



J. BRIAN TUCKER & JOHN KOESSLER

ALL

TOGETHER

DIFFERENT

**UPHOLDING THE CHURCH'S UNITY
WHILE HONORING OUR INDIVIDUAL IDENTITIES**

ONE AMONG MANY

Have you ever “unfollowed” one of your Christian friends on Facebook because you couldn’t handle their political views? Or maybe you received criticism because of who you voted for in the last election. Have you ever found yourself longing for the good old days in the worship service when the songs were recognizable and the volume was bearable? Do they really *have* to sing the same choruses over and over again? Or can you recall a situation when you felt uncomfortable with “those kind of people” when you noticed them in a church service, people different from you in some significant way? Perhaps you thought they would be more comfortable in a service that was designed for their own kind. Politics, worship styles, and personal biases are just some of the challenges church folk face as they try to navigate their personal identity along with their membership in the body of Christ.

The lens that the Bible uses to help us understand ourselves is both individual and collective. The church is one body made

of many members (1 Cor. 12:27). We cannot see ourselves as mere individuals. Yet we do not lose our individual identity in Christ (1 Cor. 7:18–20). In the New Testament, the designation “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19 ESV) is ascribed both to the individual believer and the entire faith community. The church is a collective by nature. The bond that knits individual believers together is spiritual. We are joined to one another because we are united with Christ. Unfortunately, this spiritual reality does not guarantee either a cohesive culture or a community that expresses mutual concern for its individual members.

It’s no accident that the epistle that speaks most clearly of our identity as one among many was addressed to the sharply divided church in Corinth. It alerts us to the pitfalls we face in wrestling with our identity. Some in Corinth overidentified with their leaders in a way that set them against others. They even identified themselves with Christ in a way that set them against other members of Christ’s body. In order to have a biblically shaped identity, we must learn to hold our individual identity in balance with our corporate identity. And Paul shows us a way to do this in his letter to Philemon. We must know when to subordinate the particularities of our individual sense of self to our collective identity as part of the body of Christ.

DIVISIONS IN THE BODY IN CORINTH

One of the many problems the Corinthian church wrestled with was an overidentification with their Roman social identity. We see this unhealthy tendency in many of their actions. They were dividing around key personalities (1 Cor. 1:12). They over-relied on the world’s wisdom (1 Cor. 2:5). They had an

inordinate trust in Roman officials (1 Cor. 2:6–9). They had a misplaced confidence in Roman law courts, which were central in enforcing Roman identity (1 Cor. 6:1–11). And their social hierarchy relied on patronage relationships, the primary economic model in antiquity (1 Cor. 3:3–4; 4:8; 11:17–34). Civic identity had become a problem for the congregation, which resulted in “divisions” within the body (1 Cor. 11:18). This was so much the case that Paul had to ask, “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13).

We see Paul’s goal for the community in 1 Corinthians 1:10: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” To accomplish this, Paul addresses issues related to identity in chapters 1–4, and then he instructs the Corinthians on issues related to individual ethics in chapters 5–10. In chapters 11–16, he offers guidance in the formation of the group’s ethos. Paul recognized that identity influences individual ethics, which when expressed in a group setting also produce a group ethos. Leaders seeking to maintain or restore unity in a church need to sustain a balanced focus on these three areas: identity, ethics, and ethos.

Paul focuses on the transformation of the group ethos in the last part of the letter, and after addressing issues related to worship practices, he writes, “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). This may be another example of Corinthian Roman social identity causing problems in the church. The imagery of a group of people as a body was well-known in Roman politics. Menenius Agrippa used it to

reestablish a hierarchical relationship between the senate and the plebeians. His point was that each segment of society had a role to play and should remain in their social stations for the common good. His purpose was to maintain the existing order for the ruling elites and to tell the masses they had no choice but to submit to this order.¹

In light of the problems in Corinth associated with Roman political identity, it's likely that just such a status-based approach to communal life had taken root in the church, especially when one considers the mistreatment of the poor at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34). Paul, as an intercultural mediator, took this well-known imagery and reused it to point out the way status reversals are the norm within the church. Those who were undesirables among the Romans were given honor in the “body” (1 Cor. 12:22–24). It is likely that the problems associated with tongues were also linked to social stratification (1 Cor. 14:18–20). Paul identified with the higher-status group initially but then switched to offer a transformed approach to worship. “In declaring this,” Kar Lim explains, “Paul is also instructing those who perceived that they might have higher social status because of the possession of the gift of tongues to give up their rights to speak for the sake of the weaker brother so that there would be no schism in the body (1 Cor. 12:25).”² By doing this, Paul is marking identity boundaries for the group and noting that they are different than the status-based ones evident in the broader culture. The identity of the group as the body of Christ is made evident through the inclusion of the weak and poor, those the broader culture would set aside as deplorable.

IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST

Paul emphasized the close connection between Christ and those who claim to follow Him. This may harken to his experience on the Damascus road where the risen Christ associated the members of the church with Himself (Acts 9:1–5). Identification with Christ refers to the position every believer has in Jesus on the basis of His work and the appropriation of it by the individual believer’s faith. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit as an act of divine grace. Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12:13 when he writes, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” And in Galatians 3:27, he describes this experience as being “baptized into Christ.”

We are united with Christ (John 15:1–6; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:6). Scripture’s teaching on our union with Christ is crucial for the formation of a salient identity. Theologian J. Todd Billings describes it this way: “Union with Christ . . . entails the giving of a new identity such that in Christ, forgiveness and new life are received through the Spirit. Union with Christ involves abiding in Christ the Vine. It means that through the Spirit, sinners are adopted in the household of God as co-heirs with Christ.”³ Those who are in Christ have at their disposal the cognitive, evaluative, and emotional resources to overcome a life of failure, guilt, and frustration—both personally and with others (1 Cor. 2:10–16).

The last phrase, “with others,” is especially important. Union with Christ is not just a personal doctrine. It is also a social one. As a result of being united to Christ the Head, all

individual believers—members of Christ’s body—are united to each other. Naomi Ellemers recognizes that the three components mentioned above (cognitive, evaluative, and emotional) contribute to a sense of social identity: “a *cognitive* component (a cognitive awareness of one’s membership in a social group—self-categorization), an *evaluative* component (a positive or negative value connotation attached to this group membership—group self-esteem), and an *emotional* component (a sense of emotional involvement with the group—affective commitment).”⁴ These three components are important to keep in mind as we seek to uphold the unity of the church while maintaining and honoring our respective differences. Too often, union with Christ is seen only as a theological point and not a social one. It is more than a point of belief. It is also a way of life.

Seeing union with Christ only as a doctrine often results in the fossilization of Christian identity. Fossilization occurs when theological constructs designed to address earlier cultural settings are transported to a different era without proper contextualization. The way to overcome fossilization is to translate union with Christ in a way that retains its essential content while restating it in contemporary terms. Union with Christ doesn’t require only one way of living. Christian identity adapts to various cultural circumstances. William S. Campbell notes that in-Christ language is metaphorical.⁵ But on what basis is the believer’s being in Christ or in union with Christ construed as a metaphor rather than a reality? Being in Christ is conceptual (lending coherence to Paul’s writing) and also contributes to shaping these new realities based on existing ways of acting, knowing, and communicating. In this way, in Christ becomes a “metaphor we live by.”⁶

Union with Christ contributes to the formation of both a personal and social identity and does so in ways that allow for diverse expressions of these formations in a new, transformed common identity. It allows church attendees to stop thinking in an “us” versus “them” way, since it opens up a realization of a new, other group with which we should identify. This could be described as a “superordinate” identity, a larger group identity that transcends our smaller identities. This way of thinking can help reduce conflict. When “they” become “we” in the body of Christ, Cleveland notes, at least four changes occur: “we naturally like them a whole lot more; we’re more open to receiving helpful criticism from them; we forgive them more easily and are less likely to expect them to experience collective guilt; and we treat each other better.”⁷

I (Brian) saw this occur when several students approached one of our staff members concerning the type of language that was used in an illustration. The middle-aged leader wasn’t aware that his description was perceived as sexist to many of the younger generation. As the group sat together and discussed the different cultural settings they were raised in, a mutual understanding and empathy was expressed. The conversation ended with the group developing a newfound awareness of their differences and an appreciation for what they have in common: their common in-Christ identity and shared passion to reach others with the gospel. Through this interaction, the staff member learned to think about his language and illustrations while the students developed an appreciation for the cultural baggage older leaders sometimes have to navigate and overcome to reach a new generation with the gospel. In this case, the “they” became “we,” and it allowed for more effective ministry to occur.

