they say and do as a living representation of Unity. Share your Unity Canvas on social media.



WEEKLY PROGRAMS

Youth Ministries Resources

Women's Ministries Program

Men's Ministries Program

Reading Resource Article

Youth Message

UNITED

From the beginning of time, God has demonstrated his appreciation for diversity. One of the ways He shows this is through the use of color in creation. The colorful, paint-lit sunset, the awe-inspiring allure of exotic ocean waters worldwide, and the overwhelming variety of lush green vegetation that changes with the seasons all attest to God's love for diversity! To assure just how much he appreciates diversity, Genesis 1 tells us that He looked at creation in all its color, glory, and artsy and said, "It was good." These elements alone should be enough to convince us that God celebrates differences!

But he did not stop there. He took it further and said, "Let us make human beings in our image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26 ICB). After he was finished, He looked at his creation again and said, "It was very good."

I am often amazed by how uniquely different every aspect of creation is—different in color, appearance, and function. Yet, God celebrates them all. Nevertheless, his goal wasn't just diversity. Instead, it is diversity in harmony. None of the creation works independently. While each has a specific role and purpose, if we look carefully, we can witness the harmonious operation in creation, signaling that God's intent and desire is for us is unity.

Our theme for this year's Cultural awareness is **United**. The dictionary defines the word united as "being made one." God desires to see his people live united. He sent his son Jesus to give us new Life and make oneness with Him and each other possible. Colossians 3:10 says, **"In this new Life, one's nationality or race, or education or social position is unimportant; such things mean nothing. Whether a person has Christ is what matters, and he is equally available to all."**

As we embark on the journey of cultural awareness week, we hope that you and your little ones will experience great joy and deep encouragement as we use color and art to explore the concept of "United." Through this artistic approach, we will discover some foundational elements of unity and determine how we can live better as believers united in Christ.



Captain Kendacy Barnes

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Kindergarten–Fifth Grade

UNITED: ONE BODY

1 Corinthians 12:18-19 (ICB)

“If each part of the body were the same part, there would be no body. But truly, God put the parts in the body as he wanted them. He made a place for each one of them. And so there are many parts, but only one body.”

Aim

Children will learn that although we are all uniquely created, we are one through Jesus.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

OPTION 1

- Instruct children to spell “United” using their body parts without help.
- Divide children into pairs and say each pair represents one body. Instruct pairs to spell the word “United.”
- Now combine the kids into one large group and say, this entire group represents one body. Instruct them to spell the word “United”. Each child in the group must be included.

Ask

- When was it easiest to spell the word united, alone or together? Why?
- What did you have to do to help you spell the word “united” when you became one group? (Work together.)

OPTION 2

Materials

- Any sweet-smelling fragrances (i.e. air fresheners, perfume, etc ...)
- Fruits
- Music
- Blindfold

Instructions

- In a spacious room, blindfold a few children and ask them to find a specific object in the room. They may use other parts of their body to help them. The first person to find the object wins.
- Next, instruct children to cover their noses. Spray some perfume in the air and ask children to detect the scent. They can use any body apart except their noses.
- Instruct the children to stand at one end of the room and place the fruit/snacks on the opposite end. Instruct children to get their favorite snack from the other end of the room. They can use any part of their body except their feet. The first person to get across the room wins a prize.

Ask students to share how they felt having to find the object without using their eyes or moving from one side of the room to the other without using their feet. What does this activity teach us about our body and how it works?

STORY CONNECTION

Our bodies work best when all its parts are working together. As children of God, we are a part of a body, too. This body is called the body of Christ. Jesus died for each of us. He died to save us and make us one with him and each other. If we claim Jesus as our savior and Lord, no matter who we are, where we come from, or how we look, we are all one in Christ.

Not only are we one body, but just as each part of our bodies has a specific but important role, so is it with us as children in the body of Christ. God has created each of us with unique abilities to work in the kingdom. These include preaching, teaching, having a particular skill at sharing about Jesus with non-believers, being really good at making others feel welcomed, and so much more!

1 Corinthians 12:18-20 tells us that, “If each part of the body were the same part, there would be no body. But truly, God put the parts in the body as he wanted them. He made a place for each one of them. And so there are many parts, but only one body.

Each of us is needed and essential to God and his kingdom work. Through Jesus, we are united. God has uniquely designed us to serve Him and each other. Therefore, we must make room for one another, acknowledging that no matter our differences, Jesus makes us one, and each of us is equally important to him. We can achieve great things together for God’s kingdom when we live and work in unity.

APPLICATION ACTIVITIES

OPTION 1: BODY OF CHRIST HANDPRINT MURAL

Using color, children will demonstrate that although each person’s favorite color is different, they create something beautiful when combined. In the same way, just as each of us is different, we can achieve beautiful things when we live in unity.

Materials

- 1 Large canvas / white cardboard
- Various colors of water paint / acrylic
- Aprons
- Paper tape
- Paper plates
- Paintbrush
- Plastic tablecloth

Instructions

1. Cover a table with a plastic tablecloth to protect the surface from paint spills. You can also do this activity on the floor.
2. Lay your canvas flat on the tablecloth and line the edges of your canvas with paper tape.
3. Have each child pick their favorite color paint. Using the color they have selected, paint each child’s hands with a generous amount of paint.
4. Tell the children to make handprints on the canvas with their painted hands.
5. Alternatively, you can pre-paint your canvas black and use neon paint for the handprints.

Thinking Beyond

Have the children list some unity words, and the leader will write these words between the handprints.

List of words for unity: equal, loved, valued, matter, important, belong, worthy, respect, together, oneness, love.

OPTION 2: GOD'S FAMILY CRAFT / ACTIVITY

We don't all look the same in God's family, but we are one!

