"American culture too often 'unites' around only division and shouting. Happily, Rick Lints's Uncommon Unity provides something different, something better—hope for thinking and acting 'differently with our differences,' both inside and outside the church, as we consider how to live out our witness more faithfully. This book is chock full of wisdom, ably reminding us that worldly power isn't the center of life, and thus we can't let disagreements about temporal politics define who we are. Uncommon Unity is filled beginning to end with biblical theology and thoughtful historical reflection. Buy, read, savor, act."

—BEN SASSE,
United States senator, Nebraska

"With scholarly precision and rigor, Rick Lints offers a Christian vision for true pluralism that allows for a healthier understanding of faith in public life. He demonstrates how the scriptural models of marriage, Trinity, and redemptive history can—and indeed must—confidently advance a vision for unity-in-diversity. This book is a gift to all Christians who find the cultural engagement that has characterized evangelicalism inadequate and who seek to become, in the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a 'creative minority' within our nation."

—TISH HARRISON WARREN,
Anglican priest; author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary* and
Prayer in the Night

"The writings of Richard Lints invariably display, within the contours of orthodoxy, fresh thought and analysis. This book is no exception. At a time when the siren demands of both unity and diversity are threatening to destroy the credibility of democracy itself, Lints outlines the patterns of unity and diversity within Scripture, and argues convincingly that these patterns ought to undergo some adaptation as they confront the complexities of our broken world. Nevertheless, it is the gospel itself that lays down the approaches to these tensions that our hearts desire. Highly recommended."

—D. A. CARSON,
Distinguished Emeritus Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School;
president and cofounder of The Gospel Coalition

"Confident that Christ's kingdom out-narrates the distorted narratives of our age, Lints nevertheless recognizes that how we envision, tell, and practice that story is conditioned by other stories we often just assume. Identifying and analyzing these different takes on unity and diversity for many years, he at last shares the fruit of his labors! Diving beneath the tiresome and polarizing rhetoric of the culture wars, this book gives us deeply informed, well-considered, and timely insights that we desperately need."

—MICHAEL HORTON,
professor of theology and apologetics,
Westminster Seminary California

"Lints covers a breathtaking sweep of history in this short, elegant book. He takes a hard look at the contradictions woven into secular ideals of tolerance and self-determination and makes a strong case that Christianity in general, and evangelicalism in particular, holds the keys to intellectually honest pluralism and a renewed sense of common good in the modern world."

—MOLLY WORTHEN,
associate professor of history,
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

"When Christians think about diversity in the church, they likely go to the apostle Paul's teaching about the variety of gifts that church members possess. But what if differences among Christians go beyond spiritual gifts to ethnic, political, geographical, and economic circumstances? Richard Lints tackles this kind of variety without relying on the social sciences. Instead, he brings biblical and theological wisdom to bear on the human variations among Christians. It will provide an invaluable framework for Christians trying to sort out and answer the challenges of unity and diversity in the church."

—D. G. Hart,
Distinguished Associate Professor of History, Hillsdale College;
author *Benjamin Franklin: Cultural Protestant*

"Richard Lints proves a masterful guide in directing followers of Jesus Christ to rise above the seemingly endless division that has come to typify both American society and the church. Part historian, sociologist, biblical scholar, philosopher, psychologist, and theologian, yet always and fully pastoral, he provides a valuable map that helps make sense of our current moral and political maze. He exhorts Christ's people to see and live with one another as the God who made us intended, navigating our earthly citizenship by bringing to bear upon it the reality of our heavenly one. As a shepherd of Christ's sheep, I am grateful and commend his tutelage to all who seek to follow in Jesus's steps."

<div align="right">

—LAURA MIGUÉLEZ QUAY,

senior pastor, Linebrook Church;

adjunct theology professor, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

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"The evangelical world is desperate for a new imagination of what it means to be a people of different ethnicities, nationaliities, and cultures in a society that rejects Christian assumptions. Uncommon Unity is the beginning of the imagination needed to carry the application of God's redemptive mission deep into the twenty-first century."

<div align="right">

—ANTHONY B. BRADLEY,

professor of religious studies, The King's College

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UNCOMMON UNITY

Wisdom for the Church in an Age of Division

UNCOMMON UNITY

Wisdom for the Church in an Age of Division

RICHARD LINTS

To Brannin and Tanya, whose lives exemplify
the gracious and generous wisdom of the gospel
at the heart of this book

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

by Timothy Keller

The US church today stands in the midst of a maelstrom of conflict over *e pluribus unum*—unity and diversity. How can people who have been historically excluded and marginalized be genuinely included? How can the disempowered be empowered?

The great paradox is that the very motto, "out of many, one," is judged now to have been a failure. And indeed, how could that slogan, which was the nation's unofficial motto from the time it was put on the Great Seal of the United States in 1782, have ever been taken seriously when over 15 percent of its entire population was enslaved at the time?

Nevertheless, what Rick Lints here calls "the inclusion narrative of democracy" is still the only instrument our secular society has with which to address this problem. This narrative was quite radical in its day, because it held that governing authority did not flow from the governing to the governed, but the other way around—government by common consent.

But while statements in our founding documents—such as all persons being "created equal"—gestured toward belief in moral norms and absolutes that were to be honored by all, the reality on the ground was that women, slaves, and others were excluded. Why? Because at bottom the inclusion narrative of democracy is exactly that—the only way it can adjudicate competing claims and values is by majority rule. If government is by common consent, why can't a majority disenfranchise groups of people if the majority believe it is in the best

interest of the whole polity? "Democracy provides no built-in guar-antees against immoral behavior" (49).

The inclusion narrative of democracy had another unintended consequence. Americans wanted to escape the inherited privilege of European class society. The great cry was for freedom of opportu-nity and therefore for a free market, but that led to a new American version of class society based on economic success or failure rather than on aristocratic rank. Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart* shows how the religious nature of the majority of the population somewhat cushioned people from the effect of business based on a pure, exclu-sive profit motive. But as religion has declined in society, increasing numbers of people are excluded economically.

Lints, like Bellah, argues here that the democracy narrative alone does not produce an inclusive society. We need other robust moral and religious narratives out there in the public square, supplementing and complementing the democracy narrative. This will be necessary to create a society in which unity and diversity are held together in balance, without one devouring the other.

This book shows how the gospel inclusion narrative can be a resource for our society. The gospel is that we were "excluded" from God's people and promises but now we "who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:12–13, NIV). Because Jesus was excluded for us, we have been included. The gospel inclusion narrative is neither identical with nor totally contradictory to all parts of the democracy narrative. For example, the modern idea of freedom is to be liberated from slavery in order to live as we choose as long as we do not harm, but the biblical theme of exodus is to be liberated from slavery in order to serve the living God and thereby come to serve those around us. The two narratives are over-lapping but not identical.

Like the democracy narrative, the gospel recognizes the reality of the *imago Dei,* the absolute equal dignity of all individuals, but unlike the democracy narrative, the gospel assumes human sinful-ness, namely, that "there is an intrinsic human tendency to diminish

the dignity of others as a means of increasing one's own sense of significance" (49).

Like the democracy narrative, the gospel recognizes the importance of human personal identity to finding the balance between unity and diversity. But the gospel rejects the reductionism of modern identities—both those that reduce us to our social group and those that insist we can be radically self-defined.

Lints does a marvelous job of drilling down on the rich resources Christianity provides for this social challenge. Perhaps the greatest of all is the doctrine of the Trinity itself—God is neither more One than Three nor more Three than One. Then there is the teaching of the church as a body—made up of diverse parts but each comprising a crucial part of the whole. Then there is the biblical teaching on marriage, which again is a strong unity across profound diversity.

