



ETHNIC SPECIFIC MINISTRY: A DIFFERENT LENS

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“When you close your eyes and envision the Kingdom of Heaven, what will it be like?”

I distinctly remember being asked this question and then I remembered back as a fourth grader, one morning at my annual church summer camp. As we gathered for worship that day, I was awe struck by the beauty and majesty invoked by the chorus of nearly 400 Japanese Americans singing praises to God. The melding of people, from senior citizens to infants, gathered together to proclaim one singular love and truth to our God was an amazing sight I had never experienced before. So when I was asked to picture heaven and all the multitudes singing, this was the exact image that came to mind. I thought about all the people who will be worshipping God together and how mind-blowing that will be... an amazing image emblazoned in my mind... So when I do picture the Kingdom of Heaven, what does it look like? Well, when all of us die and go to heaven, from my 10 year-old's perspective, you will be a new creation. You will all be Japanese American.

Jesus is central, in the pursuit of our faith as people of different cultures, individually and collectively. The truth of God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, but the way we understand this truth is strongly shaped by influences that are unique to our respective cultural backgrounds and heritages. Race and ethnicity are powerful and influential lens through which we come to know and understand ourselves, our world, and our God. There are vital questions to be asked about the cultural lens through which we see our faith. Do we all understand the same things when we study scripture? Are we limited in our view? How does our cultural perspective enhance our understanding of God? How does it inhibit it?

Ethnic specific ministry offers a strategy to redeem culture, equip and train minority leaders, and reach unchurched people. Ethnic specific ministry enables us to tap creative avenues in developing minority leaders that love, know and understand God. As we learn to understand both the beauty of whom God has made us and to see more clearly the sinfulness of who we are we can join the chorus of believers speaking God's truth to others seeking the redemption of all the nations.

I. Redeeming Culture

InterVarsity has developed a strength in listening to and critiquing our American culture and offering a genuine and deep biblical response. Every people group, culture, and person, reflects the image of God. And at the same time, inherent within each culture, society and individual, is the influence of Sin and the fall.

Identifying differences of culture, its influences and evaluating it in a biblical light is essential for growth and development. Many Asian & Pacific Islander American

populations (APA-Asian/Pacific Islander Americans) place a high value on harmony of friendships in a relational circle. Having too strong of a voice or “rocking the boat” is often not affirmed or taught in an Asian context. Thus many APA have a stronger corporate understanding of the world around them (family units versus individuals). The opinions and beliefs of the surrounding voices are greater and very influential in the shaping of a person’s identity. An ethnic specific setting offers a special opportunity to address such issues of cultural dynamics.

In my experience, ethnic identity development is a key discipleship issue for many APA and even more for a subset of this group Dr. Ken Uyeda Fong calls Americanized Asian Americans (who I will more simply refer to as Asian Americans)¹. Asian Americans students struggle to know who they are and how to process their ethnicity. Faced with fundamental questions of “who am I?” being in the minority culture complicates this process for Asian Americans. I love a good burger and fries, but yet most of my meals at home I use chop sticks. I see my parents express themselves in their own way, and compare them to models of non-Asian families around - and there is a disconnect. I want everyone who comes into my room to take their shoes off, but not everyone does. Do I confront them, or is it just okay. I was raised knowing that the “nail that sticks up gets hammered”, but a more western voice declares that the “squeaky wheel gets oil”. Why do these things cause tension in me? Understanding who God has created us to be as individuals, as well as a corporate people, is foundational in learning to love and accept ourselves, God and others. In the context of an ethnic specific fellowship, these issues can be named and worked with.

II. Equipping and Training Leaders

As we build leaders and fellowships we want to be aware of the how each person makes a unique contribution to our chapters. While an ethnic specific ministry provides space for more specific issues of culture and ethnicity to be addressed, it also gives ethnic minority students a place to learn, grow and fail in leadership. As some Asian churches experience a decline in membership and a transfer from older generations to a younger generation, there is a need for a new wave of Asian leaders to help lead the church. Being a part of what God is doing to raise up a generation of Asian American leaders who are both prophetic and apostolic to the Asian American community and to the Non-Asian American community is an opportunity we have today.