Materials

- Brown foam / cardboard
- Foam sheets of various colors or heavy card stock, regular construction paper
- Black markers
- Scissors
- Elmer's glue / glue stick

Instructions

1. Outline a tree on the brown foam papers/cardboard. Make it as small or large as you'd like.
2. Draw and cut out a large crown for your tree using a large green foam sheet or cardboard.
3. On construction paper or foam sheets, cut out heart shapes enough for each child in your group.
4. Have each child write their name on a heart cut-out and paste it onto the tree's crown.
5. On the root of your tree, write the words "United in Christ."
6. If there is extra room in your tree, you can write unity words on your heart shapes and include them on your tree. Here are some unity word suggestions: equal, loved, valued, matter, important, belong, worthy, respect, together, oneness, love, etc.

FOCUSED PRAYER: PRAYER CHAIN

Have paper slips in various colors with the name of each child in your group. Make a paper chain by having each child connect their name to another child's ring to indicate they are united. Use glue sticks to connect the chains. Share a prayer for unity.

Sixth–Eighth Grade

UNITED: VALUE

Psalm 139:14 (ICB)

*“I praise you because you made me in an amazing and wonderful way.
What you have done is wonderful. I know this very well.”*

Aim

For children to understand one step to unity is believing that God created each of us equally valuable.

INTRODUCTION ACTIVITY

TREASURE HUNT PUZZLE

Children must work together to find the treasure and solve the puzzle. The first group to find the treasure and solve the puzzle wins.

Materials

- Colorful Ping-Pong or ball pit balls
- Masking tape
- Marker
- Sticky notes / white construction paper

Instructions

1. Divide your group into two or more smaller groups depending on your class size, and name the groups by colors.
2. Using masking tape & markers, spell out the word “united” by adding one letter of the word to each ball per color set. Now, mix all the balls (along with some remaining balls) and scatter them on the floor.
3. On a separate ball for each group color, tape the word value onto it. This ball will be the lucky ball.
4. Give each group 1-2 minutes to collect all the balls with their team color and unscramble the words.
5. The object is to find the balls with the letters/or words.
6. Each unlabeled ball is worth 1 point. Any ball with unity letters is worth 5 points each. The lucky ball is worth 20 points.
7. The team with the most points wins.

TRANSITION

Say: What did you have to do to complete the puzzle within the given time? (*Response: we had to work together*). Yes, when we work together, this is called unity. What are the words in your puzzle?

Our theme for this year’s Cultural Awareness Week is United. Say it with me, UNITED. United means to join together as one or to be made one. One important element of being united is knowing that each person has value.

Say: Do you know what it means for something or someone to have value? (*Allow time for response*). It means that someone or something has worth, is important, and is useful or adds meaning.

Ask: Can you think of someone or something important or valuable to you? Why is that person or thing important to you? What do you do to let that person know they mean a lot to you?

CONNECTION TO STORY

Just as we may find value in the things around us, God sees value in each of us! He created us valuable and full of worth. **Psalm 139:14** says, “**God made each of us in an amazing and wonderful way.**” If we believe this about ourselves and one another, no matter how big or small we are, where we come from, how much or little we have, or how different we are, we can be confident that we are equally valuable to God. Therefore, we should not think of one person more highly than another. Instead, we can celebrate our uniqueness and consider each other equally important. **Colossians 3:10-11** tells us, “**Jesus is equally available to all of us.**”

In addition, when we believe there is value in everyone, it inspires us to work together in love and appreciation for one another despite our differences. We will also do whatever we can to protect and treat each other with care, gentleness, respect, and love.

Finally, and most importantly, by celebrating our differences and valuing each other, we show the world that Jesus lives in our hearts.

APPLICATION ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: UNITED IN CHRIST CRAFT

Materials

- Scissors
- White construction paper
- Glue sticks
- Decorative materials
- Markers
- Crayons

Instructions

1. Turn your paper into a landscape position, fold it into two perfect halves, and create a neat crease.
2. Open your paper & cut along the crease to create two paper strips.
3. Fix one strip into landscape position and fold it into two perfect halves, taking the corners of the right side and matching it to the left side.
4. Take the top half and match it to the crease and fold. Flip over and repeat the step on the other side.
5. Using the pencil, draw a doll on one side of the paper. Ensure that hands and legs meet the edge of the paper.
6. Cut out your figure and unfold the paper to reveal your doll chain.
7. Color in the dolls using the favorite colors of each person in your group.
8. You may join your chain and keep it in your classroom as a weekly reminder of unity, or children can take their chains home.

Note: For younger children, a leader can prep the cut-out dolls and have children do the coloring & decorating portion.

Resource: Paper Doll video—<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xX5npCOOTQ>

ACTIVITY 2: UNITY IN COLOR

Materials:

- Canvas boards/cardboard
- Washable paint
- Plastic tablecloths
- Paint brushes and other paint supplies

Instructions

1. Divide children into groups.
2. Instruct children to design their artwork to demonstrate unity.
3. Display this in your classroom as a reminder for the month.

FOCUSED PRAYER

Using scissors and colorful construction paper, cut out heart shapes, have each child write their names, and place them into a jar. Each child will take a heart, and with the leader's help, they will pray prayers of love and unity over each other.

High School

UNITED: TOGETHERNESS

Galatians 3:27-29a (ICB)

“This shows that you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Now, in Christ, there is no difference between Jew and Greek. There is no difference between enslaved people and free men. There is no difference between males and females. You are all the same in Christ Jesus. You belong to Christ.”

Aim

For teens to understand that Christ is the foundation of our unity as believers.

INTRODUCTION ACTIVITY

ONE IN CHRIST

When we work together in unity, looking beyond differences and celebrating the image of God in which we were all created, we can achieve beautiful things.

Materials

- Tie-dye kits or water, food coloring, and gloves.
- Disposal gloves
- Aprons
- Basin / buckets
- 100% plain cotton shirt/ or large enough white fabric
- Tarp / plastic tablecloth
- Rubber bands

Instructions

1. Divide your group into two or more smaller groups.
2. Each group is given one damp/ pre-washed cotton t-shirt/ fabric.
3. Each group member picks a color of their preference.
4. The group must work together as they follow the instructions to tie-dye their fabric.

