

Encourage

Inspiration for IPHC Leaders

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The Miracle of Christmas Is for All Generations

The Christmas story shows us how God uses all generations, both young and old.



BY DOUG
BEACHAM

DOUG BEACHAM is the presiding bishop of the IPHC. He has served in various roles in the church including Georgia Conference Superintendent, executive director of Church Education Ministries, and executive director of World Missions Ministries. You can follow Bishop Beacham on [Facebook](#) or Twitter [@DougBeacham](#).

The higher education institutions of the IPHC have served multiple generations of students. Begun in 1898, Holmes Bible College is the same age as the IPHC. Emmanuel College will be one hundred years old in 2019. Southwestern Christian University began in 1946. Advantage College began in 1976.

In each instance, there are hundreds and thousands of changed lives who prayerfully and financially give so that thousands more can be educated in Christ-filled environments.

Over the past decade each of these institutions has faced serious challenges. Yet, God continues to provide solutions and hope for each. For both Holmes and Emmanuel, the solutions have been dramatic as God has provided the finances and personnel needed for significant breakthroughs.

At Emmanuel, President Ron White set aside Saturday, October 20, as a day of thanksgiving to God for the numerous miracles of the past five years. For all of us present that day, it was a deeply moving experience to hear the testimonies of how God has demonstrated His faithfulness through countless people.

I mention this because we are in the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons. My heart is filled with deep gratitude for our schools and for all who continue to stand with them. They need our support, now more than ever. I hope you will join me with end of the year contributions to each of them.

Emmanuel, originally founded as Franklin Springs Institute, celebrates its Centennial next year. One hundred years ago as he prepared for the opening on January 1, 1919, founder G.F. Taylor called the fledgling community together to pray on Tuesday night, December 31, 1918, from 8 until after midnight.

No doubt they prayed for the opening of the school the next morning. But surely, they gave thanks for the conclusion of The Great War, World War I, which had closed with an armistice on November 11, 1918.

Those of us who gathered on October 20, 2018, in Franklin Springs, were standing on the shoulders of these prayer warriors. We did this because we believe the Holy Spirit continues to call successive waves of young men and women into the service of Jesus Christ, regardless their fields of study.

The Christmas season is a special time for us to think about the future within the context of how God works through the generations. My wife, Susan, and I are blessed with two young granddaughters who live near us. Their childlike wonder in this season warms their grandparent's hearts.

In this season I've been reflecting on St. Luke 1 and 2 and St. Matthew 1 and 2. It's a story of generations.

For Zacharias and Elizabeth, it's a story of a miracle birth in old age (Luke 1:7). While their exact ages are uncertain, the phrase in Luke 1:7 refers to people who are over sixty years of age. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was probably a young woman in her middle teens when she became pregnant. The man to whom she is espoused, Joseph, is old enough to understand the consequences of Mary's pregnancy and wise enough to face it discreetly.

In my thinking there are multiple miracles in these birth narratives. The older Zacharias and Elizabeth remind us of an even older Abraham and Sarah. Mary conceived as the Holy Spirit "overshadows" her. The Holy Spirit, not the angel Gabriel, entered the womb of the Virgin and created divine life, just as the Holy Spirit hovered over creation in Genesis 1:2.

The response of Joseph is another miracle that captures my attention (see Matthew 1:18-24). Upon discovering that his betrothed is pregnant, he responds with mercy that overshadows his own sorrow.

How can Mary explain this? How can Joseph believe it? How can Joseph save his reputation? Why should Mary not be publicly humiliated? What keeps a wounded person from expressing public outrage upon another?

The answer to those questions is found in two aspects of Joseph's life. First, Joseph is called a "just man" (Matthew 1:19). He is righteous in his own self. That righteousness is demonstrated in his concern for Mary's reputation.

Joseph's first thoughts are not of himself; they are of her. His love covered a multitude of what he perceived to be "sins." The righteousness of his character is not a form of self-justification. Rather, it denotes a heart and mind shaped by divine grace and the divine Word.