Some will ask how Christianity can really be able to take a servant stance to a pluralistic society. Doesn't all religion—and Christianity in particular—impose a monolithic social straitjacket on a culture if it gets the chance? In chapters 9 and 10 Lints shows how Christianity is different. It has been made, as it were, for cultural flexibility, and there is no recipe in the New Testament for *a* Christian culture.

Uncommon Unity is a crucial book. It will serve as a kind of "prolegomena" to the many discussions we are about to have on injustice, unity-in-diversity, and the relationship of religion to public life. There is great wisdom here for all of those projects.

PREFACE

It is an all-too-obvious truth that we live in polarized times. If one were to choose a cultural moment to best exhibit how to "get along with others," ours would definitely not be that time. Our disagreements run deep and by most accounts are getting worse rather than better. Into this nexus, a work both defending and describing the unity of the church may seem a hopeless task. It surely runs against the grain of our ordinary experiences of life together. Ours is a time that thinks far more about what makes us different from each other than what binds us together. We privilege opinions that emphasize the ways we disagree. We are drawn to media that promote a chasm alienating us from "the other side." We are inveterately suspicious of motives that do not align with ours.

At a personal level, we remember moments in our past of deep disagreements that broke apart valued relationships. We play over in our minds the recording of that long-standing argument with our spouse or our sibling or our boss or our former friend. The wounds of those disagreements do not seem to go away. We rehearse the argument again and again—too often only from our perspective. The fracturing of our significant relationships stays with us for a very long time; it is part of our hardwiring.

The pain of these conflicts, however, is a pungent reminder that this is not the way things are supposed to be. As much as we stumble into conflicts, we yearn for an end to them. The sweetness of reconciliation, when it does occur, serves as a reminder that conflict is not final or ultimate. It also provides a unique snapshot of the paradoxical unity-in-diversity for which we have been created. It is paradoxical in the sense that a certain difference is required for the kind of

unity that is richer and more satisfying than mere uniformity. This is played out in obvious ways, as with a symphony of diverse instruments blending into a complex unity or a construction team building a house. The apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 frame the issue of the unity of the church in precisely these ways as well. Different gifts but one body. Different offices but one church.

Historical discussions on the unity of the church have often focused on the doctrinal or structural ties binding the church together—or binding churches to each other. In what follows, I will be turning this argument upside down. To think more carefully about the unity of the church, we must first reflect on the nature of difference as it stands in relation to the theological constructs of unity. That, in turn, requires us to examine our ordinary intuitions and experiences of difference and the manner in which they both help and hinder us from getting a clearer grasp on the fabric of the church in its unity-in-difference.

Diversity is part of the air we breathe today and a complex overlay on all our lives. It seems conjoined to the polarization of our times and also to the sheer variety of differences that we confront by virtue of the omnipresence of modern technology. We bump into a hundred different kinds of ketchup on grocery store shelves. We traverse the diverse cultures of the globe daily through the media. Our Twitter accounts put us in touch with an incredible array of voices. Diversity, with all its complex layers, is one of those taken-for-granted realities in which our lives are played out. There are many ways to discuss the complexity of difference, and part of the challenge of navigating through the web of differences today is knowing the implicit and explicit meanings of the different kinds of differences.

I intend to examine the ways in which committed and confessionally oriented Christians should think and live in a deeply pluralistic context largely interpreted through the constraints of a late-modern democracy. I am less concerned with the cultural contexts of diversity than how these contexts influence our experience of the unity-in-diversity of the church and the church's relation to these cultural contexts. I will also examine the ways the canon of Scripture itself thinks

about diversity and the wisdom it offers for living in a thickly pluralized culture, both inside the church and outside its walls.

Part 1 of the book (chapters 1–4) deals with the cultural and contextual influences on how we understand and deal with difference. In chapter 1, I open by explaining why difference is important and why it matters for sustainable constructs of unity. I also consider the current cultural moment and the deep polarizations through which our differences are too often interpreted. In chapter 2, I look at the history of democracy in America and the peculiar impact it has had on the ways we think about difference and the kinds of difference that have been brought to the forefront of our consciousness. The distinctive emphasis on inclusion and exclusion at the heart of modern democratic polity has profoundly shaped, for good and ill, the ways we relate to others across our differences. Chapter 3 turns to the distinctively religious character of these issues, considering the sacred and secular roots of our instincts about constructive and destructive forms of difference. In that context, I ask whether a secular age has the moral resources to sustain the ties that bind us together across our differences. In the final chapter of part 1, I examine the social-cultural conditions of modernity as a window to the connections between pluralism and diversity. Those conditions include the movement from fate to choice represented in the power of the tools of modernity, which helps us understand the way in which our fascination with freedom has led to a much greater fracturing and fragmentation of our body politic, inside and outside the church.

In part 2 (chapters 5–8), I consider biblical resources for thinking more clearly and navigating more faithfully the way in which difference relates to unity and the way in which unity relates to difference. Chapter 5 argues for a biblical anthropology rooted in the early chapters of Genesis. The peculiar relational character of the persons depicted at the outset of creation serves as a template for human identity across the remainder of the canon. A person's identity is found in relationships—first and foremost in their relationship to the God who made them, and derivatively in their relationships

with other persons. This anthropology stands in opposition to the modern intuition that people's identity lies solely within themselves as individuals. In chapter 6, I examine three different biblical models of unity-in-diversity: marriage, the Trinity, and redemptive history. In each of these models, there is an overarching conceptual framework of difference-within-unity that may seem obvious at first glance but is often difficult to apply to other areas of our human experience. Recognizing the complex relationship of difference to unity in each of these models helps illuminate the fabric of the created order regarding human relations more generally. In chapter 7, I explore the history of the church's actual experience of unity-in-diversity and contrast it with the church's teaching about its unity. How the church lives out its sense of unity and how it doctrinally construes that unity have not always been closely aligned. Following the narrative of the lived experiences of the church across the ages may provide clues as to how one might think more carefully about the unity-in-diversity of the church in our own time. In the final chapter of part 2, I examine the relationship between the mission of the church and the unity of the church. The recent surge in missiological understandings of the church's identity has opened a new conversation regarding the movement dynamics of the church and the institutional dynamics of the church. This conversation in turn may provide a richer way to think about the church's unity-in-diversity. From this angle, the history of evangelical churches in particular can be viewed in a very different light. These sorts of churches are often far more interested in their evangelistic mission than in their institutional unity with other churches, and so tend to display a different kind of unity—what I call a missiological unity—than traditional ecclesiological analyses consider.

In part 3 (chapters 9–10), I explore the category of "wisdom" as the intended mechanism for engaging the issues of unity and difference. In chapter 9, the question of how the church is to live out its mission in different contexts (the theological issue of contextualization) comes to the forefront. The wisdom of the gospel strongly argues for the church to look differently in different contexts—but how different?

And how does the context influence the identity of the church? There is no mechanical way to provide answers to these questions. Wisdom, though messy, is the most appropriate tool to work through the complex issues surrounding the contextualization of the church.

In the concluding chapter, I explore the nature of wisdom at greater length. Wisdom is situational without being relativistic. It is grounded in the nature of reality while recognizing the complexities of human reality. It can hold in tension apparently contrasting convictions while keeping a clear eye on that which is final and ultimate. The clearest model of wisdom is found in the story of the gospel, which stands as a strong rebuke to human pretensions and a strong encouragement to courage and humility. These are essential to achieve the reconciliation required for a genuine experience of unity-in-difference in the life of the church.