Tie-dye Instructions

1. Use rubber bands to secure your fabric into a pattern of choice.
2. Now soak your fabric in dye and let your fabric set for 6-8 hours or overnight.
3. Remove rubber bands to reveal the design.
4. Rinse your tie-dyed fabric in cold water and allow it to dry before displaying.

TRANSITION

Ask: What is the most crucial step in the tie-dye process? (*Allow time for response*). The most crucial step in the tie-dye process is starting with a damp fabric. When wet, the fabric can be shaped, changed, flexed, and adapted to the style and patterns of the tie-dye process. It also allows the dye to flow slowly through the fabric. You can pour colors onto your dry fabric, which will still be colorful. But if you want the colors to be beautifully blended to produce the desired pattern, you must start with a damp fabric. This fabric serves as the foundation for your beautiful tie-dye artwork. It's the one thing that makes it all come together.

CONNECTION TO THEME

Say: When working on any art piece, we desire to see it come together nicely. Today, we are going to talk about togetherness as we observe this year's cultural awareness week under the theme United. Ask teens to share their definitions of unity.

To be united is to be made one with something or someone. It can also be described as "the harmonious bringing together of multiple elements. But unity is often spurred by someone or something. In our tie-dye craft, each color reacts differently since they all have different characteristics and are produced by various chemicals. However, the dampness of the fabric allows the colors to flow through and form the pattern. No matter how different the reactivity of each color dye, the damp cloth brings them all together. It is the foundation for unity among the colors.

As followers of Christ, the foundation of our unity is Jesus. John 13:35 says that we "are all one in Christ." If we are all one in Christ, our differences do not matter. What matters most is that He is in our hearts, and we love each other the same way he loves us.

In **John 18:21**, Jesus prays for the believers, saying, "**Father, I pray that all people who believe in me can be one. You are in me, and I am in you. I pray that these people can also be one in us so the world will believe you sent me.**" Jesus came to make us one. Therefore, we can ask God to reveal the obstacles that stand in the way of our love and oneness with each other. Is it race, culture, socio-economic conditions, fear, traditions, biases, generational beliefs, wealth, unwillingness, stubbornness? We can pray for God to give us eyes to see others the way he sees them, for hearts to love others the way he loves, and for the courage and will to move beyond these differences and live as people, saved by Jesus and the United in him.

APPLICATION ACTIVITIES

OPTION 1: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions

1. How do you define unity?
2. How does the Bible define unity?
3. Where have you seen unity at work in creation, your personal life, your corps, and our world??
4. What are some obstacles to practicing unity in your personal life, at your corps, in the community, etc.?
5. Share a time when you experienced division. How did it affect you or those around you?
6. What practical steps can we take to live out unity in everyday life?

OPTION 2: ONE IN CHRIST PRAYER BRACELET

Materials

- Beads of different colors and varieties (plain and lettered)
- Beading wire
- Scissors
- Chinese knotting cord (optional)

Instructions

1. Measure your wrist and cut the elastic to size.
2. Thread beads onto elastic until you reach your desired length.
3. Be sure to include the word “united” or the phrase “United in Christ” on your bracelet

FOCUSED PRAYER: UNITY CHORDS

Collect three colors of yarn. One of the colors must be red. The red will symbolize the blood of Jesus, representing that Jesus died for all people and he is the foundation of our unity. The other two colors will represent the diversity of humanity. Divide your class into groups of 2 and instruct them to braid the chords into one. This braided chord represents their commitment to live in unity with each other. Share a group prayer on unity.

REFERENCES

www.Ministry-To-Children.com

www.thinkorange.com

WOMEN'S DEVOTIONAL

Revelation 7:9 (NRSV)

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

[This program could be held either at the Corps or alternatively in someone's home. To give an added special touch to the evening, it would be a good idea to encourage the women to attend in traditional clothing reflective of their various countries of origin and/or countries of their ancestors. Traditional clothing can evoke a sense of home and belonging, and also helps to inform others.]

A simple prayer station consisting of a table with a globe can be set up in a convenient location. As the women enter, they are invited to write the name of the country they are linked with along with a prayer request for that nation onto an index card and placed into a small basket next to the globe.

The designated leader welcomes the women and opens in prayer.

Two or three (or more!) women can share with the group about their outfits (name, material, when it would normally be worn, etc.)

DEVOTIONAL

Can you imagine what this world would look like if we all looked the same, spoke the same language, dressed in the same way and lived in the same manner? How boring that would be! There is truth to the saying that "variety is the spice of life." Quite fortunately, our God is the Creator of all things, and that includes our diversity. Diversity is his idea! And while we celebrate our differences of language, cultures, and customs, what unites us is our worship. Although there are many styles of worship, at the heart of worship is God, the one who alone is worthy.

We can see from Revelation chapter 7 and verse 9 that John had a vision of "a great multitude ... from EVERY nation and tribe and people and language ..." What did they have in common? Looking on to verse 10 we see that they were united in their worship:

*"And they cried out in a loud voice:
'Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.'"*

The people John saw in his vision did not all look the same! They were not all speaking just one language! They were not all from the same place! On the contrary, we see that they were diverse...from every nation, from every tribe, from every people and from every language on earth. Different, yes, but with the same purpose: worshipping God.

When we gather together and worship, we may wear different styles of clothing, worship in our unique ways, and sing and pray in our distinct languages, but we are united in our praise, love, and adoration of God our Father and the Lamb who sits on the throne, Jesus Christ.

In these days where we see so much division, may we be examples of unity. May we love one another not *despite* our differences but rather *because* of our differences. The only way that will happen, however, is if we ask Jesus to help make it so in our hearts. His desire is that his disciples "be one", just as he and the Father are one, so that "the world will believe" that God sent him (John 17:21).

Yes, Lord Jesus, may it be so within and among us. Amen.

DISCUSSION

Why is there a tendency to stick with those who look/act/think the same way we do?

