
Variety Anxiety

1 Cor. 12:1, 3-13

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Ascension Sunday, June 4, 2017,
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On the day of Pentecost, the tongue-talking, holy-rolling, fire-breathing disciples were accused of being drunk with wine in the morning, as if it were the last day of classes at Duke. The church at Corinth was drunk in their own way too, but not with wine or even the Spirit. They were drunk on divisiveness. They were naughty and nasty and not too nice to each other. Yet they were Christians! As we might say in Dade County of South Florida, they were beat up from the feet up, tore up from the floor up. They were anxious in their own way, trying to figure out who's in charge, not sure who they belong to, learning what it means to be spiritual, how to love, what it means to be a body and what to do with your body, what to eat and how to eat and who should eat when, and when to bring a lawsuit and if to bring a lawsuit. Just anxious about everything seemingly, about being together and not knowing who to look to for leadership and guidance. They were like a spiritual ship without a sail. Read Paul's letter and you can sense the angst, the anxiety.

According to its medical definition, anxiety is a state consisting of psychological and physical symptoms that are brought about by a sense of apprehension at a perceived threat. Psychological symptoms can include feelings of fear, an exaggerated startle reflex, poor concentration, irritability, and insomnia. Physical symptoms can include tremors, sweating, muscle tension, a fast heartbeat, fast breathing, sometimes a dry mouth and the feeling of having a lump in the throat. In severe cases, hyperventilation can lead to a fall in the concentration of carbon dioxide in the blood, giving rise to an additional set of physical symptoms like chest discomfort, numbness or tingling in the hands and feet, dizziness, and faintness. Have you ever been anxious?

There's a whole list of things one can do to cope with anxiety according to the professionals: Make a problem list. Use relaxation techniques. Implement simple lifestyle changes. Seek help. Use sedatives and engage in talking treatments. But what does one do when dealing with the Church and its own anxieties, such as "variety anxiety"?

"Variety anxiety" is prevalent in the Church and also in the world. There aren't pills to help with this but maybe a dose of the Holy Ghost will help, help to awaken us to God's vision of variation. This variety anxiety arises when we make homogeneity holy and heterogeneity hell's angel. There's a peculiar problem in the world and Church where difference of any kind is looked down upon or merely viewed strangely because sameness is believed to be the will of God, the work of the Spirit, and anything different from what we experience or know or believe, makes us uncomfortable, so we get anxious. But the Spirit of God doesn't specialize in coddling Christians. The Spirit works on making us more Christ-like and the truth is that it may be hard sometimes. Variety anxiety is not the will of God because variation is actually a part of the nature of God.

The triune God, the Trinity, is itself a variation on a theme. Three in one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons, yet one God. Variety is not solely the spice of life. It is the Spirit's expression at the heart of who God is in the very being of God. Even the Day of Pentecost reveals variations on a theme. All began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability. Many languages but

one message— “God’s deeds of power.” And apostle Paul grabs ahold of this thinking and tells the church at Corinth, “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone... To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues....” To another and another and another. Variety is the vision of God.

Yet those suffering from variety anxiety don’t see variation and difference as a sign of unity so they get anxious when everyone doesn’t look the same or act the same or think the same. Paul’s teaching on the Spirit, however, shows us that we should actually get anxious and worried when everything is the same because the Spirit creates the diversity of gifts. But anxiety still reigns in our world.

This past week alone is evidence of the variety anxiety in society.

Two Oregon men died defending a pair of high school girls from a train passenger's religious and racial taunts. Basketball star LeBron James’ home was painted with a racial slur. A noose was left hanging in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American history and culture in D.C. And there were numerous racist reactions to a Japanese driver winning the Indy 500 and now yesterday in London, a terrorist attack. Variety anxiety still prevails in the world and it can be very dangerous; we are not yet free because fear of the other is so rampant.

But as Christians, whether we are speaking of gifts or diversity in other ways, to be spiritual (*pneumatikos*), which is what they are debating about in Corinth, is to embrace the variations found in and through God’s people. There are varieties but no spiritual soloists! “There are many members, yet one body.” “If the whole body [says Paul] were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” “If all were a single member, where would the body be?” No body part should tell another, “I have no need of you,” especially to the weakest and most vulnerable. Each body part, every person, every gift, matters and “each is given the manifestation of the Spirit” and should be treated with dignity and respect because the multiplicity and variety embodied in the church and world are the work of the Spirit.

Remember that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5). The Spirit produces variety. There isn’t just one fruit of love but all the variations of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control that are aspects of the theme of fruit. Again, variations on a theme.

Some consider variety or diversity as chaos and emblematic of division when really it’s a reflection of the unity of God and the context for our oneness and unity in Christ. You might not realize this when you look at examples of church behavior.

According to tradition, Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built over the cave in which Christ is said to have been buried. In July 2002, the church became the scene of an Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) bout, as the monks who run it battled over territory. The conflict began when a Coptic monk, sitting on the rooftop, decided to move his chair into the shade. This took him into the part of the rooftop courtyard looked after by the Ethiopian monks. The Ethiopian and Coptic monks have been arguing over the rooftop of the Church for centuries. In 1752, the

Ottoman Sultan issued an edict declaring which parts of the Church belong to each of six Christian groups: the Latins, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Copts, and Ethiopians.