Secondly, Joseph was able to hear the angel of the Lord speak in a dream and reveal to him the power of the fulfilling Word (1:20-23). Like the dreamer Joseph of Genesis 37-50, this Joseph was open to hear God's voice through dreams.

In the dream the angel reminded Joseph of his personal connection to his ancestor, Israel's King David (1:20).

He understood the Davidic promises and he was able to receive the divine Word in his present situation (2 Samuel 7:12-16). The Word, first reflected in the Davidic promise and secondly reflected in the Isaiah 7:14 quote, became the pathway of obedience for Joseph to walk as a new future unfolded.

In this holiday season, Susan and I pray that the miracles described in the birth narratives of our Lord will be fresh in your own life. Some of you are like Zacharias and Elizabeth, wondering if there is more the

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A place of hope. A people of promise.

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Lord has in your life. The answer is yes. You probably don't want it to be a new baby, unless it's a grandchild, but you still want purpose and fruitfulness in your lives.

You may be a young person like Mary, wanting to obey God in all areas of your life. Let the Holy Spirit overshadow you with divine love, peace, timing and preparation. Some of us may be like Joseph. We need to trust when life doesn't make sense. We need to remember God's promises. And we need to remember God's future!

Merry Christmas to all the IPHC family!





There Would Be **NO CHRISTMAS** Without the Holy Spirit

When Luke wrote his gospel, he highlighted the work of the Spirit in the story of Jesus' birth.



BY J. LEE
GRADY

J. LEE GRADY is an ordained IPHC minister who directs The Mordecai Project, an international outreach focused on confronting gender-based violence. For 18 years he served as an editor with Charisma magazine, and he is the author of several books including the newly released *Set My Heart on Fire*, a Bible study on the Holy Spirit. He and his wife, Deborah, live in LaGrange, Georgia.

We Christians are notorious for downplaying the Holy Spirit. Many churches confine Him in a box of tradition or just ignore Him. Some Christians treat the Third Person of the Trinity as if he magically materialized in the book of Acts, like a genie out of a bottle, and then vanished after the early church was established.

But the Holy Spirit is first mentioned in the second verse of the Bible! The same Spirit who brooded over the waters at Creation (see Gen. 1:2), inspired the Old Testament prophets and empowered the first disciples at Pentecost also was involved in every step of the Christmas story. We should pay closer attention to the Spirit's work in the miracle of the incarnation.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, pays close attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in his Gospel. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is the most detailed, and he highlights the Holy Spirit's activity in the lives of five people in the first two chapters.

We tend to look down on **Zacharias**, John the Baptist's father, because he doubted God's ability to give his barren wife a child. But Luke reminds us that after Zacharias was struck dumb, he was filled with the Spirit when his son was born (see Luke 1:67) and he began to prophesy. His failure is overshadowed by his renewed faith!

Humbled and chastised by God, Zacharias gained new strength from the

Spirit and uttered one of the richest Messianic promises recorded anywhere in Scripture. He made a mistake in the beginning, but he finished well!

Zacharias reminds me that the Holy Spirit refines and corrects us, and ultimately uses us in spite of our failures and weaknesses. We must never grow weary of God's discipline—because in the end, we will emerge with a message from Him.

Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, rarely appears in most Nativity scenes. We tend to consider her a "minor player" in the drama. Yet Luke tells us that she was filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary came to visit her (see Luke 1:41). How was the Spirit's power manifested in her life? Luke says she "cried out with a loud voice" and announced that Mary was carrying the Christ child. Her prophetic encouragement was crucial in Mary's life.

I wonder if Mary would have had the courage to carry the Christ child in her womb if she did not have Elizabeth by her side to cheer her on. What a beautiful picture of the generations working together to fulfill God's plan!