What can we gain by forming friendships with people who are different than ourselves?

What are some practical ways that we can celebrate our differences?

Are there any poor attitudes, preconceptions, or prejudices within your own heart today? Ask God to help you to overcome them, and allow him to open your eyes, heart and mind to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

After a closing prayer (requests taken from the Prayer Station basket), refreshments may be served. Extra points if there are a variety of dishes from around the world!



Major Kristin Rivero

Divisional Secretary for Women's Ministries

Divisional Director of Officer Development (Puerto Rico & Virgin Islands Division)

USA Eastern Territory

MEN'S DEVOTIONAL

OVERVIEW

A men's prayer breakfast is an excellent opportunity to show unity by getting together to break bread and pray together. In the spirit of being united, it would also be suggested to invite other area men's groups to join if space allows. The devotional and prayer time can take place while the men are gathered around the table, or the men can be relocated to the chapel if this is necessary for logistical purposes.

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan"

DEVOTIONAL

The idea of unity is perhaps best expressed through the command to love your neighbor as yourself. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of Jesus' most well known parables, and one that speaks to how unity can cross cultural lines. In New Testament times, Jews and Samaritans were geographic neighbors, but their relationship was often defined by their differences, and Jews usually went out of their way to avoid Samaritans. I want us to take a moment to consider how divided the world is today, based on political differences, differences in economic status, and cultural differences. It is easy to label others as different, to buy into stereotypes, to avoid interaction with certain groups. As we consider this parable, and Jesus' choice of a Samaritan to be a loving neighbor, there are a few things we can learn about being united.

BEING UNITED WITH OTHERS REQUIRES ACTION

In the parable, the priest and the Levite in the parable were people who would have been well versed in biblical law, and certainly could have answered the question about God's commands that was posed at the beginning of this passage. And yet, by their actions they kept themselves separate from the man on the side of the road. They knew the right answers, they could have said the right things, but their actions told a different story. By contrast, Samaritans were seen by Jews as people who did not know God's law or keep God's law, and yet it was the Samaritan who was moved to action. It was this action that caused the Samaritan to be held up as the example of love and neighborly unity in the story.

The question for us as we think about being united is: does it show in our actions? Many of us know the socially acceptable things to say or even the biblical thing to say, but does that come through in the way we treat others?

BEING UNITED WITH OTHERS COMES WITH RISK

The fact is that when the Samaritan chose to stop, he was taking a risk to his personal safety. Travelling on that road was clearly dangerous, as evidenced by what happened to the man who was robbed. It would make sense that someone seeing that would want to keep moving as quickly as possible to avoid something similar happening to them. Furthermore, the scene could have been a trap to take advantage of anyone kind enough to stop. Many would think that the wiser course of action would be to avoid the potential trap than to be the sucker that got caught. The Samaritan did not allow such considerations to stop him from connecting with the man who needed him.

When we think about other groups around us, one of the things that can keep us divided is fear. Oftentimes these fears are misguided or based on misconceptions, and it is common to be afraid of the unknown. However, Jesus calls us to a love that overcomes that fear, that is willing to take a risk to connect with other people who were made in his image.

BEING UNITED WITH OTHERS WILL COST US SOMETHING

When the Samaritan stopped, he offered real tangible things that came at a cost to him: the bandages, the oil and wine, the transportation on his donkey, the cost of the lodging. More than that, he offered his own time and presence. When they had to part, he took the time to make sure that provision would continue to be made. There is no mention of any expectation of repayment or condition for what he gave.

When we think about being united, there is a selflessness that comes with that. This isn't just about superficial small talk, but about truly being invested in the lives of others, having the opportunity to receive from them as well, without keeping score.

The danger for us is that sometimes we don't identify with the Samaritan in this parable, but with the teacher of the law whose question prompted Jesus to tell this parable in the first place. Verse 29 tells us that this man wanted to justify himself, and so he asked, "Who is my neighbor?" The question he was really asking was who could he be justified in avoiding. We often have our own justifications today for division, but Jesus is calling us to put those aside, to put our faith in action, to take some risks, even if it costs us something, to love others. I want us to take some time today to pray together for unity.

PROMPTS FOR PRAYER

Are there barriers to unity within our community? Are there barriers to unity within our Corps? Are there barriers to unity within our own hearts?

Who are those who we most need to reach out to in the spirit of unity? How might God be giving us the opportunity to do so?



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USA Eastern Territory

UNITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have experienced an influx of migrants worldwide, impacting our churches on a social, cultural, racial, and ethnic level. This migratory impact is not only experienced by today's churches. When we delve into the biblical texts, we notice that the churches of the first century were formed and structured by ethnic groups. When we examine the letters of the apostle Paul to the churches, we can notice the cultural diversity that existed in the first-century churches. We also notice the sensitivity of the apostle towards the different ethnic groups that formed these churches, always calling for unity among them due to the lack of cultural tolerance that existed among these groups.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY DEFINED

What is cultural diversity? According to some writers, cultural diversity is the variety and coexistence of different cultures within a society, a region, or the entire world. It includes the diversity of languages, traditions, customs, religions, arts, gastronomy, and other elements that differentiate various cultural groups. Culture is the system of patterns and interconnections of ideas and beliefs, symbols, feelings, and values.

In each of his letters, the apostle Paul reminds us of the cultural patterns that were evident between Jews and Gentiles and how each of these challenges should be handled.

UNITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLE PAUL

As we look into the letters of the apostle Paul, we see that the early Church proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior after His ascension. However, we can also observe the lack of cultural, religious, and social tolerance that existed within the churches, where many of the Jews who had converted to Christianity caused disunity among the brothers, trying to impose their beliefs, their customs, and their social traditions. We can appreciate these facts in many of his letters, especially in the letter addressed to the Colossians. In Colossians 3:9-11 (NKJV), Paul writes the following:

“Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.”