Obviously, these changes would go a long way in reducing church-based conflicts. Union with Christ is at the same time union with other Christians. The work of the Spirit knits disparate individuals into one body (Eph. 2:22; 1 Peter 2:4–5) and calls Christians to live out who they already are in Christ. For this reason, Paul’s admonitions in Romans 6:1–14 are structured around the indicatives of Christian identity—you are in Christ (Rom. 6:1–10)—and the imperatives that follow from that identity—now live like it (Rom. 6:11–14). The believer’s old life has been crucified with Christ, and a new one has resulted—one that is free from the power of sin. But Paul’s teaching about one’s union with Christ in Romans 6:3–10 is about breaking the power of sin, not about erasing previously existing identity-based differences.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER

The individual and the community belong together in Paul’s theology. The apostle does not conceive of a solitary individual. In 1 Corinthians 12:27, he writes, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (ESV). For Paul, identity is derived from being a member of Christ’s body.⁸ This is important for us as North Americans, since we generally tend to think of ourselves as individuals first. It is vital that we not downplay or even overemphasize either the individual or the communal. Rather, we need to keep both of these identities in balance, otherwise we’ll miss foundational aspects of Paul’s theology. For Paul, the Christian is an individual in community, one who lives by the principle of unity amid diversity. As a result,

each member has a team mindset in which the group is capable of accomplishing more than would otherwise be possible for the individual.

In the final race scene in the movie *Seabiscuit*, the horse's jockey, Red, reflects on the way the team originally saw its role to shape Seabiscuit into a winner. But he says in the end, "Seabiscuit fixed us." The shared mission and goal between the trainer, owner, and jockey resulted in mutual support that transformed each individual in needed ways. Seabiscuit couldn't win without them, and they couldn't have moved beyond their brokenness without each other. The trainer, owner, and jockey maintained their unique identities and roles, but their shared life and goal allowed them to accomplish more together than each could have alone.

The local congregation is not just *compared* to the body; it *is* the body of Christ. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, just as Seabiscuit, Red, and the team were. The imagery in 1 Corinthians 12 reveals a close connection between Christ and the church. In 3:23, Paul claims that the church has a Christ-defined identity. As we discovered in chapter 4, individual identities are not obliterated but are transformed through union with Christ. This means members of Christ's body have dual identities: one that is communal and one that is individual. Paul says as much in 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

A leader, for example, can shift the attention of the congregation to the identity that the church members seem to be neglecting and that is causing division (small group, gender, ethnic, individual, corporate, denominational, etc.). By acknowledging one overemphasized identity and reprioritizing it

in reference to a higher one (that is, one's in-Christ identity), a pastor could preach a sermon that is likely to motivate church members to expend more effort in living out the highlighted identity. This insight will be crucial in helping congregational leaders uphold the church's unity while maintaining each person's uniqueness.

Consider the tension between small-group ministry and congregational worship celebration. Often leaders who have seen church fights in the past view small groups as breeding grounds for cliques or settings for people to complain about the church's leadership. The solution isn't to get rid of small-group ministry, but rather to help the congregation see the need for a balance between the small group and the larger celebrations. Healthy congregations maintain both. Those who emphasize the importance of community building that occurs in the small-group setting are correct but miss the important unifying factor that occurs during corporate worship. Those who dismiss the value of small groups significantly overlook the need for accountability and community that can occur only in those intimate settings. A social identity approach to pastoral leadership would discern which side is being overemphasized and help the congregation reprioritize it in relation to the underemphasized value.

Having to reprioritize values is not just a challenge we face today. Paul had to wrestle with such a challenge as he sought to reconcile an early church leader named Philemon and his slave, Onesimus.

N. T. Wright has called that small letter to Philemon a perfect snapshot of Paul's theology.⁹ All of the detailed argumentation that is evident in his other letters is distilled down in this most personal communication. Philemon provides a good

example of the way this individual-communal identity was addressed in Paul's day. It also offers wisdom for maintaining unity amid continuing differences in the church. Timothy Keller has observed that "those who have been given a Christian identity have the resources to become more open to difference and to become more culturally flexible than they would ever have been otherwise."¹⁰ Being open to difference and the ability to be culturally flexible are two of the most important ways we maintain church unity amid our individual uniqueness. In Philemon, Paul demonstrates these characteristics in surprisingly helpful ways.