Elizabeth reminds me that the Spirit is an Encourager and a Comforter, and that I cannot make this spiritual journey without His help. I must also recognize that God sometimes brings people into my life to provide words that will sustain me.

The baby **John** was filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb (see Luke 1:15). This was an exceptional miracle—I've never met a baby who was filled with the Spirit! But because John's task was so great—to call a wayward Israel to repentance and prepare the way for Jesus—he required exceptional power.

John reminds me that if I am to attempt any task for God, I must do it in the power of the Spirit. I cannot just come up with a good idea and ask God to bless it. It must be God's idea, and it must be soaked in the Holy Spirit's anointing from the moment of conception!

When the young **Mary** asked Gabriel how she would be able to conceive the Messiah as a virgin, the angel said: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (see Luke 1:35). Commentator Matthew Henry speculated that Mary may have conceived after she arrived at Elizabeth's house, perhaps even at the moment when Elizabeth felt the baby John leap in her womb.

At that moment Mary praised the Lord extravagantly, and extolled Him for His mercy, power and faithfulness. Her Spirit-inspired utterance became part of holy Scripture.

Mary reminds me that one of the key manifestations of the Spirit in our lives is extravagant praise and worship. Being filled with the Spirit automatically unleashes praise. If my praise is subdued, casual or restrained, then I need a fresh infilling.



"I pray you will not be so focused on the decorations and distractions of the season that you miss what the Holy Spirit wants to do in and through you."

Luke also introduces us to an elderly man named Simeon who had been praying for the coming of the Messiah for many years. The Holy Spirit was "upon" this man (Luke 2:25), and the Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen Jesus. As it turned out, Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, spoke a blessing over the child and prophesied to his mother.

Right after Joseph and Mary encountered Simeon, they met an 84-year-old widow named **Anna** who had been fasting and praying for the coming of the Messiah. She also, obviously under the Spirit's unction, "continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). Though she would probably not live long enough to experience the power of Pentecost, this Old Testament saint had enough supernatural insight to recognize the Savior had been born.

Simeon and Anna remind me that the Holy Spirit will give me the power to hold onto God's promises, no matter how many years it takes to see their fulfillment.

This holiday, I pray you will not be so focused on the decorations and distractions of the season that you miss what the Holy Spirit wants to do in and through you. May you and your church be renewed in the Spirit during this Christmas season. ☐



Four Ways to Overcome Racial Barriers in Your Church

Racial walls don't fall by themselves. As a leader, you must sensitively work to dismantle what divides God's people.



**BY DR. PAUL
CARRETTE**

DR. PAUL CARRETTE is senior pastor of Church of Living Waters in Oxon Hill, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. After graduating from Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas, Texas in 1984, he studied at Global University and Trinity College and Seminary. He has served as a business executive and a community leader, and he is the author of the book *Raising Godly Children*. He and his wife of 31 years, Eulita, are active members of the IPHC's Mid-Atlantic Conference, and they host the annual Kingdom Builders conference to help equip fellow ministers. You can learn more about their ministry at livingwatersmd.org. Paul and Eulita have three daughters.

A few years ago I accompanied my wife and a few of our congregation's members to the women's conference sponsored by our local IPHC conference. The majority of the attendees were Caucasian women, with only a few Latinos and African-Americans. The leadership, music, worship and speakers were all white.

We felt welcomed. There were no racial overtones, nor was there any hint of exclusivity. Yet we felt like invited guests rather than proprietary participants.

Then a cultural metamorphosis was initiated that would transform the dynamics of the conference. My wife was invited to serve on the women's ministry board and was surprisingly elected to serve as the director. Over the years, the annual conference has evolved into a celebration of diversity, as women from various nations, races and culture come together to worship Jesus and fellowship with each other.

A team comprising of women from various cultural backgrounds lead a diverse group in praise and worship, singing in English and Spanish, accompanied by musical styles ranging from African to traditional American. The atmosphere and sentiments suggest that everyone is an integral part of the conference.