In a time when the cultural patterns of fragmentation and polarization spill over into the church, it is important to remember that we were created for the experience of unity-in-difference and that our yearnings for it are themselves pointers in the right direction. Wisdom would suggest that seeking forgiveness and granting forgiveness are the surest routes for the journey. This is counterintuitive in a time like ours, since forgiveness is not grounded in natural rights but in the display of mercy both extended and received. The way of reconciliation does not stand in opposition to our natural rights but rather is the means to complete them. The violation of natural rights explains why the fracturing and fragmentation of human relations takes place. The grace of forgiveness explains why they may be put back together. This is the journey of the gospel as well, and my hope is that this gospel journey will help us to live more into the grace of forgiveness with each other.

Life is not like a river but like a tree. It does not move towards unity but away from it and the creatures grow further apart as they increase across time.

—C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

1

MAKING SENSE OF OUR DIFFERENCES

WHEN IS DIFFERENCE TOO MUCH?

The worship service was as unusual as the surroundings of this small village in southern Zimbabwe. It began slowly, as families made their way to the village center following their leisurely Saturday-evening dinner. The men gathered on the right side of the structure, with the women and children meandering toward the left. I was helped through the local dialect by a gentle-souled translator. Then came the sudden banging of the drums, calling all to rise. The women and children began dancing in a large circle as a familiar hymn was sung. As the singing faded, the first preacher entered the pulpit to deliver what would be an hour-long sermon on the story of the exodus. Smaller children began falling asleep in their mothers' arms. Another song was followed by a second preacher and another hour-long sermon—this time on the book of Daniel. As the night wore on, older children and mothers were now sleeping. As the sun began to rise, the preaching came to a close after the twelfth sermon. Everyone had drifted to sleep at some point during the long, hot evening. At daybreak, there was a march to the local river for baptisms before we dispersed for Sunday lunch. With the heat of the day rising, the twelve preaching elders sat with me under a large shade tree. I had to ask, "Do you do this every Saturday night/Sunday morning?" Without hesitancy, the reply came, "Sometimes Tuesday nights as well!"

Throughout my stay, I struggled to make sense of these dear Christian brothers and sisters worshiping in a fashion *very* different from anything I had ever experienced. As a young church planter in the Boston suburbs, I had wrestled at great length over the precise details needed to conduct the most appealing worship service to attract folks as a congregation. How could I make sense of a world of differences from those Zimbabwean Christians? What about those neighbors in "my own backyard" whose cultural assumptions also seemed a world apart? Which differences mattered, and which ones could I affirm as diverse expressions of an equally genuine Christianity?

We are ever more conscious of diversity—not only in terms of Christian worship but across a broad array of factors: we encounter diverse political communities, ethnic and racial communities, vocational and economic communities, even communities with passionate diversity of sports loyalties. Our social contexts are pluralized in countless directions and experienced at many levels. The "contemporary" is often marked out from the "traditional" purely by the plurality of experience, with the contemporary connoting a much higher volume of diversity—diversity of music, of religion, of vocation, of culture, of language.[1] Tension in each of these spheres arises as different communities bump into each other.

Another factor contributing to our sense of living inside of deep differences is the technology in which our lives are embedded. Technology gives voice to everyone while also narrowing the range of voices influencing us. Consider how many individuals fill your email address book or the number of your friends on Facebook. Consider how many television channels compete for diverse niches of interest. Consider the vast number of locations we are transported to every day via the internet and the vast number of cultures we bump into

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1. Peter Berger says, "Modernity is not necessarily secularizing; it is necessarily pluralizing. Modernity is characterized by an increasing plurality, within the same society, of different beliefs, values, and worldviews." Berger, "Secularization Falsified," *First Things* (February 2008): 23. One may argue that secularization is, at least in part, a consequence of certain kinds of pluralization. That question is tackled at greater length in chapters 3 and 4.

as a result. These varieties of experience in our lives have the consequence of privileging diversity over unity in our collective consciousness, even if they also produce an instinctive backlash against dealing with so many emotional differences.[2]

Certain kinds of difference elicit sharp reactions; other kinds may be shrugged off as inconsequential. There are many kinds of differences; some matter and others do not. The contexts in which differences are experienced often determine how those differences are interpreted. In the small community church, the pastor's relational investment and willingness to personally disciple is not only noticed but often analyzed, especially in the case of missteps or unintended slights. By contrast, for the megachurch pastor who has gained celebrity status, any relational awkwardness is excused in exchange for their platform presence. Churches deeply rooted in their denominational heritage take denominational differences seriously in all manner of budget matters—missionary sending and supporting, for example, are closely linked to a common denominational identity. In a nondenominational church, though, mission giving and other funding isn't allocated on this basis at all—denominational differences are inconsequential.

The costliness of difference is apparent when it becomes concrete. Differences of taste may not matter until it comes to deciding what the family will eat for dinner—together. Differences of fashion seem harmless enough until it's time for a family photo. Different habits of cleanliness may not seem significant until husband and wife must learn to live with these habits day in and day out. Differences matter when they serve as occasions for divisions and disagreements.

In a modern democracy, the freedom to express different opinions prevents a community or nation from becoming ideologically captive to any one partisan interest. On the other hand, most of us are wary

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2. It also can create emotional exhaustion for individuals who feel as if they must disperse themselves among so many other people. See Jonathan Haidt, "The Age of Outrage," *City Journal,* December 17, 2017, https://www.city-journal.org/html/age-outrage-15608.html.

of disagreement when it becomes polarizing and interminable. We intuitively want others to agree with us. When we bump into differences of opinion too concretely and not merely in an abstract conversation about the body politic, it makes us uncomfortable. Certain kinds of differences hit too close to home. Uncovering genuine and deep disagreement can be so sharp as to paralyze us. When it breeds conflict, families, churches, communities, and even companies can be destroyed. People with whom we disagree may appear to threaten not merely beliefs but our sense of the common, overarching good.[3]

An important irony is the ever-growing disparity between the descriptive diversity of contemporary culture and the actual homogeneity of the communities in which we experience day-to-day life. We are conscious of the conflicts between Red Sox fans and Yankee fans, but part of what animates great sports rivalries is the unity of the respective rival communities. Under the pressures of pluralization, we tend to socially migrate to safe havens of unity. Social conservatives tend to listen to socially conservative commentators. Social radicals tend to read other social radicals. We migrate toward homogeneous communities as a response to the increase of diversity around us.[4] Our experience in the church can be similar. Baptists tend to congregate with Baptists and Lutherans with Lutherans, and so on. However, as I will note in later chapters, the lines of demarcation between traditional denominations appear to be blurring. Individuals now identify less with a particular denomination and are more likely to feel comfortable associating with a wide array of church traditions. There are still social styles and internal church cultures that largely

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3. James Skillen, "Pluralism as a Matter of Principle," in *The Many and the One: Religious and Secular Perspectives on Ethical Pluralism in the Modern World*, ed. Richard Masden and Tracy B. Strong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), notes that not all differences present as one side being right and the other side wrong.