As we go deeper into these verses of Colossians 3:9-11, we see the apostle urgently calling them to a change of behavior using the metaphor of “stripping off” and “putting on,” indicating that a qualitative change of identity has already occurred in the lives of believers. Identification with Christ is produced by the action of the Holy Spirit, who vitally unites the believer with the Savior, to form a spiritual unity with Him. This unity should also be reflected in coexistence and respect for others.

In Christ, inequalities or, perhaps a better term, differences between men disappear. Paul is very firm when he states that, in the new man, there are no longer the differences that were proper to the human condition without regeneration; that is, in the believer, the individual differences proper to the Earth are cancelled. In verse 11, we observe the emphasis that the apostle makes affirming that in Christ we are one, saying “where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free; but Christ is all, and in all.” In other words, in Christ Jesus there is no distinction of persons, nor of status. In the people of God we are one in Him.

In Galatians 4:8, Paul again reiterates that in Christ there is no distinction of persons, saying, “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are not gods.” (NASB) This means that no one has a special claim on God, nor is treated with less dignity than another. The Scythians were a group of people who inhabited the Northern coast of the Black Sea. To the Greeks, the Scythians were violent, uneducated, uncivilized, and completely inferior. In contrast to this type of discrimination and prejudice against other races and cultures, Paul shows that Jesus—who is all and in all—unites all Christians in equality, regardless of any social and cultural differences.

If we go to the book of Ephesians, we see Paul again calling for tolerance and unity (Ephesians 4:2-3). Bringing the biblical world into our context, we can see that there is not a significant difference between the socio-cultural context of Paul’s world and our own. If we introspect how we behave towards other cultures and make a thorough examination of our ministerial and social context, we are likely to identify with Paul’s world. We can see that there is not much difference between them and us when we act with respect and tolerance towards other cultures. We see that history repeats itself, making room for social and cultural differences, marginalizing those we consider less Christian because of their appearance or their social and cultural status.

THE CULTURAL DYNAMICS

Another aspect we must take into account when we talk about culture is cultural dynamics. In Genesis 11:1-9 (NASB), God said:

“Now all the earth used the same language and the same words. And it came about, as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. Then they said to one another, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and fire them thoroughly’ And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. And they said, ‘Come, let’s build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let’s make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of all the earth.’ Now the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the men had built. And the Lord said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they have started to do, and now nothing which they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore it was named Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”

A careful reading of this passage indicates that God recognized the potential dynamics of unified human culture. If we go back to the previous chapter, we see a future division of the human family into three races—one race for the descendants of each of Noah’s three sons. Because “all the earth used the same language and the same words” (v.1), it is evident that the entire human species was culturally united during the period referred to in chapter 10. Such complete union of language indicates another aspect of the cultural unity of that time. Take a look once again at Genesis 11:1-9 to see if you can find the direct indication that God recognized the potential dynamics of this united human culture.

THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURE

According to Dr. Paul A. Pomerville, language—in its various applications to communication—is truly one of the central aspects of human culture. The advantages of linguistic unity allow for cooperation among peoples capable of producing great advances of social and economic benefit to human life. We wish to emphasize the beneficial potential of unified culture.

Between unity and cultural diversity there is language. Through languages we identify with different cultures. For this reason, language has an important meaning within our churches.

LANGUAGE MEANING AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

According to Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett, words are nothing more than mechanisms that express the essence of meaning and reasoning that all people share. According to them, language is a means of classifying reality on the border between objects and concepts.

In the context of ministry, Christians affirm that the Gospel can be proclaimed in any culture and that God speaks all languages. A living example can be found in Acts 2:5-11. According to this account, all those gathered in that place were astonished because they heard the apostles speaking in their own languages.

The interesting thing about the chapter is the emphasis that the congregants put on the apostles' origins by saying, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans?" The Jews of Northern Israel had a special way of speaking that distinguished them from the rest. Peter was considered a Galilean because of his way of speaking (Mark 14:70). The inhabitants of Judea, especially those of Jerusalem, looked down on the people of the North, whom they considered somewhat uneducated. All this led to the surprise of seeing how those who were considered second-class people culturally speaking, expressed themselves with ease in different languages, expressing themselves in them with complete perfection, as each of the listeners remembered the way of speaking from their childhood, "in our own language, to which we were born."

What do we learn from this? The language barriers are not an impediment to bringing the Gospel of salvation to people with a different cultural background than our own. Therefore, unity and diversity should be some of the supernatural characteristics of Christians regardless of language, race, culture, or social status. In Christ we are one through the Holy Spirit.

UNITY, CULTURAL DIVERSITY, AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Another aspect of cultural unity and diversity is social relations. As we saw earlier, language not only affects communication, but it also affects social relations.

One of the most difficult things for me when I arrived in the United States was linguistic expression. Spanish is a language that has a formal and informal level, and in some Latin American countries, Spanish has an intimate level of respect. The linguistic form and vocabulary used will reflect social class, education, and racial differences. According to some writers on American culture, social relations follow certain characteristics that influence the way people of different ethnic and national origins relate to each other. These cultural and linguistic diversities have created a social separation, not only in the secular sphere, but also in the ecclesiastical sphere.

As we plunge into the gospels, we see how Jesus called for unity through social relationships regardless of the social, cultural, or educational status of the people around Him. According to the gospels, Jesus broke with all racial, social, and cultural protocols of the time. An example of this can be seen in John 4:9 with His interaction with the Samaritan woman. We know that Samaritans and Jews did not associate with each other. And He was often accused of sitting at the table with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16).

Another example is seen in His disciples, who were from different social circles. The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 (NKJV) says:

"And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

According to theologian Simon J. Kistemaker, in his attempt to win Jews to Christ, Paul conformed to Jewish customs during his ministry. Notable examples include: he allowed Timothy to be circumcised "because of the Jews" (Acts 16:3 NKJV); he took a Nazirite vow to express his thanks to God (Acts 18:18); he purified himself along with four Nazirites

and paid their expenses for the sacrificial offering (Acts 21:23, 24, 26).