The transition did not isolate anyone. It simply gave birth to a new experience for everyone. And it gave each woman, regardless of her race or culture, a sense of ownership.

As the church faces a society increasingly characterized by diversity and equality, we must attempt to be at the forefront of that evolution. In fact, we must give life and legitimacy to it!

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. once lamented the reality of racial barriers in the church. "It is appalling," he said, "that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." King's words still apply today in many parts of our country.

While we cannot ignore the progress that has been made, we must be willing to

admit that the church needs to intensify its effort to reflect the diversity that is progressively defining our contemporary culture. We have many more barriers to break.

Diversity is a reflection of God's creativity. As believers, we have been called to declare and display His glory. We can do so by introducing the world to a symphonic display of collaboration in which God is celebrated through cultural diversity. Here are some important guidelines to consider in seeking to break cultural barriers in your church.

1. BE INTENTIONAL.

We must be willing to embrace change as a prerequisite to maintaining relevance. One cannot deny that contemporary culture represents a dynamic merger of our unique differences. If winning people to Christ and discipling them is our mission, then we must seek to adapt the gospel to the new cultural evolution.

The Apostle Paul said, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). If your church is still focused on maintaining a particular culture, it will eventually become lifeless and irrelevant.

There are almost 75 million millennials in America, and none of them are interested in preserving any particular culture. They are committed to diversity, and they view exclusivity as insensitive and repulsive. Being intentional about breaking cultural barriers is not optional; it is an absolute necessity.

2. BE SENSITIVE.

Breaking down cultural barriers will not be accomplished without some level of resistance. Many churches make the mistake of implementing drastic changes without considering the feelings and opinions of those who have worked hard to help sustain the ministry. It is not necessary to disregard or rewrite history but rather, we must seek to create a fresh perspective by introducing a new narrative governed by God's love for humanity.

Consider what Jesus said in an effort to calm the fears of the religious people of his day. He said: "Do not think I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

In attempting to break the cultural barriers in your church, consider being a bridge builder rather than a revolutionary. Seek to integrate every one into the vision rather than accomplishing

your objective at the expense of others. Regardless of how gentle and compassionate you approach this subject, some may still reject it. But you will have done it God's way!

3. BE TRANSPARENT.

When transparency is at the foundation of any relationship, the resulting benefit is understanding and oneness. Human beings have a tendency to fear what they do not know, therefore when change is initiated without a proper conversation, resistance is an inevitable outcome.

Most people would embrace a cultural shift if we simply engaged in transparent dialogue. We must get to know each other and allow our uniqueness to unify us rather than pull us apart.

In the last twenty years, I have been fortunate to lead multicultural congregations. My current congregation is a mixture of various cultures. Our worship style is a reflection of our diversity, and our conversations are guarded by cultural sensitivity.

The members of my church come from the United States, Africa, various parts of the Caribbean and Central America. We have become one body, integrating our unique cultures into a dynamic worship experience.

Earlier, I mentioned the transition that occurred among the women of our conference. It was not that racism or indifference existed in our conference. We just did not know each other. We needed to talk!

Once we did, a new narrative was born and a declining conference was reenergized for future generations. If you have a desire to break down the cultural barriers, I urge you to start a transparent conversation. It could lead to a transformational experience in your church.

4. BE INCLUSIVE.

Jesus said, "By this shall men know you are my disciples if you have love one for another" (John 13:35). A significant barometer of love is the value that we

place on each other. Inviting people to share in our worship and church experiences while marginalizing their cultural background forces them to suppress a significant facet of their lives.

Create opportunities for the people in your church to express their culture. If you are a pastor seeking to break the cultural barriers in your church, you can begin by organizing special services to recognize and celebrate the various cultures represented in your congregation and community. It will help to sensitize your congregation and initiate the process of cultural integration.