The rooftop had been controlled by the Ethiopians, but they lost control to the Copts when hit by a disease epidemic in the 19th century. Then in 1970, the Ethiopians regained control when the Coptic monks were absent for a short period. They have been squatting there ever since, with at least one Ethiopian monk always remaining on the roof to assert their rights. In response, a Coptic monk has been living on the roof also, to maintain the claim of the Copts. So in July 2002, when the Coptic monk moved his chair into the shade, harsh words led to pushes, shoves, until a full-blown brawl broke out, including the throwing of chairs and iron bars. At the end of the fight, 11 of the monks were injured, including one monk unconscious in the hospital and another with a broken arm. This makes WWE look like “Little House on the Prairie.” From this scene and other future fights in this church, you might come away with the view that diversity in the Church is a problem. But Paul doesn’t believe so, and neither do I because there are varieties but it is the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God who activates all of them in everyone, the one and the same Spirit who gives each gift.

Paul’s emphasis on the one body and the one Spirit implies that diversity is not a negation of unity but the essential environment for it to occur. You can only have unity if the members of a body are varied or diverse, for the church unifies when it diversifies. Otherwise, all you have is uniformity, not unity. Uniformity means everyone looks the same, acts the same, and thinks the same. That is not unity; that is clonality. And the Spirit doesn’t make clones of Christ but diverse followers of Christ.

Variation is the gift of the one Spirit. Diversity isn’t the problem like many institutions want to claim. Uniformity is the theological problem because it is anti-Spirit as the Spirit is the one who plays variations on the theme of “Jesus Christ is Lord.” What variations reveal is the beauty of God as multiplicity and diversity. Pentecost is a Christian feast because of the unified diversity or variety. The miracle of Pentecost is that with all the variety voiced, there was still unity and oneness. Pentecost is actually about being one, which is different from uniformity, because oneness is unity and unity implies diversity and variety. The church can’t be one and be uniform. Sameness is actually more theologically, and specifically, pneumatologically, problematic than variation, because the latter is a gift of the Spirit, whereas the former—sameness— suggests we are in charge because we like to be with those who look like us, act like us, and think like us.

But the dynamite of Pentecost blows all of that up in the power of the Spirit. There are varieties and all these are activated by one and the same Spirit. All drink of the same Spirit; no one gift eclipses another. Until we come to this realization, there will be variety anxiety in the academy, church, and world. But I don't know about you; I don't want just red robins as the only bird species or grits as the only breakfast food or roses as the only flower or Powery as the only preacher. I want and need variety in my life as a Christian because varieties on all levels bring me closer to the heart and creation of God, which is a beautiful unified diversity.

When we enter the scientific realm of biodiversity, scientists identify 1.75 million different species. That includes 950,000 species of insects, 270,000 species of plants, 19,000 species of fish, 9,000 species of birds, and 4,000 species of mammals, and they are still discovering more! If you look at the species biodiversity in a pond alone, you may identify different plants, such as cattails and water lilies, and then perhaps see a garter snake, a bullfrog or even a red-winged blackbird and then

perhaps some invertebrates and worms under leaves or on grasses. Biodiversity is not just species-related either; there's also genetic and ecological biodiversity so there's lots of variation in the world because there's a lot of variation in God.

But these Spirit-initiated variations are not untethered but are moored to a main theme in Paul's letter. His concern for oneness is obvious but he's adamant about two other themes, one is a sub-theme, the other is the main one. The sub-theme is encapsulated when he says that each person is given a manifestation of the Spirit "for the common good." Throughout his letter, he urges the church at Corinth to act in ways that build up the community and not tear it down. In a 17th century commentary, Presbyterian minister, Matthew Henry, writes that the gifts "are not given for show, but for service; not for pomp and ostentation, but for edification; not to magnify those that have them, but to edify others." Our varieties of gifts are to benefit the whole community. The test of the charism, the gift, is how it benefits the whole church. The variety is not for variety's sake or some sickened political correctness. It is a revelation of who God is and an expression of the Spirit's movement toward a whole, holy and unified church, the body of Christ. Who I am and what I do and with what I've been gifted is never for myself; it is always for the other. As Albert Einstein once said, "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile."

This isn't the only theme Paul plays, though it's a good one. But if we were left only with that sub-theme, we might as well be talking about a rotary club, but we are talking about the church, the body of Christ. Paul's primary theme is Jesus Christ because the fundamental criterion that one is possessed by the Spirit is the confession— "Jesus is Lord." The foundation of the spiritual life, with all of its varieties, is Jesus Christ. Authentic Christian spirituality is rooted in Jesus, not in the excess of spiritual gifts. Every Christian is a spiritual person whose common identity with others is found in Christ. United to Christ, diverse Christians are united to one another in the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit plays variations on this Christian theme—"on Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand." Without this ground of our being together, we will sink into divisions over diversity. But if we remain firmly planted on the rock of Jesus Christ, we will be a spiritual people who embrace variations as the way of the triune God in the world. Then they will not only know we are Christians by our love or by our joy, but even with all of our variety, they will know we are Christians by our unity. May it be so.

Today, say "bye-bye" to variety anxiety and "hello" to the vision and unity of God. In other words, "hello" to theodiversity. Amen.