Paul tried to promote church unity by bringing some Gentile Christians from Macedonia and Asia Minor to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). Although he was accused of not teaching the law of Moses to the Jews of the dispersion (Acts 21:20, 21), he willingly pacified the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He wanted to show that he had no qualms about obeying the law of Moses.

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude by emphasizing that in Christ we are all one. In Christ there is no distinction of race, culture, language, or social status. Through the gospels and the letters of the apostle Paul we learned that there is no social, cultural, or racial impediment to bringing the Gospel to every creature. This teaches us that the Bible has a cross-cultural message, the practice of biblical hospitality and corporate worship appropriate to the culture. As leaders, it is our responsibility to go beyond peoples and nations; we must walk together towards God's purpose with the world, bringing unity among the people of God.



Major (Dr.) Miguelina Feliz
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SUGGESTIONS

WORSHIP

- “Somos el pueblo de Dios” by Marcos Witt
- “Come Now Is the Time to Worship” by Brian Doerksen

ACTIVITIES

- Convey cultural diversity through music and dances typical of the countries represented in the congregation.
- Ask each participant to bring an object, whether it be a photo, a piece of art, or some other object that represents his or her cultural heritage. Each participant will have the opportunity to present his or her object to the other members of the group and share a brief story about its cultural significance.

- Celebrate cultural diversity through a food fair. Ask each member of the congregation to bring a dish of food that represents the cuisine of his or her country and, if possible, to dress in the traditional dress of his or her country of origin. Decorate the place with the flags of all the countries of the world.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Guillermo D. Taylor, ed., *Demasiado valioso para que se pierda* (Wheaton, IL: Alianza Evangélica Mundial WEF, 1997).
- H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *1 Corinthians*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; NY: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909).
- Movie: *Encanto*



SUNDAY WORSHIP

Meeting Outline

Sermon

Children's Moment

MEETING OUTLINE

CALL TO WORSHIP

“Shout To The North”

Men of faith, rise up and sing
Of the great and glorious king.
You are strong when you feel weak,
In your brokenness complete.

*Shout to the north and the south,
Sing to the east and the west;
Jesus is Savior to all,
Lord of Heaven and earth.*

Rise up, women of the truth,
Stand and sing to broken hearts,
Who can know the healing power
Of our awesome king of love.

*We've been through fire, we've been through rain,
We've been refined by the power of His name.
We've fallen deeper in love with You,
You've burned the truth on our lips.*

Rise up, Church with broken wings,
Fill this place with songs again
Of our God who reigns on high:
By His grace again we'll fly.

*Lord of Heaven and earth,
Lord of Heaven and earth,
Lord of Heaven and earth.*

RESPONSIVE READING

Leader: There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female.
(Galatians 3:28)

People: For we are all one in Christ Jesus (Colossians 3:11)

Leader: So be clothed in Christ (Galatians 3:26-37)

People: With Holiness, Love, Compassion, and Kindness (Colossians 3:12a)

Leader: Transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2)

People: For Humility, Gentleness, and Patience (Colossians 3:12b)

Leader: Loving each other deeply (Romans 12:10a)

People: Honoring others above ourselves (Romans 12:10b)

Leader: And perfected in unity (John 17:23)

People: So the world may know of the Father's love (John 17:23)

All: Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER

“God of peace and restoration, you brought unity and reconciliation amongst your people through the power of the cross. Holy, Spirit, come once again to build us up into a Holy Place where your presence dwells, that all may be brought near to you through the saving power of Jesus Christ. “

Rev. Dr. Tesia L. Mallory

SCRIPTURE READING

Colossians 3:10-11 (TLB)

“You are living a brand-new kind of life that is continually learning more and more of what is right, and trying constantly to be more and more like Christ who created this new life within you. In this new life one’s nationality or race or education or social position is unimportant; such things mean nothing. Whether a person has Christ is what matters, and he is equally available to all.”

PRAISE AND WORSHIP MUSIC

“Bind Us Together” (CCLI #1228)

“Christ Be Magnified” (CCLI Song #7139866)

“Thank You Jesus for the Blood” CCLI Song #7172456)

“They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love” (CCLI Song #26997)

“Come, Holy Ghost” All Quickening Fire (SB #296)

“Standing on the Promises of Christ My King” (SB #522)

“I Bring to Thee My Heart to Fill” (SB #588)

“I then Shall Live as One Who’s Been Forgiven” (SB #850)

“In Christ Alone My Hope Is Found” (SB #861)

“I’ve Found the Pearl of Greatest Price” (SB #869)

“They Shall Come From the East” (SB #1011)

BENEDICTION

Colossians 3:15-17 (NIV)

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Sermon

OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Focus

In Christ we “put on” a new identity.

Idea

Christ is the universal source of reconciliation and unity. These are expressed in the life of the Church.

Scripture

Colossians 3:10-11 (TLB)

INTRODUCTION

You were created with intentionality and purpose, in the image of God, but “Who are you?” What does it mean to be you? What does it mean to be you in the context of society? What does it mean to be you as a Christ follower, and a member of both a local faith community and the universal church?

These are difficult, yet important questions that each of us must wrestle with as we seek to identify the meaning of our lives, and our place in this world.

However, these are not new questions. The loosely networked house churches in the region of Colossae faced similar questions. Like many of the early New Testament churches, the churches in Colossae were made up of a variety of individuals: male and female; slave and free; rich and poor; well-traveled and those who had never left their small village; educated and illiterate, Jew and Gentile.

To these churches, Paul wrote the pastoral letter we look at this morning. As we look at this letter, and keep in mind that our struggles with identity were also their struggles, we find the same hope. We find hope that there is perhaps something greater than the identity the world has labeled us with.