It is important to note that diversity must be celebrated within the context of kingdom principles. Several centuries ago, as Christianity was introduced to the Caribbean, the Catholic Church sought

to make it more palatable by retaining many of the demonic practices of the former slaves. They attached religious connotations to these practices, hence creating a culture of spiritual compromise. That is not the way to break cultural barriers!

So often, in its efforts to become relevant, the church dilutes its values. Our primary purpose for breaking the cultural barriers should be to win people to Christ, not to simply add to our church membership. We should not be guided by fear, but we must be cautious as we embrace a platform of diversity. □

"If your church is still focused on maintaining a particular culture, it will eventually become lifeless and irrelevant."

You Might Be Guilty of Mistreating Women Ministers If ...

In this #MeToo era, God is challenging the IPHC to encourage women in their spiritual callings.



BY KAREN LUCAS

KAREN LUCAS is a minister in the IPHC's North Carolina Conference and a graduate of Emmanuel College. She currently serves as Archives and Research Ministries Director for the North Carolina Conference and also as worship pastor at Culbreth Memorial PH Church. She has served as a social worker at Falcon Children's home and as a counselor at Royal Home Ministries. She is currently pursuing her M.Div. from Campbell University Divinity School. She and her husband, Chip, live in Falcon, North Carolina, with their three children.

Ever since the Harvey Weinstein scandal shook Hollywood in 2017, the #MeToo Movement has dominated the headlines. Women who once kept silent are now talking openly about the pain of sexual abuse.

As a result, more women in the church—including leaders like Beth Moore—began stepping up to address issues of abuse and gender bias in the Christian community. This resulted in the #ChurchToo movement—in which believers began openly discussing how sexual abuse has often been swept under the rug in our congregations.

I hope we are not tuning out this important conversation. There are women in the IPHC who have suffered silently from various forms of sexism. And even though this was addressed publicly at the denomination's Solemn Assembly in 1996, I believe there is more pain for us to heal.

No spiritual leader wants to be guilty of mistreating the women God has assigned them to mentor, minister to or serve alongside. However, if we choose to ignore, diminish, discredit or reject the stories that women are telling as trite, insignificant or embellished, we create further division between the genders.

Conversely, when we listen to these stories, wounds can be properly cared for and we can correct our own behaviors. I am listing below ten examples of how female ministers have been mistreated by leaders in our own churches, from my own interviews and research:

1. Ignoring their credentials. While preparing for this article, every female minister that I interviewed brought this up. Women do not appreciate being called by their first names or their husband's names, or referred to as "Miss" or "sister," while male ministers who have the same credentials are more regularly referred to as Reverend, Pastor or Doctor. This is especially true when they are sharing a platform with male colleagues. Women would appreciate having their education and title referenced in the same way men's are when they are introduced.

2. Juvenilizing them. Several women complained that some pastors used patronizing language, such as "Girlie," "Sugar," "Sweetheart," and other childish or unprofessional terms that serve as verbal pats on the head. Women are adults and peers, not children. They want to be treated with respect.

3. Sexualizing them or treating them as a threats.

Some women told me they could not develop meaningful relationships with their pastors, conference leadership or male peers because they were treated as a potential temptresses. This is hurtful and offensive.

Ministers who are highly challenged by sexual temptation should not be serving in positions of spiritual leadership. All ministers are expected to serve both men and women equally. It is unacceptable for male clergy to use “the appearance of evil” as an excuse to avoid meaningful personal interaction with women they work with.

Men in the public workforce are not allowed to avoid or ignore women or to treat them as objects of some other man’s sexual pleasure. Instead, they must learn to interact with them respectfully and seriously as peers. Male ministers should do the same.

4. Failure to help women discern their ministry callings.

Many women complained of a late start in seeking ministerial training because male senior pastors never gave them serious attention to help them discern their call. In these cases, women said that their male pastors seemed awkward around them or implied that they believed in a form of gender hierarchy where men were spiritual leaders, not women.