PAUL, PHILEMON, AND ONESIMUS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Paul's statements about Christian unity in Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 12:13, and Colossians 3:11 could sound as if no existing social identity is relevant in Christ and that Christ-following slaves should no longer be identified as such. Two main interpretive approaches have tried to determine the social implications of these verses: the universalistic and the particularistic. The universalistic approach contends that in Christ, existing social distinctions lose their relevance or are in some sense erased. The particularistic approach argues that these identities are reprioritized in Christ but can and do continue to remain situationally salient. In Philemon, we see the "slave or free" issue clearly, and thinking about the way Paul navigates this may help us address some of the complexities associated with socioeconomic distinctions in the church today.

What's going on in this letter? Various reconstructions have

been proposed regarding the context of the letter to Philemon. The first approach describes Onesimus as a runaway slave. Another view, the friend of the master approach, does not see Onesimus as a fugitive but as one who intended to return to his master's household once he had received a promise of intercession from his owner's friend (Paul). In a third view, Onesimus is believed to have been sent by the church to provide Paul with aid while in prison. While each of these views has limitations and while the brief nature of the letter does not provide further clarity, paying attention to the group dynamics may give us insight as to what's really going on. Paul's letter, in turn, can help us see how social identity continues to be a factor in relationships within the church.

In Philemon, several different social groups are mentioned. We find one group in v. 2: the congregation that meets in Philemon's house. The members of this house assembly are described as the saints (vv. 5, 7 *ESV*). Thus, church and the saints may have functioned to reinforce the unity of all the Christ followers, since they emphasize an overarching social identity for the group.

Paul describes another social group through the use of "brother." He uses it for the letter's co-sender, Timothy, "our brother" (v. 1). He uses the term for Philemon (vv. 7 and 20) and for Onesimus, with a significant increase in emotion—a "beloved brother" (v. 16 *ESV*). It is likely that "brothers" functioned as a widespread term describing members of the Christ movement as a new kinship group.

In Philemon, Paul seems to be emphasizing the way these individuals now embody a shared ingroup prototype—that is, the way they embody what the group values. Philemon and

Onesimus are now both brothers in Christ, but what should be done when a Christ-following slave owner has a slave who is also a member of the Christ movement? This was a significant challenge for the earliest Christians who sought to understand the social implications of the gospel and what it means to be one among many in the body. Our challenges today are different, but Paul's approach may prove helpful for us church leaders as we navigate overlapping relational networks in the church.

***Paul as an Entrepreneur
of Onesimus's Dual Identities***

Paul, acting as an “entrepreneur” of identity, offers guidelines for defining and maintaining identity within the church. In this letter, he uses a process that social identity theory describes as “recategorization.” This, as a leadership approach, will shift thinking from “us” and “them” to a more inclusive “we.”¹¹ Paul does this first by recategorizing Onesimus. While he is still a slave and a debtor, he is also Paul's “child,” “heart,” and “brother” (vv. 10, 12, 16 ESV).

Philemon is likewise recategorized by Paul in relation to Onesimus. He is now Philemon's “brother” (v. 16). To emphasize the positive nature of this renewed interdependence, Paul reminds Philemon of the nature of their own relationship: he is Paul's “fellow worker,” “brother,” “partner,” and debtor (vv. 1, 7, 17, 19b). Paul's language highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the three of them while emphasizing the renewed kinship that should reduce hostility and increase cooperation in the Pauline mission, the social project in view in this letter (vv. 11, 13, 17).

Several key ideas can help reduce conflict and increase the

likelihood of intergroup cooperation: a common fate, positive interdependence, and a common identity. All three are expressed in this letter.

Common fate is evident in Paul's desire for the three men to work together. He characterizes Philemon as a leader of a house assembly and a "fellow worker" in the Pauline movement (vv. 1–2). He is also described as Paul's partner and debtor (vv. 17–19b). Into this relationship of positive interdependence, Paul inserts Onesimus as one who now can be an integral part of the continuation and expansion of the gentile mission in Asia Minor, an apt description of their shared superordinate goal (vv. 6, 11, 13). A common identity must precede, and in fact, produces, positive interdependence.¹² By this point, it's clear that Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus share a common identity as members of Christ's body (vv. 10, 16).

This construction of a superordinate identity does not eliminate or obliterate existing subgroup identities. The universalistic approach runs the risk of elevating the dominant culture and giving cultural norms a theological significance they do not deserve. The key to conflict resolution is to recognize the dual nature of group identity. According to Haslam, "The key to satisfactory conflict resolution lies not in increasing the salience of [superordinate] social identity *at the expense of* subgroup identity (that is, recategorization . . .) but in acknowledging and allowing expression of both superordinate *and* subgroup identities."¹³ This dual identity recognizes the continued importance of subgroup identities in the formation of superordinate social identity salience. The combination of the two kinds of identity increases the likelihood of group goal achievement.