4. Chris Bale, *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), challenges the assumption that social media is the primary contemporary polarizing force. In a counterintuitive way, when persons are exposed to significant differences of opinion on social media, it simply reinforces their own in-built biases and tribal identities.

determine who is attracted to certain churches and not others. The unique doctrines of a church may be less important compared to the music or the style of preaching, but there remains a distinctive ethos that attracts some and repels others. The loss of denominational identities is part of the larger story of the loss of a sense of belonging to particular local communities in our time. The experience of living in deep diversities exerts pressure on our natural sense we have of belonging to others. Many sociologists, following Robert Putnam's work, have noticed the significant increase in isolation and loneliness in the modern world.[5] There appears to be an ever-decreasing amount of social glue binding people together in genuine relationships in late modernity. The symptoms of social isolation are manifest and appear to be increasing. It is not simply that we are divided more and more by our differences, but also there are more and more obstacles to maintaining enduring relational connections of significance, even within our own local communities.[6]

It might appear hopeless at the outset to address the church's call to unity in the face of such overwhelming differences, especially given the virtually infinite number of them. But thinking clearly about difference will help us think more wisely about unity, the unity of the church in particular, and thus enable Christians to live more nimbly in a world of deep, embedded polarization. Some differences do matter and often create conflicts that are not easily resolved. It is also true that differences sometimes mask our commonalities and keep us from the tasks we are called to work on together as Christians.

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5. The literature on this is vast (and somewhat contested) and centers on Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001). Mention could also be made of more recent treatments dealing with the consequences of social fragmentation and contemporary loneliness. See Timothy Carney, *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Other Places Collapse* (New York: Harper, 2019); and Ben Sasse, *The Vanishing American Adult* (New York: St. Martin's, 2017).

6. Sasse notes that the average American adult has gone in the span of twenty years from having three close friends to having only two close friends. Sasse, *Vanishing American Adult*, 124. Most of us know that if you ask the typical baby-boomer father whether he has bared his soul with anyone in the last year, the overwhelming (honest) reply is no.

In this work I want to investigate the differences between as well as inside churches, discerning which ones are complementary and which ones are divisive. Discussions about the unity of the church have traditionally bypassed this concern in favor of a doctrinal account of essential beliefs necessary for church unity. These doctrinal issues are not inconsequential; however, they often miss the social realities in which most individuals in late modernity experience church unity or disunity.

Our Present Diversities

In the early decades of the twenty-first century in the West, the concept of difference is increasingly attached to the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.[7] When universities employ a "diversity officer," it is for the purpose of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the student body. "Diversity training" within companies, likewise, is directed primarily at racial and ethnic differences among employees. When the US Census attempts to take a snapshot of the population every ten years, it is also prominently concerned with the ethnic and racial makeup of the population. In these and many other ways, "diversity" is a term loaded with connotations that draw attention to certain kinds of differences while avoiding others. Unfortunately, the language of diversity in some circles defines a person's identity solely in terms of ethnicity or race (and to some extent gender and sexuality as well). In later chapters I argue that, while these identity markers are important, they are not the sole basis by which identity is secured. Humans are far too complex to be reducible to a single identity marker.

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7. These are discussed at much greater length in later chapters. The emergence of this set of difference is helpfully charted by David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), who suggests that, when these categories emerged on the US Census form in the late 1970s, they thereby began to serve as the interpretive categories for understanding the different "kinds" of American citizens. Robert Putnam refers to the four canonical ethno-racial categories: white, African American, Latino, and Asian, also as prescribed by the US Census. See his "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007): 137–74. One of the difficulties with these categories, as many have pointed out, is the complexity of children (and grandchildren) of "mixed" marriages. Do children born to parents of different ethnicities belong to one category, two categories, or neither?

Further, these identity markers are not sufficiently cohesive as to mean the same for everyone under their umbrella.[8]

This emphasis on racial identity has emerged from reconstructing the history of modern democracy as primarily a history of discrimination. On this reading, the differences that matter historically arose in the cultural systems of inclusion and exclusion.[9] Though we must take seriously the story of democracy's bent toward inclusion and exclusion, it would be a mistake to view this narrative as the *only* story worth telling, or that this story captures everything important about inclusion and exclusion.[10] The story of the gospel is also a narrative of inclusion and exclusion, but it has far greater implications and explanatory power, and it does so without minimizing the significance of the cultural systems of democracy that bend toward exclusion. The main thing I want to do in this book is to view the gospel story as the interpretive lens through which we best understand the telos of creation as a rich, deep, and complex unity-in-difference. Insofar as our cultural moment has come to emphasize diversity in certain ways, it is also appropriate for those of us who confess the gospel to think through how we relate to this wider cultural conversation as well as how the contemporary categories of diversity influence the ways we navigate differences in the church and outside the church.[11] We should

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8.   Emerging out of the movement we now refer to as postmodernism, there is a sizeable group of intellectuals who have argued that *all* of human experience must be interpreted through the lens of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. These movements range from critical race theory to fourth-wave feminism to whiteness studies to intersectionality. The common core to these movements is the claim that systemic bias related to race, ethnicity, and sexuality is the primary window through which to interpret human behavior.

9.   This is often referred to the "politics of identity." Jonathan Rauch defines it as a "political mobilization organized around group characteristics such as race, gender, and sexuality, as opposed to party, ideology, or pecuniary interest." Rauch, "Speaking as a … ," *New York Review of Books*, November 9, 2017, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/11/09/mark-lilla-liberal-speaking. Identity politics is ably defended by Amy Gutman, *Identity in Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), and ably criticized by Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

10.   Chapter 2 is devoted in its entirety to this peculiar story.

11.   Francis Fukuyama, "Why National Identity Matters," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 5–17, makes the point that politics on the Right and the Left both read the narrative of discrimination as a way to leverage political power. He writes, "The left has focused less

not forget that there are other differences among us (family systems, personality types, experiences, language, education, economic conditions, neighborhoods, peer groups, and so on), all of which serve to bind us together with certain persons while distinguishing us from others. We all yearn for unity-in-the-midst-of-our-differences. This unity seems elusive today, in our cultural discourse and in our ecclesial discourse.[12] Thinking more clearly and wisely about that unity-in-difference is the challenge before us.

It is important to understand what gave rise to the current categories by which we understand the differences that our cultural moment emphasizes. A significant part of that historical narrative indicates that the nebulous construct of "diversity" became a much more pronounced positive after the cultural revolutions of the 1960s.[13] It was an era of protest against certain kinds of exclusionary practices in the modern democratic state and an ever-increasing sense of alienation from older structures of political power and political authority. It was a radical decade rooted both in a yearning for greater democratization and in a revolt against the history of democracy. The 1960s called into question the melting-pot narrative that saw cultural uniformity as the highest social good. The decade served as a pungent reminder

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on broad economic equality and more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of groups perceived as being marginalized—Blacks, immigrants, women, Hispanics, the LGBT community, refugees, and the like. The ight, meanwhile, is redefining itself as a collection of patriots who seek to protect traditional national identity, an identity that is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity, or religion." On both the Right and the Left, "political leaders have mobilized followers around the perception that a group's dignity has been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded. This resentment engenders demands for public recognition of the dignity of the group in question. A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage" (5).

12.   Martha Nussbaum reminds us that there are significantly different models among the diverse countries in the West as to what is "common" and thereby how to deal with differences. She highlights in particular the differences between many European countries where genealogy and religious identity (not religious practice) serve as the framework of commonality, whereas in North America genealogy is far less significant as an overarching commonality. See Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

13.   See Richard Lints, *Progressive and Conservative Religious Ideologies: The Tumultuous Decade of the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 2010).

that "democratic unity" is somewhat of an oxymoron, since democracy is a social polity that grants protections for diverse opinions.[14] It permits and even encourages differences of opinion; therefore, social unity in democracy will always be tentative and fragile.[15] In Steven Pinker's apt phrase, "democracy is essentially based on giving people the right to complain."[16]

The framework for engaging with certain kinds of diversity in our time has been sketched out by our secular democracy. (We might also call this democratic secularism.)[17] There is much lament in conservative religious circles about the moral emptiness of a secular democracy loosed from religious convictions, while at other times Christians have ardently defended this social polity because it provides for a wide religious freedom that enables them to speak into the public moral issues of the day.[18] Yet while Christians remain remarkably free (historically speaking) to express their convictions openly, their voice remains one among a myriad of other voices clamoring for attention in the contemporary public square. In American democracy, persons are

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14. See Gordon Wood, "The American Enlightenment," in *America and Enlightenment Constitutionalism*, ed. Gary McDowell and Jonathan O'Neill (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 159–78.