(Prayer)

MAIN FOCUS

Our scripture comes from the third chapter of Paul’s letter to the Colossians. He writes:

“You are living a brand-new kind of life that is continually learning more and more of what is right, and trying constantly to be more and more like Christ who created this new life within you. In this new life one’s nationality or race or education or social position is unimportant; such things mean nothing. Whether a person has Christ is what matters, and he is equally available to all.” (TLB)

While Paul’s letter was written to the Christians in the network of churches in Colossae, it was also written for today’s church, for you and me. In fact, in many ways, the ancient world was not so different from our own. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explains, “The ancient world, just like the modern, was an elaborate network of prejudice, suspicion, and arrogance, so ingrained as to be thought natural and normal.” The prejudice, suspicion, and arrogance found both in the ancient world, and in our own, provide a rich soil for the cultivation of mutual suspicion and distrust. Do you see these attitudes brewing in our world today, perhaps even in our own communities, or perhaps even in our church?

The resulting fruit of such mutual suspicion and distrust are sins of anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and dishonesty that Paul described in verses 8-9 of this passage. It doesn't take much effort to look at our own world and see how mutual suspicion and distrust between racial, socio-ethnic, and cultural groups has resulted in anger, rage, malice, and slander. This mutual suspicion and distrust, and all the resulting sins are relentlessly indoctrinated into our minds and hearts through the polarizing discipleship of social media, news outlets, podcasts, celebrity figures, and even the secular, anti-gospel, philosophies poured into our children in school. The increasing polarization of Western society, alongside its insistence that all members of that society be marked with identifying tribal labels, is now, sadly, often reflected in the life and ministry of the church.

In this, there is no great chasm between the socio-cultural context of the Colossians, and our own. Their story is our story. If we search ourselves with total honesty, and authenticity, we can probably admit that our own individual lives have been affected by this mutual suspicion and distrust. This is personal.

It is in contrast to these societal norms of prejudice, suspicion, and arrogance that Paul makes the radical statement, "You are living a brand-new kind of life." In the New International Version of this passage, Paul calls on Christ followers to "take off" the *old* self, and "put on" the *new* self.

(Insert personal illustration about removing filthy clothing)

Literally, Paul is calling upon them to put on a new form of humanity, a humanity which sheds the identity of the first Adam, and puts on the new, life-giving identity of the new (final) Adam, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15). The Greek form of these verbs (take off, and put-on) is the aorist participle, which reinforces the idea that Paul is calling the Colossians to these actions with a sense of purposeful finality, "once and for all."

CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION AND UNITY IS NOT COLORBLINDNESS

It is important to note that in his calls for the putting on of a new primary identity in Christ, Paul was not ignoring racial, ethnic, or socio-economic differences, or abuses between these groups. He wasn't pretending that these differences didn't exist and he certainly wasn't ignoring the abuses that had taken place between these groups. The historical accounts of Paul's ministry, and the contents of his letters to various individuals and churches demonstrate not only his awareness of these differences, but also his acknowledgment of such differences in the contextualization of his ministry.

In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul explains that to the Jews, he became like the Jews. To the Gentiles, he became like a Gentile. He writes "*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings*" (1 Corinthians 9:22-23).

In the unified Body of Christ, we don't ignore differences in skin color or culture. We recognize that these differences reflect the fullness of God's creative work in creation, and we seek to honor, celebrate, and humbly learn from these differences.

However, we also recognize that because of sin, every area of our humanity has been corrupted, or damaged. In our doctrines, we call this corruption total depravity. Total depravity does not mean that humanity is as corrupt as it possibly can be, but instead that every area of our lives, including our cultural backgrounds has been scarred and functionally distorted by the effects of sin. This is why Christian regeneration is a necessary condition of reconciliation and unity.

It is in this new, life-giving identity that nationality, race, education, and social positions are no longer the defining characteristics of one's life. While these distinctions still exist, they do not define the life of the one who has "put-on" the heavenly nature (1 Corinthians 15). In the context of a Christian community, all hope for reconciliation and unity is found in this new, shared identity of Christ.

Let us reflect on three aspects of this new identity.

1. This new identity is Accessible to all

The new identity of Jesus Christ is available to all people, regardless of nationality, race, education, or social position. This truth is communicated to us in the words of Christ, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16, NIV). God’s love was not just for Israel or Samaria, but for the whole world. This was a bold, audacious claim then, and it’s a bold, audacious claim now.

The profound truth of John 3:16 is not just an empty claim. We see the fullness of the truth of God’s love for the world and the availability of his saving work expressed in the New Testament accounts of the early church. We see the Gospel go worldwide in the Book of Acts. In that short amount of time, we see it travel to the ends of the known world in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

That profound truth of the accessibility of the Gospel to all peoples is confirmed in the imagery of the great song of Revelation 7, sung by “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne, and before the Lamb.”

2. This new identity is Transforming for all

To the whosoever that would accept the saving work of Jesus Christ, there is deep, complete transformation. The effects of sin were pervasive, affecting every area our life, but the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is greater! When we place ourselves fully on the altar, without reserve, and let the Blood of Jesus wash over us, every area of our life can be redeemed. We find ourselves no longer conforming to the patterns of this world, but being transformed by a complete renewing or renovation of our mind (Romans 12:2).

Because Christ is the image of God in human form (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3), as we become more and more like Him (sanctification), the true image of God, the *imago dei* is restored in our lives.

In the transformational work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we are no longer conformed to the worldly thought patterns of prejudice, suspicion, and arrogance, especially those related to nationality, race, gender, education, or social position. Instead, as we “put on” the image of Christ, we find ourselves able to positively respond to Paul’s command to love each other deeply, and honor others more than ourselves (Romans 12:10).

Like Jesus, we find ourselves crossing cultural and ethnic boundaries to truly love and minister to those whose tribe our own tribe has been at war with, “those people.” (John 4)

Like Philemon, we find ourselves compelled by gratitude and the work of grace in our lives to fully forgive and accept as brothers and sisters in Christ those who have previously hurt us.