This approach was used in a study that tried to resolve

tensions between loggers and environmentalists regarding the cutting down of trees in the Pacific Northwest. What the negotiators discovered is that both groups valued the forest and wanted to preserve it for future generations. That became their shared goal. The challenge existed at the subgroup level because each group viewed the other with hostility and suspicion. They eventually came to an agreement, but one that maintained the values of both groups. They did this by adopting a new social identity that shifted away from their divergent affiliations to a more collective and inclusive affiliation within their local community. So, for example, the loggers began to see the environmentalists as part of their community. As their definition of the community expanded, this changed the context of the conflict and allowed for more effective negotiation of their differences. Something similar will be needed in order to address deeply felt differences within the body of Christ.

Earlier, we suggested that Paul engaged in a process of re-categorization, and he did so without negating subgroup identities. Rather, he recognized the legitimacy of subgroup identities so that the formation of a more inclusive social identity could occur. While it seems strange that Paul legitimated the slave's identity, he did so with qualifications (see also 1 Cor. 7:20–22). He asks Philemon to view Onesimus “no longer as a slave” (Philem. 16). If Paul wanted to say this subgroup identity (or social status) was abrogated, he probably would not have included “as.”¹⁴ Its presence in this phrase indicates Paul's subjective perspective of Onesimus's identity. He is a slave, yet he has been transformed into “more than a slave” (v. 16 NRSV). His existing status has been recategorized to a more inclusive level of saliency as “a beloved brother.” Thus, Paul identifies him in

the context of his existing identity as a “slave” and his transformed identity in Christ as “a beloved brother.”

One might argue that Onesimus would have preferred to be identified only as “a beloved brother” so his slave identity could be abrogated. Yet the social dynamics involved did not make this a valid option. Paul’s primary purpose was reconciliation, and we’ll see below the way he effects this. However, Philemon had the upper hand in this relationship, and Paul was quite concerned to address the deformations of his identity.

*Paul as an Entrepreneur
of Philemon’s Dual Identities*

While the recategorization of Onesimus is important, the negotiation of Philemon’s social identities appears to be another concern for Paul. Philemon had sent Onesimus to Paul as a gift likely designed to entangle Paul in a further patronage relationship, the dominant socioeconomic model in antiquity, given the prevalence of patronage language in the letter (vv. 1, 7, 13, 17, and 22). For example, Paul notes that Philemon’s house is used for community gatherings that would have entailed several behaviors associated with patronage (v. 2). It seems the primary problem here was Philemon seeking to maintain an existing economic structure that was somewhat incompatible with the social implications of the gospel. His economic identity needed to be transformed.

However, Paul, in another sense, acts like a patron in relation to Philemon. This may also suggest that Paul builds on an existing economic structure but seeks to transform it within the Christ movement. First, he reminds Philemon that it was based on Paul’s ministry that he was originally converted, and

thus he clearly owes Paul something (v. 19b). Second, Paul describes the way Philemon is obligated to “serve” him (v. 13 *ESV*). Third, Paul and Philemon relate to one another according to hierarchy (vv. 8–9, 13, 19b, 21, 22). Thus, both Philemon and Onesimus were part of a “nested social dilemma,” one that could potentially hinder Paul’s mission if it was not resolved adequately.¹⁵ Philemon and Onesimus needed to be recategorized, not obliterating but transforming subgroup identities so that their shared superordinate identity as brothers increased in salience, resulting in positive interdependence and securing the continuance of the Pauline mission among them.

Paul still views Onesimus as a slave since that was his legal situation. Paul does, however, see a transformation in Onesimus’s identity. He is a slave *and* a beloved brother in Christ. And the former does not prevent him from being the latter. In v. 16b, Paul provides an evaluation of Onesimus and connects him to himself and to a greater degree to Philemon (“how much more to you”). Haslam contends that the “dual identity model,” which is based on the premise of social identity salience, “need not suppress individuality or sub-group specialization—it can simply harness these things towards a common goal.”¹⁶ Onesimus was earlier described as one who was “useless” but had been transformed into one who was now “useful” to both Paul and Philemon (v. 11).