15. Joseph Ellis suggests that the founding of democracy in America carried within it two central conflicting intuitions—namely, that sovereignty is to be located in the individual (thereby depicting government as an alien force, making rebellion against it a natural act) and that sovereignty is located in that collective called the "people" (thereby making government an essential protector of liberty rather than its enemy). American history is essentially the constant and conflicting interaction of these two cultural intuitions. See Ellis, *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

16. Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now* (New York: Viking, 2018), 205. Jeffrey Stout refers to democracy in less pejorative terms but aims in the same direction when he refers to it as an "endless conversation" without fixed points. See Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12.

17. Charles Taylor asserts that democracy and secularism are products uniquely owing their origins to the Christian West. It seems clear enough that secularism does not demand democracy (e.g., the Soviet Union and modern China), but whether democracy can survive apart from some form of civil religion is an open-ended question. Taylor, "Can Secularism Travel?," in *Beyond the Secular West*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1–27.

18. Christopher Wolfe sketches out this divided spectrum accurately in historical perspective. See Wolfe, "Free Exercise, Religious Conscience and the Common Good," in *Challenges to Religious Liberty in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gerard V. Bradley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 93–111.

protected from the intrusion of others by virtue of possessing certain rights enunciated in the Constitution. Tolerance is one way to frame those rights and is a primary political manner of dealing with difference, but it should not be the only way Christians respond to those with whom they disagree—inside or outside the church. Tolerance as the sole or primary democratic mechanism for dealing with diversity often pushes us toward a shallow way of engaging with each other honestly and generously. Merely being tolerant of others may mean we do not take them seriously enough as persons made in God's image.

We have embraced a social polity that encourages freedom of opinion largely for two reasons. First, freedom of opinion serves as a check on impositions of power. And second, those protected freedoms allow one's convictions even when in the minority. We aim at these goals but rarely ever fully achieve them in practice.[19] But values are always aspirational by nature, and it is dangerous when we assume that any form of politics will solve our deep disagreements. A contemporary political theorist and politician puts it this way:

> It seems clear that in America today, we're facing problems that feel too big for us, so we're lashing out at each other, often over less important matters. … Fortunately, we can avoid addressing the big problems as long as someone else—some nearer target— is standing in the way of our securing the political power even to try. It's easier to shriek at the people on the other side of the street. … At least our contempt unites us with other Americans who think like we do. At least *we* are not like *them*.[20]

Utopian political projects, whether on the Right or the Left, always founder on the rock of reality. Human nature is fragile and flawed,

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19. Patrick Deneen, Introduction to *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, by Jean Bethke Elshtain (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), writes, "Democracy is more a cultural ethos than it is a set of solutions. It acknowledges the pervasiveness of conflict and the fact that our loyalties are not one; our wills are not single; our opinions are not uniform; our ideals are not from the same cloth."

20. Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How We Can Heal* (New York: St. Martin's, 2018), 9.

and human communities will always manifest those flaws and that fragility. We should not suppose there is a set of political arrangements looming in the future that would resolve all our disagreements. The Puritan vision of a "city on a hill" appeared to promise a stable moral order, but it was an illusion to suppose human brokenness (individually and communally) could be overcome by any political arrangement. Every couple of generations, that vision of a utopian political framework comes to life again among groups of conservative Christians.[21] In our time, outsiders to the Christian faith (or outsiders to the particular tradition of Christianity manifest in the political order) often view that dream as a moral imposition on their own human rights. Christians of all stripes should recognize that a prophetic presence in politics rather than a new political order more nearly captures the missionary task of Christians in their own culture. Christians will flourish only as they learn better how to live in a religiously plural and deeply diverse secular age and how best to work for appropriate kinds of unity.[22]

Listening to the Echoes from Ancient Contexts

Christians also have much to learn from the ancients, who remind us that unity and diversity have been perennial concerns that unveil assumptions about the nature of reality itself. Under the rubric of the "one and the many," we learn from Plato that these issues animated

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21. See D. G. Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

22. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark offer a minority opinion that religious belief and practice thrive far better in more diverse settings than in less diverse settings. They use rates of religious participation to make the case that when a religious monopoly takes hold (e.g., in Puritan Massachusetts in the 1690s or in Roman Catholic France throughout the modern period), religious participation is very low. When religious diversity is introduced on a larger scale, religious participation increases significantly. See Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776– 2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

discussion well before his time.[23] Was the world in which humans lived essentially unified, or was it made up of an infinite number of discrete parts in a state of constant flux? The issue was not a scientific or empirical question in the modern sense of those terms, but rather a question of meaning and purpose. Did the world have one defining purpose or meaning, or was the world constantly changing without any fixed meaning or purpose? It is unlikely that the average person in the ancient world was concerned with such abstract questions, but we do know that these matters became significant as ancient empires rose and fell, and historians interpreted the flow of history as having (or lacking) purpose. The ruling elites of the ancient world wrestled with their own convictions on what held empires together and what divided them, leading to their downfall.

In contrast, ancient Israelites believed that Yahweh moved history with an inexorable purpose, and that he exercised oversight of all diverse nations in the created order. Yahweh was no local deity. Yahweh consistently reminded Israel they were to have no other gods (Exod 20). The underlying premise was that Israel's identity would inevitably be formed by what and whom they worshiped. If they would worship the living God, Israel would be "alive" to justice and compassion. Worship dead idols, and they, like the golden calf (Exod 32), would have eyes but would not see, would have ears but would not hear, and their hearts would grow stone cold to justice and compassion. The unity of their worship was underwritten in part by the cultural separation from the nations that surrounded them. Though similarities existed between the moral codes of ancient Israel and some of the larger surrounding empires, Israel's law book displays far more distinctive elements than similarities—the most distinctive difference being the command to worship the one and only living God.

With the radical call to go out into the nations with the good news of Jesus, the early church found itself in uncharted waters. If

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23. See Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

it was to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22) by adapting to the various languages and cultural habits throughout the gentile world, in what would their unity consist, and how would it be sustained? Underscoring this concern was the conundrum of abiding by the command of Israel to worship only the *one* true God while also affirming the full deity of Jesus. How was the early church to understand the unity of God, and in what manner would it frame the relationships of the persons in the Triune God?