As we prepare students for lives of discipleship, topics of stewardship and vocational call are important issues for many Asian Americans. Most Asian American families who faced economic and cultural hardship when they came to America, a generation or two later are now experiencing a higher level of economic return. God has blessed parts of the Asian American church with much worldly wealth. As a body we are blessed with this to be a blessing to others. Thus fighting the tide of materialism and success is a raging

¹ Asian America is a diverse group of people, with multiple generations and ethnic heritages. When I talk about Asian Pacific Islanders or Asian Americans I am most keenly thinking about the growing population of Americanized Asian Americans, the population that is most likely to join an InterVarsity Campus fellowship.

battle. I fear that the Asian American church is not listening to how it is to bless others with what God has given it. And at the same time lead them in the area of compassion to those who are in similar and needy positions today.

Obviously this is not the only way to build Asian American leaders who have a corporate perspective, but an ethnic specific strategy does build towards the forming of a corporate minority voice, a much needed voice as we work for justice and the eradication of racism.

III. Evangelism

The truth of the scriptures is something that transcends time and culture. But in our current evangelism training are there ways in which we are not speaking about Jesus in the most relevant way? While Asian Americans are by no means the only ones who can speak the truth of Jesus to other Asian American, being Asian American and then doing evangelism in the Asian American context offers some distinct advantages, for example there are points of connections, familiarity, and the ability to role model and lead from a common context. As ethnic specific ministries help redeem culture and train minority leaders, they can also offer non-churched Asian Americans outreach, welcome and proclamation of the gospel that is contextualized for them as a specific audience.

Growth edges for Asian American ministries are developing outreach strategies to the Asian American community including Pacific Islanders, South East Asians, South Asians, and East Asians. The Asian American population is very diverse socio-economically, culturally, and generationally. The immigration waves have all been very different too. This makes for less than homogenous group of people to reach out.

As a body of believers we need to raise up leaders who are thinking critically and creatively about how to proclaim the truths of our faith in the most effective and relevant ways possible in the Asian American context.

IV. CONCLUSION

Criticism for ethnic specific ministry has come from the perspective that ethnic specific groups are exclusive and ethnocentric. This is a valid danger for ethnic specific ministries. As no person or collective body is free from racism and ethnocentrism, we need to repent of ways this is true in our fellowships, in our hearts, and in our minds. As a minority group historically excluded from settings on the basis of ethnic background reversing the behavior would be particularly grieving. We must ask God for help in knowing how to welcome others into our lives in a trusting and meaningful way and to be looking to Jesus to transform our hearts to love with forgiveness and compassion. Taking on the call of racial reconciliation more seriously.

With respect to the larger multi-ethnic emphasis it is vitally important to understand that Ethnic specific ministry is a part of a greater movement of God. At Harvard University the two undergraduate fellowships (one multi-ethnic, one ethnic specific) have a vital partnership with each other. The multi-ethnic fellowship and the Asian American fellowship enjoy a strong commitment to each other that is renewed and affirmed each year. Each fellowship is committed to the other in prayer and campus partnership. The

partnership brings each fellowship much joy and thankfulness for the greater body of believers on campus. Each year the partnership grows and matures. Each Exec team comes together to meet regularly to pray and plan. (See the Harvard-Radcliffe Christian Fellowship & the Harvard-Radcliffe Asian American Christian Fellowship Covenant, <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hraacf/about/covenant.htm>)

A common question asked about ethnic specific ministry is one concerning unity. Are we not all Christians and is this not the central commonality we should focus on? To this one responds with a resounding Yes. We are all disciples of Jesus and inextricably of the same body. This is indeed our common call. However, within the diversity of the body there is a unique call and place for ethnic specific ministry to minister, teach, train, heal, challenge and reach a generation of people in the context of their culture and experience.

In conclusion, Unity is not as simple as gathering diverse believers in one room singing the same songs together. God calls us to a process that goes much deeper than "diversity". He asks us to fully engage in wrestling with the root issues that lead to racial reconciliation. God calls us—as different ethnic groups—to struggle to understand the fullness of who we are in the context of culture, institutions and power. He engages our hearts in acknowledging and grieving our ethnocentrism, our silence amidst injustice, and our participation in “the game of assimilation” with the dominant culture. In the pursuit to eradicate racism, our commitment extends not only to the present with this student generation, but to our family circles, social arenas, and institutional structures. With God's grace and mercy, because of the work of Jesus at the Cross-, and through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit we strive to build reconciliation and forgiveness, a central mark to our community.

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