What we find in this profound letter is that existing social identities continue to maintain their fundamental significance within the Christ movement. Paul’s phrase in v. 16, “both in the flesh and in the Lord” (*ESV*), seems to support this. Paul uses this phrase to recategorize Onesimus’s identity in relation to

Philemon. Philemon relates to Onesimus as his owner (“in the flesh”) and as a brother (“in the Lord”). In other words, these phrases are not describing discrete domains but are inclusive descriptors of life within the Christ movement as Paul sees it.¹⁷

So, did Paul want Philemon to free Onesimus? In light of Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, he did. For Paul, existing identities continue to be relevant within the body of Christ. However, there are exceptions to this rule, as evinced in 1 Corinthians 7:20–22. In Philemon 17 and 21, Paul asks for Onesimus to be freed so he can serve Paul in his mission. Paul was *not* seeking to reinscribe Roman socioeconomic dominance via its slave economy, and any use of his arguments throughout history to support slavery or racism were and are wrongheaded. Such arguments misunderstand not only Paul’s anthropology, since all humans are made equally in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), but also his teaching that one’s identity is transformed in Christ and is thus a member of Christ’s body (1 Cor. 3:23).

In this situation, Paul was helping Philemon understand the way aspects of his social identity were to be transformed within the body of Christ. He also wanted Philemon to understand how one’s identity transformation in Christ impacts the way he viewed and evaluated others. Onesimus’s identity as a slave remains, but it is not his superordinate or master identity. Paul was helping Philemon understand not only Onesimus’s dual identities but also how Philemon now relates to Onesimus in a twofold way: “in the flesh and in the Lord” (v. 16 *ESV*). The fact that Onesimus is a “brother” impacts the way Philemon should relate to him. Thus, in Paul’s letter, we find four points of action that help us today in seeking to reduce conflict: “working

towards a larger goal, creating equal status, engaging in personal interaction, and providing leadership.”¹⁸

Returning to 1 Corinthians, we find Paul’s imagery of the body of Christ described the way individual and social identities interrelate in the church. It also addressed the divisions created by allowing their congregational life to be influenced by cultural assumptions about status. Once the Corinthians realized that they all ultimately belong to Christ and share an equal status in Him, then they could see social differences as opportunities for mission. In the body of Christ, the status of the poor can be reversed as the rich change their approach to table fellowship, and the plight of slaves can be transformed as slave owners recognize the social implications of gospel. Paul’s understanding of union with Christ brings together the theological and the social. Thomas Howard describes this transformed approach to life this way: “The Incarnation took all that properly belongs to our humanity and delivered it back to us, redeemed. All of our inclinations and appetites and capacities and yearnings and proclivities are purified and gathered up and glorified by Christ. He did not come to thin out human life; He came to set it free.”¹⁹ Paul knew that the Corinthians and Philemon needed a transformed vision of life in the body of Christ, since that was crucial for human flourishing and unity within the church. While those in Christ still retain their distinct individual identities, they all are one in Christ.

So, what’s the way forward today in helping our churches realize and maintain our oneness in Christ? First, leaders should help their congregations see that group affiliations are not bad per se. They are a natural part of what it means to be human. Second, look for ways to teach how the New Testament

focuses on group-based issues and their importance for effective ministry. Third, do the hard work of uncovering the way existing cultural affiliations are dividing your local body, and in an irenic fashion, share those findings. Fourth, emphasize through your preaching and teaching of the Word that the most important identity a person has is their membership in the body of Christ. Their personal identity, while important, must be subservient to who they are in Christ. Fifth, seek creative ways to develop openness to difference and cultural flexibility in the church. Finally, work with the three key tools of social identity leadership: (1) cast a compelling vision of identity for the group through your use of language; (2) remind your people of this identity in the various meetings, celebrations, memorials, and rituals involved in congregational life; (3) engineer new structures and mobilize the church to social action. This also involves the formation of new leaders who will embody this shared vision for a congregation that is unified in the context of their individual identities. These tools suggest that ministry leaders need to think more concretely about their role as managers of the identity of the congregation. It is to this we now turn.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does Paul's imagery of the body of Christ help us understand the goal of maintaining unity amid diversity?
2. Being open to difference and culturally flexible are two crucial tools for maintaining unity in the church. What kinds of people do you think your church finds difficult to accept? Why is this the case? What steps might your church take to change this?
3. Can you think of ways that churches or Christians "fossilize" their identity? How can this be overcome?
4. Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus were mixed up in a sticky social relationship. Can you think of a similar situation that might occur today? If so, how might seeing each other "in the flesh and in the Lord" (ESV) help the individuals resolve their conflict?

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