The early church emerged in the age of empires that contained within their boundaries smaller local tribal cultures. In the Mediterranean world, Roman authority over its colonies vacillated between ambivalence and tyranny. History remembers the latter most vividly, and this has often provided an argument for a countercultural understanding of the Christian faith. The ruling authorities viewed Christianity as an alternative to Roman paganism with its local and imperial deities, including the emperor himself. The persecution of the early church in the latter half of the first century resulted in the dispersion of Christians out of Jerusalem and into many other cities and towns of the empire. Early Christians in the volatile and violent world of the late Roman Empire developed a sense of their fundamental difference from all things Roman, but they also, by virtue of being culturally scattered, developed a sense of being "at home" in many diverse cultures. As historian Mark Noll notes, "The great turning point represented by the destruction of Jerusalem (in AD 70) was to move Christianity outward, to transform it from a religion shaped in nearly every particular by its early Jewish environment into a religion advancing toward universal significance in the broader reaches of the Mediterranean world, and then beyond."[24]

Christians soon learned they would have to survive outside the cultural homogeneity of first-century Judaism, speak the languages of the gentiles, and adapt to their customs and cultural habits. By the early

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24. Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 42.

second century, Christians had become at home speaking Latin in Italy, North Africa, and Spain. They spoke Greek in the eastern Mediterranean and eastern Europe and learned Syriac in the Middle East. They were a people who belonged nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

The move from the Jewish world into the pagan gentile cultures represented the gravest challenge to the early Christians.[25] In almost every letter of the New Testament, the challenge of taking the gospel to the gentiles was of supreme importance. The book of Acts charts this journey beginning with the ascension of Jesus (his final climactic encounter with his disciples) through the first preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem to its initial foray to the Samaritans and then full bore into gentile lands at Athens before culminating with Paul's proclamation of the gospel at Rome. In the space of Luke's narrative, Christianity made the massive cultural leap from its origins in the Jewish world to a much wider and diverse set of gentile destinations. This cultural journey forced early Christians to wrestle with being a minority religion within the Roman Empire, as both a sect of Judaism and increasingly a set of communities embedded in many diverse gentile cities.[26] Not only did they have to wrestle with the variety of settings they found themselves in, but they also had to wrestle with the variety of ways the Christian faith would look in those different settings. How much of the Jewish law was to be observed? How was church discipline to be administered?

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25. There was a Jewish diaspora that had been underway in the long centuries before Jesus. There were significant Jewish communities in Babylon (modern-day Iraq) as well as Egypt and elsewhere along the coast of North Africa. However, wherever Jewish communities were sustained, there was a cultural continuity with the Jewish communities of Judea. When the early Christian communities scattered from Judea, by contrast, the development of multiple cultural assimilations took place. See Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

26. Robert Louis Wilken summarizes the journey: "Early in the second century there were Aramaic-speaking Christians in Adiabene (modern Arbil) in northern Iraq. … The gospel was brought to Central Asia and to China by Syriac-speaking missionaries. [They entered into] other linguistic worlds, those of the Copts up the Nile River in Egypt, the Nubians (in present-day Sudan), the Ethiopians farther south, the Armenians east of Asia Minor, and the Georgians between the Black and Caspian Seas." Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 26.

What were appropriate Sabbath practices? How were Christians to relate to the variety of pagan festivals? In what did their unity consist, and in what ways did Christian communities adapt differently to different settings?

Overlaid on the significant cultural diversity of the first century, the early Christian communities learned to speak into a Mediterranean world that had consolidated power into the hands of one person—the emperor. In the century before Jesus, Rome had extended its imperial rule over most of modern-day France, Spain, Italy, and Greece, as well as over much of North Africa and large swaths of the eastern Mediterranean world.[27] Travel and trade were largely unrestricted within the empire. Consequently, local cultures were interacting with each other while the conflicts between them were held in check by the heavy hand of the Roman military. By the end of the third century AD, the empire became so large it was necessary for it to be divided into four administrative districts.

We cannot draw a straight line from the religiously pluralistic world in which Christianity first emerged and the religiously pluralistic world of the early twenty-first century. The Roman Empire with its multiculturalism, both genuine and fragile, was the primary globalizing force of the world into which Christianity entered. In the empire, there was no sharp conceptual difference between the political powers and the religion of the state.[28] The *pax Romana* (the peace of the Roman Empire) was conceptualized in a hierarchy of deities—local deities exercising influence over cities and towns, and imperial deities exercising influence across the empire—culminating in the rule of the emperor himself. The unitary rule of the emperor

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27. Wilken notes, "By the first century Rome's empire reached from the Euphrates River in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, from the olive groves and vineyards of North Africa on the southern coast of the Mediterranean to the great rivers of the north, the Danube flowing into the Black Sea and the Rhine into the North Sea." Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 7.

28. Robert Joustra, following the lead of many others, makes the point that there would have been no way to distinguish the "religious" from the "non-religious" in the ancient world. The consequence is that we must recognize that the sacred-secular distinction is peculiarly modern. See his *The Religious Problem with Religious Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2018).

was the means by which the remarkable cultural diversity across the empire was kept in check.

It is fair to say that early Christian communities had little interest in political affairs, in all likelihood because of the imperial nature of politics—that is, until one of the emperors converted to Christianity in the early fourth century. Constantine's conversion changed the political dynamic for Christian communities across the empire. Late in the fourth century, Christianity was declared the official religion of the empire under Emperor Theodosius. This action set in motion a strange alliance between political powers and Christian authorities that would last nearly fifteen hundred years in parts of the West. Whatever else may be said of those fifteen hundred years, the days in which the church was the central organizing institution of the culture are long gone in these early decades of the twenty-first century. Through its first centuries of existence, Christianity emerged as a fast-growing minority religion often granted considerable social tolerance, though sometimes (as under Emperor Diocletian in the late third century) suffering significant official persecution owing to its rejection of the pantheon of Roman gods. But there is abundant evidence that many of the early Christian communities earned the trust of their pagan neighbors by their commitment to the social virtues of compassion, generosity, kindness, and gentleness, and thereby resisted being treated as cultural miscreants leading an insurgency intending to overthrow imperial rule.[29]

From Fate to Choice to Fragmentation

Ours is a vastly different world than the world of the early church. The two are separated not merely by enormous technological, economic, and political differences but also by how difference itself is experienced. In the ancient world, religions, cities, and cultures were

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29. See Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), and Larry Hurtado, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016).

experienced objectively—arranged in a hierarchy of cultures and deities that was a taken-for-granted fact of the world and was also experienced in and through other taken-for-granted realities such as the homogeneity of the local culture, the universality of military might, and the permanence of economic hierarchies. There was a certain "fixed" nature to the way the ancient world was, and it was not malleable to one's own desires.

By contrast, our world has moved from *fate* to *choice*.[30] There are few fixed points in how we experience the world. In a democracy, our choices determine the future, which would have been an alien intuition in the ancient world. We are also witnessing the victory of the particular over the universal. We give our attention to fragments and individual interests. We are faced every day with virtually infinite options with an infinite number of details within those options. Think of how many different kinds of ketchup or soft drinks or breads fill our grocery shelves. The monarchs of the medieval world could not have dreamed of so many trivial choices. Condemned to fragmentary details, we seem all too comfortable with the loss of a universal context—regrettably content to relinquish an overarching purpose to life. Former President Barack Obama put it this way in 2006: "Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds—dropping off the kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets—and they're coming to the realization that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness, is not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives."[31]

The modern truism that "change is the only constant" also points at the underlying reality that modern democracies have very few

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30. This is Peter Berger's phrase from his work *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Anchor, 1979).

31. Barack Obama, "Faith in the Public Square," January 2006, reprinted as "Obama's 2006 Speech on Faith and Politics," *New York Times*, June 28, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/28/us/politics/2006obamaspeech.html.

fixed points. Freedom of conscience and opinion are elusive grounds on which to build enduring cultural unity. So we should not be surprised that modern democracies tend toward disorder and fragmentation, if also in an orderly, prescribed fashion. Social commentators are mixed on this point, but the preponderance of evidence today suggests that the initial interaction between diverse ethnic and racial groups produces greater negative engagement, decreases interethnic tolerance, and makes social solidarity more fragile.[32] But there is also evidence suggesting younger generations are more at home with cultural and religious diversity over time, even if the initial interactions tend to be negative. One further bit of conflicting evidence suggests that though religious conviction is actually more important to most people than their ethnic or racial identity, the more contentious and more public conflicts of our times focus on ethnicity and race.[33] We tend to care more about our personal religious convictions but seem to be bothered more by the ethnic and racial differences that surround us. However, on neither religious nor racial matters is there evidence that a sustainable unity-in-diversity is within our grasp.