When these women expressed a desire to become more involved at church, pastors often told them where they could be of most help (the nursery, women’s ministry, youth ministry, etc.) instead of asking them about their interests and competencies.

5. Failure to mentor them.

Credentialed women who attend IPHC churches frequently complain that they are ignored by their pastors. Many have shared stories of how their senior pastors call on other male ministers to fill their pulpits when they are away rather than giving the female minister in the congregation an opportunity to preach, teach or assist with pastoral care. This is hurtful and limiting.

6. Accusing women of being “Jezebels” for exhibiting leadership qualities.

Many women are exasperated from feeling that their leadership gifts are constantly being stifled. When men observe inconsistencies and inequities within church culture, they are rewarded with

compliments about their bold, prophetic voice or their dynamic teaching ministry.

Conversely, when women speak out about the same issues, they are more often accused of being power-hungry troublemakers. This is unfair. It forces women to become silent, or to settle for becoming anonymous advisors to men who serve in leadership.



“If we believe women are called to all forms ministry, we must become more intentional about creating a church culture that is sensitive, hospitable and affirming towards them.”

7. Preferring men for leadership positions.

Earlier this year, I attended an academic conference that included a meeting of some of the most educated women across several mainline Pentecostal denominations. I heard bone-chilling stories of sexual abuse within the church, but I also heard women describe deep hurt over gender discrimination.

One woman told of never hearing from a conference official after receiving her credentials. For a decade, she had never been called on for anything besides her tithe. She was treated with respect and able to flourish in ministry only when she left the United States to minister in a foreign country.

8. Making social media posts that are insensitive about women’s issues.

Pastors and lay-leaders should be extremely careful about how they talk about today’s headlines regarding sexual abuse and

assault that are being brought to light in the media today. During the recent Supreme Court hearings involving Justice Brett Kavanaugh, I was shocked to read some of the posts I saw by some of our IPHC leaders. There may be victims of sexual assault in your church. Be careful how you talk about this issue—or those victims will assume you don’t take them seriously.

9. Treating women as exceptions.

Women who are called to minister want equal treatment and equal opportunities. Don’t make unnecessary remarks about a female minister’s appearance, voice or stature. She is not a man. She does not preach, teach, look like or sound like a man. She is a woman who is called. That’s all! There is no need to make jokes about perceived differences.

10. Teasing single or childless women.

If a female minister is single, she is no different from a single male minister. If she does not have a husband or children, she should not be made to feel she is an incomplete person. Let her follow her calling, and leave her personal issues alone.

Maybe she has not yet found a man who can be supportive of her call. If so, your prayers towards that end are sufficient. Perhaps she is called to celibacy. If so, it is not your place to interfere. If she is married but childless, she may have fertility issues, or she and her husband may have decided not to have children. Either way, it’s not something to tease her about!

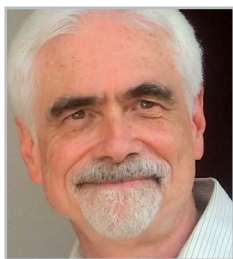
The IPHC has historically championed the callings of women. As Pentecostals, we have long preached that “your daughters will prophesy,” according to Acts 2:17. But if we believe women are called to all forms ministry, we must become more intentional about creating a church culture that is sensitive, hospitable and affirming towards them.

Leaders, be willing to listen to what women are saying and to make necessary adjustments in the places where they serve. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where adjustments may need to be made in your own heart. Together, we can make the changes that will help us be able to better reflect our beliefs in practice and not just in doctrinal statements. □



Is Your Church Open to All Kinds of People?

While we strive for Christian unity,
we need diversity to fully express God's heart.



BY RUSSELL
BOARD

RUSSELL BOARD has served with IPHC World Missions Ministries for 35 years. He currently lives in Japan and serves as regional director for Continental Asia, overseeing the IPHC's work in a dozen countries. He has authored *Grow*, a manual for new believers, and *Forty Days with Jesus*, a devotional from the Gospels.

