The Challenge of Diversity:  
Chaos or Community

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We live in a world poised on the threshold of a new century; not only a new century but a new millennium. There is no way to anticipate fully what that means, but we can gather clues from some of the glimmers we have been getting in the last few years. Certainly, our world as we know it is clearly changing. Technology is presenting opportunities — challenges at which we can only guess. This is bringing the geographical world closer — the tap of a button can link one to Europe or Africa or Asia — if you know how to do it. This alone is startling, but there is also the potential for isolation. It is easier to sit at home and “discuss” things with people you never see on the “Net.” It is even possible to shop on the “WEB,” and education is beginning to experiment with distance learning and non-traditional forms of education. All of this development is great in that it makes education and learning more accessible and more available. But it leaves out something important — the community created by the classroom, the bonding and interaction between professor and student, and the feeling among the students that we are all in this together.

The faces of America are also changing. There was a time when the majority of people in North America looked similar, had similar educational and economic backgrounds, and similar dreams for the future. Events like the two world wars bonded people in a common cause against a common enemy.

Now our world is and has been changing. Demographic and scholarly studies show clearly that the past “majority” is quickly becoming the “minority” as more and more faces take on a variety of colors, shapes and styles accompanied by as many different languages, educational and economic backgrounds, and ways of living life. At one recent conference on elementary education, the speaker pointed out
that in some California classrooms there are sometimes as many as fifty different languages represented. And, that is not only California. The face of America is changing and with it the comfortable assumption of life as we have known it. By comfortable I mean, it is always easier to speak the same language as everyone, to have similar backgrounds, to have similar understandings of history, and similar dreams for the future, similar perspectives about life and how the world is.

Furthermore, I submit, that the challenge of diversity not only exists within the spheres of ethnicity, culture, and language. The challenge exists in a more disconcerting form within Christianity and even within Pentecostalism. We have heard a lot about this during this conference in Springfield.

Diversity in itself is not inherently good or bad; rather it is something to which one must respond: either it can create a meaningless multiplicity of divisions, conflict and chaos or it can be embraced to become a rich tapestry of colors, a mosaic of images, a community of each part contributing to the whole. The image I like is a stained glass window in which portions viewed separately make up a chaos of colors but together they create a picture.

God seems to have ordained diversity by nature itself: consider in nature the multiplicity of colors, styles of animals, kinds and shapes of plants, even insects. The picture of Jesus in the Gospels is given from four perspectives. Although some of the material is similar, different perspectives of Jesus are evident. Paul often used the body with its many parts to explain the working of individuals within the church — there are different kinds of gifts, different kinds of services, different kinds of working (1 Cor. 12:4-6), even different kinds of tongues (1 Cor. 12:28).

Diversity can build the uniqueness of each individual into a harmonious unity or it can lead to chaos. The Tower of Babel is perhaps the earliest example of how diversity can create chaos. God used diversity of languages to distract the people from their goal. In later times, Israel experienced moral relativity when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, ultimately missing God’s desired level of holiness. The Corinthian church, a church full of gifts, misused these to create divisions, competition among the members and general disunity. So, obviously diversity can lead to chaos.

God’s purpose for diversity, however, is different than this. Perhaps the clearest example can be found in Jesus’ own prayer in John 17 where Jesus prays that the disciples (and by extension us) may be one as he and the Father are one. Jesus emphatically prayed “may they be brought to complete unity” (John 17:21). Merrill C. Tenney, the late New Testament scholar and Dean of the Wheaton Graduate School,