Modern political liberalism is built on the bare notions of individual rights and freedoms. For a time, certain kinds of cultural variety allied with these freedoms may have stimulated innovation and entrepreneurship, but they also generated considerable social friction and often downright hostility between the diverse subgroups within the culture. That social friction and those hostilities have not vanished in the present, nor are they any longer interpreted by an overarching moral vision that could, in part, inspire initiatives to overcome those

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32.   This is Robert Putnam's thesis in his "E Pluribus Unum." Putnam nonetheless holds out the hope that societies that are culturally diverse over the long run are in fact more creative and stable.

33.   In "E Pluribus Unum," Putnam writes, "In fact, our own survey evidence suggests that for most Americans their religious identity is actually more important to them than their ethnic identity, but the salience of religious differences as lines of social identity has sharply diminished" (162).

frictions and hostilities.[34] It is a common intuition that we have now entered a stage of such significant social polarization that no strategy exists to overcome it.

Our social lives are deeply fractured not only by diverse religious convictions but also by (and primarily by) a system wherein individuals are free to pursue whatever they desire as long as it does not conflict with others in their pursuits. This is as true inside the church as outside the church. This freedom to determine one's own identity is the hallmark of modern democratic liberalism. As Mark Lilla puts it, "Personal choice. Individual rights. Self-definition. We speak these words as if a wedding vow. We hear them in school, we hear them on television, we hear them in stuffy Wall Street boardrooms, in Silicon Valley playpens, we hear them in church, we even hear them in bed. We hear them so often it's hard for us to think or talk about any subject except in these self-regarding terms."[35] But we also realize that human decisions are often subverted by the commercial pressures of the marketplace; we are not nearly as "free" as public discourse would suggest. The desires that motivate our "free choices" are subtly undermined by consumer pressures. As Jeffrey Stout comments, "We obviously fall far short of the democratic ideals we espouse, on any reasonable interpretation of their substance. The ideal of equal voice, in particular, is hardly consistent with the dominant role that big money now plays."[36]

Freedom of self-determination carries with it an unintended license for greed and power. Democracy is supposed to check this very sort of behavior, but it is easily exploited by powerful economic

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34. Fukuyama, "Identity," notes that cultural diversity is not an unalloyed good: "Syria and Afghanistan are very diverse places, but their diversity has yielded violence and conflict rather than creativity and resilience. In Kenya, where there are sharp divisions between ethnic groups, diversity feeds an inward-looking political corruption based on ethnic ties" (9).

35. Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper, 2017), 29. It should be noted that Lilla is not yearning for a return to a golden era when Americans were less selfish. He is simply highlighting the social forces at work in late modern liberal democracies—the sort of forces that late modern liberal democracies were intended to blunt.

36. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 4.

entities. Late modern democracy lacks a common moral tradition that would give it the convictions to keep these sorts of behaviors restrained. The distinction between virtue and vice may not have relieved earlier times of moral decay, but the absence of any agreed-on distinction between them today makes it all the more difficult to sustain a commitment to anything resembling the "common good." The polarization of our contemporary cultural conversation has resulted in the loss of confidence in democratic liberalism even as democratic liberalism provides the structures by which it is possible to complain about the polarization. Without a common civic morality to restrain large consumer forces, the public square is not only empty but also alienating. People tend to look for social reinforcement of their own self-identity in homogeneous communities when there is not a set of shared goals promoting the common good. Ironically, the greater the yearning for a common good, the more suspicion there is about any one group imposing its sense of the common good on others. The fracturing of the sense of belonging to others becomes the dominant paradigm. "If you are not for me, on my terms, then you are against me." But the more tribal the search for self-identity is, the more polarized our common life becomes and the greater our tendency toward conflict. Without a larger perception of the common good, or at least of some form of commonality among all our differences, our social polity is doomed to failure.[37] It is not an accident that democracy itself seems tenuous in an age of global capitalism, corporate corruption, identity politics, and theocratic terrorism.[38]

Church life is likewise polarized. Though the church has been freed from state control, it remains downstream from culture and has

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37. I am here concurring with Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018): "There is something like a common nature and it is this thread of commonality that supports both individuality and plurality, and that helps us preserve the spaces between us. Out of one, many ones, each a new beginning; yet these many ones share a nature in common" (104).

38. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 7.

imbibed the same celebration of self-defining freedom as the wider public square. There are surely notable exceptions, but as in many eras, the church reflects the world it lives in even as it struggles to speak prophetically to that world.

In the 1940s and 1950s, a vigorous discussion arose among public intellectuals regarding the emergence and increasing danger of "mass culture." This was a reference to the rise of a consumer economy and the end of the subsistence economy.[39] People were able to spend their income not simply on matters of survival but on matters of convenience as well—consumer goods as diverse as the automobile, the dishwasher, the television, and the fast-food industry. The transformation into a consumer culture was alarming to a small but significant number of public voices, predominantly on the political Left. The concern they raised was that consumer culture numbed people's moral sensibilities to the crises of the times.[40] By the 1990s and early 2000s, the criticism of consumerism had become a cottage industry. Commentators on both the Right and the Left expressed a fear that it had eliminated thoughtful discussion of the big issues of the time and removed the ethical dimension to our life together.[41]

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39. Mass culture is not the same as political populism. The latter points at movements that see themselves largely as a protest movement against the cultural elites, many of whom are instrumental in the creation of mass culture. One thinks of the populist disdain for the barons of Hollywood or for the boardrooms of corporations controlling a variety of consumer industries.

40. Maurice Isserman representatively wrote, "If mass culture as portrayed in the 1950s, was not the cold dark dungeon of Stalinist-style totalitarianism, it offered only the dubious advantages of being stuck between floors in a brightly lit elevator with piped-in muzak. Americans were being psychologically manipulated in ways they could not understand, their deepest anxieties deliberately exploited by politicians, propagandists, and advertisers." Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 100.

41. A small sampling of this literature noticeably includes many religiously conservative authors: Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, eds., *Christ and Consumerism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity Press, 2000); Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000); Rodney Clapp, ed., *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); Mike Featherston, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991); Stephen Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Conrad Lodziak, *The Myth*

Looking back on those discussions, it is fair to say that mass culture morphed in ways not imagined at midcentury and diminished our ability to deal with our differences and disagreements in local and practical ways. Mass culture in the West transformed us into a global consumer culture. It created the illusion of heightened individuality while implicitly demanding conformity. Mass culture tends toward homogeneity—a McDonald's hamburger is the same whether you buy it in Maine or Montana or Moscow; so too with Starbucks or Coke or any of the other vehicles of mass culture. And with the rise of social media as the primary platform of communication in mass culture, this homogeneity is now hyper-localized and creates little room for deep deliberative conversation across differences.[42] With consumer culture comes the danger that individual freedoms will crowd out the duty to care for anything other than their own material well-being.[43] Mass culture also tends to remove us from the concrete relations of ordinary life, making it appear we belong everywhere and nowhere at the same time. The significance of local mediating structures like churches and neighborhood associations diminished under the pressure of the national and the global.[44] It is not an uncommon experience in a congregation for a "celebrity pastor" to be of greater

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of Consumerism (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Laurence Moore, *Selling God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); George Ritzer, *Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption: Fast Food, Credit Cards and Casinos* (London: Sage, 2001); Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, *Brand Jesus: Christianity in a Consumerist Age* (New York: Seabury, 2007); Sam Van Eman, *On Earth as It Is in Advertising: Moving from Commercial Hype to Gospel Hope* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005); Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

42.   It should also be noted that evangelicals have been especially prone to the temptations of mass culture. Evangelical celebrities transcend all local realities, and as many of them became overtly political (and partisan), they damaged the ability to speak across cultural differences. On this see D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservativism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

43.   See Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*.

44.   See Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1973).

significance than the local pastor, though that celebrity pastor has never once appeared in person to the congregation.

