

Continuing the Conversation

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Alan,

Thanks again for the beer and for reaching out to discuss some heavy topics. Let’s continue the conversation soon — next round is on me.

You gave me a lot to think about, and none of it is easy. I’d summarize our discussion into three broad areas:

- 1. **What is the scope of *Unity in Diversity* (UiD)?**
- 2. **What do we mean by a “Social Gospel”?**
- 3. **How should Christians—and the Church—respond to these concerns?**

Let me share a few reflections from my perspective.

1. Unity in Diversity

From the conversation you and Suzanne had with the elders, I gathered that the current scope of *Unity in Diversity* is focused primarily on the African American experience in the U.S., and more specifically in St. Louis. I’ve updated the UiD mission statement to reflect that.

As for how we work within that mission—that’s a separate question. Personally, I’d prefer UiD not be a formal ministry of the church, but rather something individual members engage in as opportunities arise. Suzanne mentioned some great ideas like visiting Crown Candy or East St. Louis. I think those could be meaningful ways to explore and discuss racial tensions and misunderstandings (from all sides) in a relational context.

2. The Social Gospel

It’s clear from passages like **Matthew 25:31–46** that our Lord expects us to see and care for the hurting, the hungry, the sick, the stranger, and the poor. There’s no ambiguity about that.

One of my concerns, however, is the sheer number of social issues people feel passionately about: poverty, income inequality, animal welfare, healthcare, abortion, euthanasia, housing, food deserts, immigration, family structure, prison reform, and so on. Each of us seems to prioritize these differently.

That leads to an important distinction:

3. What Should a Christian Do? What Should the Church Do?

I believe God places each of us in unique situations. I may be called to care for my ailing sister with cancer. That’s a serious concern—but it doesn’t necessarily become a priority for the whole church. Or I may become aware of a neighbor’s financial struggles and feel compelled to help—but again, that doesn’t obligate the corporate church.

In other words, I see the “social gospel” as something best addressed by individual Christians (and perhaps their families or small groups), more than by the institutional church.

That said, the church—as the body of Christ—is still responsible for teaching and preaching what Jesus commanded in Matthew 25. We’re told to feed the poor, but not exactly *how*. That’s where debate comes in. I’d guess most of us at McKnight would agree on the *principle*—but might differ significantly on the *practice*.
And that’s okay.

Also, as we discussed, well meaning people can actually make the problem worse. Pruitt-Igoe is such an example. The problem is not just correctly identifying a problem but then coming up with an appropriate solution. Otherwise, you

risk the danger of building another Pruitt-Igoe (an example of unintended consequences).

We should be able to **disagree on implementation** without labeling one another as good or bad, faithful or unfaithful, Christian or unchristian. Forty years ago in college, I read two books that helped me see how faithful Christians can reach different conclusions on weighty matters:

- [War: Four Christian Views](#)
- [Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics](#)

Both books featured serious believers wrestling with complex issues. There were no easy answers then, and there aren’t now. I also don’t believe the pulpit is the place for advocating political platforms or party loyalties—especially when doing so may compromise our unity in Christ.

Alan, I appreciate your heart and your willingness to wade into hard conversations. I hope we can keep talking—not necessarily to agree on everything, but to keep learning from each other in faith and friendship. I'd also like help/input as I transition into retirement!

In Christ,
--- Bret

A Few Words from C.S. Lewis

I’ve found these quotes from Lewis helpful in keeping perspective:

1. Christianity has not, and does not profess to have, a detailed political program for applying ‘Do as you would be done by’ to a particular society at a particular moment. It could not have. It is meant for all men at all times and the particular program which suited one place or time would not suit another. And, anyhow, that is not how Christianity works. When it tells you to feed the hungry it does not give you lessons in cookery. When it tells you to read the Scriptures it does not give you lessons in Hebrew and Greek, or even in English grammar. It was never intended to replace or supersede the ordinary human arts and sciences: it is rather a director which will set them all to the right jobs, and a source of energy which will give them all new life, if only they will put themselves at its disposal.

— C.S. Lewis

2. People say, ‘The Church ought to give us a lead.’ That is true if they mean it in the right way, but false if they mean it in the wrong way. By the Church they ought to mean the whole body of practicing Christians. And when they say that the Church should give us a lead, they ought to mean that some Christians—those who happen to have the right talents—should be economists and statesmen, and that all economists and statesmen should be Christians and that their whole efforts in politics and economics should be directed to putting ‘Do as you would be done by’ into action. If that happened, and if we others were really ready to take it, then we should find the Christian solution for our own social problems pretty quickly. But, of course, when they ask for a lead from the Church most people mean they want the clergy to put out a political program. That is silly. The clergy are those particular people within the whole Church who have been specially trained and set aside to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live forever: and we are asking them to do a quite different job for which they have not been trained. The job is really on us, on the laymen. The application of Christian principles, say, to trade unionism or education, must come from Christian trade unionists and Christian schoolmasters: just as Christian literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists -not from the bench of bishops getting together and trying to write plays and novels in their spare time."

— C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

3. Some people nowadays say that charity ought to be unnecessary and that instead of giving to the poor we ought to be producing a society in which there were no poor to give to. They may be quite right in saying that we ought to produce this kind of society. But if anyone thinks that, as a consequence, you can stop giving in the

meantime, then he has parted company with all Christian morality. I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charities expenditure excludes them. I am speaking now of charities’ in the common way. Particular cases of distress among your own relatives, friends, neighbors or employees, which God, as it were, forces upon your notice, may demand much more: even to the crippling and endangering of your own position."

— C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

4. What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call ‘**Christianity And**’. You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychical Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring.”

— C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters



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Unity in Diversity –Mission Statement

Mission:

To foster Christ-centered unity within the body of Christ by building understanding and relationships across lines of background, culture, and experience—grounded in Scripture and guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is primarily an exploration of the African American experience here in St. Louis.

Purpose:

- To explore how God’s diverse creation reflects His image (Genesis 1:27, Revelation 7:9)
- To strengthen the unity of the church by listening well and loving one another (Romans 12:10, Ephesians 4:2–3)
- To identify and remove barriers to fellowship within our church family, in ways that are biblical, nonpartisan, and spiritually constructive

Boundaries & Guidance:

- Discussions will be **rooted in Scripture**, not partisan politics or cultural ideologies
- The goal is **relationship and reconciliation**, not advocacy or activism
- Ministry leaders will work in **coordination with the elders** to ensure alignment with our church’s values and teaching
- Any resources, speakers, or events will be **pre-approved by the elders** to maintain theological and cultural sensitivity
- Conversations should promote **humility, grace, and peace**, avoiding divisive or inflammatory rhetoric (James 3:17)

What Unity in Diversity Is Not:

- It is not a platform for political expression (left or right)
- It is not an endorsement of every expression of “diversity” as defined by the culture
- It is not a place to settle cultural debates, but to **learn how to love across differences**
- It *is* a space for **humble listening, thoughtful reflection, and Christ-like love**.