3. This new identity is Defining of all

Finally, we must acknowledge that as we “put on” this new identity, it must be the defining characteristic of our lives. As our passage concludes, “Christ is what matters.” Other versions of this passage simply state: “Christ is All, and is in all” (NIV, NASB, ESV). In the ancient Greek version of this text, the word “Christ” is placed last to emphasize its significance. Christ alone must be the central point of our identity, not our nationality, race, education, social position, any form of a social label, or individually expressive construct.

Biblical scholar George Lyons writes, “To confess that Christ is all, and is in all is to proclaim him the universal source of reconciliation and unity. This eliminates the need for political solutions intended to create order in a sinful world. In the church, order and unity are found in Christ alone.”

This reconciliation is put on display for the whole world in the relationships between the members of the body of Christ. Within the body, wherever someone looks, they see Christ. Christ is not only all, but is in all. N.T. Wright explains, “Wherever one looks, one sees Christ. When an elderly person is ignored, Christ is ignored; where a lively teenager is snubbed, he is snubbed; where a poor or colored person (or, for that matter, a rich or white one) is treated with contempt, the reproach falls on him. There must therefore be mutual welcome and respect within

the people of God. Nobody must allow prejudices from their pre-Christian days to distort the new humanity which God has created in and through the New Man.”

Our identity in Christ must be the predominate defining characteristics of our lives, and of our faith communities. We are the only version of Christ a broken world may see.

APPLICATION

So, what do we do with this information? Our response

1. Do you truly believe that the Gospel message is for all?
2. Is your identity primarily rooted in Christ, or is there some form of ethnocentricity, racism, or nationalism that has caused you to find your identity elsewhere?
3. Do you truly believe that the primary identity of every Christ follower is their identity in Christ and have you treated other believers as so?
4. Are there areas of your mind that are still conformed to worldly thought patterns of prejudice, suspicion, and arrogance towards those who are different from you?

Wherever you find yourself this morning, the Gospel message is still for you.

God loves you and sent His Son Jesus to die for you, so that you can experience forgiveness from your sins, and so that you may experience the renewal that He offers.

He wants to take off the brokenness of your humanity, and replace it with the image of His son Jesus. He wants to define your life, not by your race, nationality, education, gender, or social position, but by the love of Jesus. He wants to take every area of prejudice or hate, and replace it with humble love.

Perhaps this morning there is an area of pain that you are holding onto. In addition to forgiveness and transformation, healing is in the hands of Jesus.

Let us consider the words to this song:

*LORD Jesus, Thou dost keep Thy child
Through sunshine or through tempest wild;
Jesus, I trust in Thee.
Thine is such wondrous power to save;
Thine is the mighty love that gave
Its all on Calvary.*

*Christ is all, yes, all in all,
My Christ is all in all.
Christ is all, yes, all in all,
My Christ is all in all.*

(SB #1008 Lord Jesus, Thou Dost Keep Thy Child)

Are these words true for you this morning?

Is Christ your all?

Will you allow Him to become your all?

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CHILDREN'S MOMENT

Colossians 3:11-12 (NIV)

"Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

What do we put on if we're cold? A sweater or jacket. What about when we go swimming at the pool? A bathing suit and flip flops. What about when you go to a fancy party or a wedding? A nice dress or a dress suit.

Do we wear a dress suit when we go to the beach? No! What about a bathing suit when we go outside to play in the snow? No! We must wear and put on the appropriate clothes in certain situations and environments.

But there are certain "clothes" we should wear that are always appropriate for every and all occasions and settings. With these specific "clothes", people can identify us as God's people. We want others to see our identity in Him and not in anything else.

Clothes are important because of course they keep us dressed but they can also tell us a lot about ourselves. If someone dresses in a chef hat and apron, we can identify and see them as a cook or chef. If someone dresses in a white lab coat, we can identify and see them as someone working in the medical field. If someone dresses in clothes with a lot of paint marks on them, we can identify and see them as a painter (or maybe someone who's just messy).

Clothes can identify us in what we do and how we present ourselves to others. As I mentioned about the certain clothes we should wear all the time, I wasn't talking about literal clothes like a shirt and pants or a type of uniform, but in today's scripture the author Paul talks about clothing ourselves with qualities and identities of God as we are all made in His image.

Since God made us in His image to be like Him, we should imitate Him and put on his nature! In verse 12 it says we need to clothe ourselves by putting on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience much like we put on a shirt and pants every day when we get dressed.

It's important we wear these clothes every day in all situations because as we are all God's people whom He loves dearly, He wants us to be like Him and to show that same love to others so when people see us in our "clothes", they can identify and see us as God's people.

However it can be hard to do this sometimes. Just like how we only wear a bathing suit to the beach or the pool, sometimes we only want to wear kindness when we feel like it or in certain situations. When we are having a fight with a friend, what should we wear even if we feel angry? After taking a breath or stepping away for a bit, we can still choose to wear kindness and talk to our friends in love and compassion to resolve the conflict.

What about when you are trying to teach your brother or sister how to do something new or play a new game, but they keep making mistakes or don't understand how to do it? We should be very patient with them and be gentle and encouraging while we explain it to them, encourage them, and tell them they can do it.

We act like God by being compassionate, kind, gentle, humble, and patient even when things aren't going how we want or people don't seem to understand us. No matter what we wear or how we look when we act in this kind way, people will see His great love and other qualities that outshine everything else. It is like we are wearing God's clothes.

If a person is wearing a chef's hat but isn't a chef, that doesn't make sense, right? Or if someone is wearing a firefighter uniform but isn't a firefighter, it would be strange. If we are God's people, Christians, but we aren't wearing God's clothes by acting like God, then that also doesn't make sense. We can tell who policemen, firefighters and crossing guards are by what they wear. How can people identify who we are if we aren't wearing the right things?

While we are all different people coming from different backgrounds, jobs, cultures and nationalities, when we clothe ourselves in God's identity, we can be united together with one another and in Christ.

We find that our identity is in Christ as He has given us a new life in Him and wants us to do our best to become more like Him every day. And one of the ways we can do that is by wearing His clothes in all seasons and situations.



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