In Japan where I have served on the mission field for many years, it is helpful to remember the biblical declaration that says, "The last shall be first, and the first, last." This is because the Japanese name order is the reverse of ours. When you are introduced to someone, your family name comes first and your given name is last.

Putting the family name first reflects the group-oriented nature of Japanese culture. Here in Japan, a person's identity is defined by the groups to which he belongs: Family, school, club, company and so on.

Americans, on the other hand, tend to take a more individualistic approach to personal identity. We tell our given name first, immediately distinguishing ourselves from the others in our family who share our surname. We are also quicker to assert our particular beliefs and affirm our peculiar likes and dislikes, seeking to stand out rather than to blend in.

In spite of this difference in cultural emphasis, both Japanese and

Americans share with all human beings a need to establish our identity both as distinctive individuals and as members of a group. All of us want to be recognized as unique, to be seen as more than just a face in the crowd or a number in a database.

Yet at the same time, we all want to belong, to be connected with others and not left alone and isolated. I want to be me, but I don't want to be me *by myself*. I want to be me *together* with you!

Unfortunately, one or the other of these fundamental needs is often frustrated in a world that tends to make conformity a requirement for inclusion. Peer groups frequently impose uniformity as a condition of acceptance. I

must suppress my individuality in order to fit in; if I refuse to do so, I suffer the consequences of exile and exclusion. Either choice is painful.

Sadly, churches can slip into this same configuration of imposed conformity. Churches often develop homogenous cultures that exhibit similarities in styles of dress, worship, prayer, liturgy and even political orientation. This is only natural, as people are drawn to associate with others who think and behave like they do.

But in addition to these natural affinities, the church should also be a place where the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit is strong enough to unite believers from differing racial, social, economic, and political backgrounds. If the whole congregation dresses, prays, worships, eats, votes and thinks the same way, we are falling short of God's design for the church to display a supernatural unity that overcomes the divisions that tend to fracture society.

God made us to be different, and yet to belong. Each of us is "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). I am a genetically unique creation formed from an original combination of DNA. We are not all stamped from the same mold, but are individually fashioned according to God's design.

There has never been another just like me. Yet it is also true that I have inherited my genetic identity from my parents, who in turn passed on genes received from their parents, and so on. Thus I entered the world not as an isolated individual, but as the latest bud on my family tree, with a blood connection to the rest of the clan.

To be sure, because of the sinful nature of mankind, this setup often breaks down, and within families a member's individuality might be suppressed or his inclusion denied. But in Christ the balance between individual and group identity is restored.

As a Christian, I am part of the family of God, with a glorious heritage

among the saints. Yet I have also been given a special name known only to God (Revelation 2:17), reflecting the unique way in which I exhibit the glory of my Redeemer, and the unique service I can offer to Him. I can rejoice both that I am

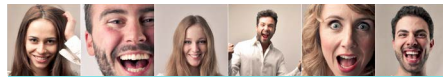
one of His, and also that He has no other like me.

On top of this, I have been re-created in Christ, and given a new nature with a unique set of giftings (1 Corinthians 12:4). Yet these endowments were not meant to enable me to function on my own, but rather to prepare me to fit into my particular place in the body of Christ. Romans 12:5 tells us: "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

The unity of the body of Christ is not uniformity. I do not have to be the same as all the other members in order to belong. Rather, it is precisely my individuality—my difference from all the other members—that assures my place as a necessary component of the whole. There is a perfect balance between the one and the many, with every individual embraced by the group yet not absorbed by it.

In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, Japanese nor American, black nor white, Republican nor Democrat. Within the church, there is no division into exclusive sub-groups. Still, though we are all one in Him, we are not all the same.

We do not lose our identity when we are incorporated into Christ; we find it. Thank God that in the body of Christ we can be ourselves and still belong! ■



"The unity of the Body of Christ is not uniformity. I do not have to be the same as all the other members in order to belong."

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