The Logic of the Gospel

How do we heal this fracturing and fragmentation, so deeply entrenched in our social polity and seemingly so arbitrary in its emotional attachments? The first step is to recognize that our task as Christians is to live as faithful witnesses in it. It is not realistic to suppose that fundamental social conflicts are going to be resolved anytime soon, whether nationally, globally, or within the church. We must begin to cultivate the desire to live together in, with, and through our differences. As philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, "We must live together. It is to politics and not to epistemology that we shall have to look for an answer as to how to do that. 'Liberal' politics has fallen on bad days recently. But to its animating vision of a society in which persons of diverse traditions live together in justice and friendship, conversing with each other and slowly altering their traditions in response to the conversation—to that, there is no viable alternative."[45]

This need is as true in the church as it is in the culture at large. Besides oppression, accepting the reality of our differences is the only social option available to us today. As Christians, we can retreat from this social polity, seek to dominate it, or learn to live with it wisely. Undoubtedly, many Christians today are wary of the fracturing of our social cohesion. They are wary of its effects on their children. They are wary of engaging yet another generation of culture wars. They are also wary of the pretensions of "neutrality" so often articulated by the most ardent defenders of tolerance and diversity.

It is unlikely that any grand social strategy will alleviate the polarization. However, as a minority voice within our entrenched polarized communities, we Christians must ponder the internal logic of

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45. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 246.

the gospel itself as a social strategy to pursue. This gospel affirms that human differences are given by our Creator in order to manifest the interdependence of the body as the very means to honor God with a deeper unity. The unique vocation of Christians is to express a commitment to justice and mercy, grace and truth, to our diverse neighbors inside the church and outside of it.[46] Living this out rather than giving in to despair is our unique calling today, and is desperately needed for the church to flourish.

Much has been written in the recent past on the theological significance of the "other"—other nations, other communities, other people.[47] In a time of increased scrutiny and anxiety about our polarizations, the language of the other has focused attention on the immensely important work of reconciliation in the context of these conflicts—a theme near the very heart of the gospel. The language of the other has provided us a way to think more clearly about the intensely personal nature of conflict and the impact of core disagreements about our own identity. Love of neighbor (the other) is a consistent theme in the teaching of Jesus. Loving our neighbors also entails that we hear the truth from our neighbors, even when we find it uncomfortable.

"Neighborliness" is just the name we give to the divine intention that humans are created to live together in communities. A community of people, such as a family, a neighborhood, or a church, is a nexus of relationships whose corporate identity requires cooperation in the face of differences. Communities, small or large, survive to the extent that collaboration and cooperation are naturally woven into the fabric of the community. Marriages often disintegrate in the face of the loss of a child's life—a crisis that requires collaboration and yet where the stress seems so great that collaboration is no longer possible. When the cooperation required is significant enough, differences

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46. See Patrick Deneen, "The Ignoble Lie," *First Things* (April 2018), https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/04/the-ignoble-lie.

47. One of the most powerful and poignant theological treatments of the "other" is Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

can quickly turn into disagreements, and significant disagreements are often the stress points that threaten the well-being of communities. Churches go into wilderness periods when pastoral leadership is absent and a cacophony of voices arise with no discernible strategy for settling the disagreements. Disagreements are also constraints on the individual's own self-will in a community. They are also a threat to that self-will.

The logic of communal life is straightforward. The greater the collaboration, the greater the opportunity for conflict unless there is a constraint on the self-interest of individuals in the community. But what could constrain self-interest? The gospel is the story in which Jesus sacrifices his human self-interest for the greater good—the greater good of his Father's glory, and the greater good of those who would be reconciled to God by that act of sacrifice. It is the logic of the gospel that constrains self-interest.

Christians, who confess a large narrative moral arc from creation to redemption to consummation, have a unique opportunity for a humble prophetic witness to our late modern democratic secular culture. The difference of differences has to do with the nature of the communities in which those differences are played out and the constraints on self-interest imposed by the community or the goals to which the community aspires. The more significant the community, the more likely disagreement will be threatening, and the more important it will be to learn how to deal with the disagreement. Absent a larger narrative or moral arc that constrains self-interest, communities will inevitably lurch toward disorder.

The mission of God as manifest in Christ does not seek the homogenization of the public square with the goal that everyone be the same, but rather the opportunity to speak about our disagreements in the public square honestly, graciously, and humbly. Dealing with disagreements as Christians requires humility and wisdom. It requires a more thorough reckoning with the relationships in which God has placed us and coming to peace with the communities in which those relationships are embedded. It also requires a vigilance against resentment

and cynicism—resentment against others and cynicism toward the present depth of the problems. It requires faith, hope, and charity. Why should we suppose this is different for us when it has been the norm for Christians in every age of the church's life? As Christians, we must engage the social world of polarizations on its own God-given terms rather than the terms being dictated by elites or culture warriors or even our own fears. The church ought not lose sight of its confession nor of its peculiar call to reflect the character of God in this world. Grace is more powerful than sin, and God's grace is far more powerful than the principalities and powers of this age.

According to the Christian story, in the beginning there were two persons. They were quite different from each other, yet they belonged together. In retrospect, the union of the man and the woman seems almost counterintuitive given such undeniable differences. But in the beautiful final passage of Genesis 2, the two are united (literally "put back together") while still retaining their own voice. As the story progresses in Genesis 3, their union deteriorates into disunion, their differences turn into disagreements. Eventually, across generations, those disagreements fostered systemic conflicts. The two were created for a relationship of unity-in-diversity, which was effectively destroyed by the pursuit of their own self-interest. The template of a unity-in-diversity at the end of Genesis 2 would, however, remain as a promissory note, not simply for marriages but for a broad array of relationships across redemptive history, awaiting its fulfillment in the gospel and experienced in fits and starts in the life of the church. The trajectory of that narrative remains true today. In one sense, there is nothing new under the sun. The deep divisions that surround us weigh heavily on our conscience, tugging at our hearts and reminding us there must be a better way. We yearn for a genuine unity across our disagreements and rarely fathom how it could happen. But still we hope, and still we are called not to abandon the goal of a genuine unity-in-diversity.

Learning to live with differences large and small, local and global, is part and parcel of the Christian calling today. There is no emperor

who will impose unity on our cultural conversations (thankfully). There is no longer even the echo of an older common culture that binds us together. Ours is a time loosed from the politically artificial frameworks of cultural unity, a time when we are reminded of how much work is required to get along with our neighbors.

In the next chapter, I tell the story of the emergence of the racial and ethnic differences that serve as the interpretive key to every other kind of difference in late modern times. It begins with the story of the birth of democracy and the categories intrinsic to that political polity. It is not a set of abstractions, but a concrete narrative rooted in actual events in our past that continue to echo into the present. It is a narrative neither identical to the story of the gospel, nor one entirely absent the echoes of the gospel—if we listen carefully to hear it.

We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the gist of which still sleeps quite unawakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue.

—WALT WHITMAN, *DEMOCRATIC VISTAS* (1870)