

## **Preserving Unity and Celebrating Diversity: Pursuing Multiethnic Fellowship Through Multiple Chapters**

This paper outlines the core convictions driving our use of multiple chapters to reach different ethnic and affinity groups on a single campus in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's Northern Illinois/Northwest Indiana Division. It provides the biblical basis for our convictions and serves as the foundation for our continuing commitment to affirm, to develop, and to broaden our work in this way. It is critical for us to articulate our beliefs so that we can understand our position and practices as we pursue our ministry together. Because of the practical implications of this issue, we cannot partner effectively in advancing witnessing communities on campus without broad-based understanding and consensus that our position is a biblically-supported position.

This paper first considers how the events of salvation history -- Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation -- shape our understanding of culture and ethnicity. Then, this paper briefly reviews how the early Church shaped its ministry in light of cultural and ethnic issues. Both sections include the implications for our ministries which we derive from our observations.

### **Culture, Ethnicity and Salvation History**

**I. Creation.** The Creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 teaches the following truth about culture: that the development of diverse cultures and ethnicities is a part of God's good creational mandate and intent for humanity. *Implications:* Our ministries must celebrate the diversity of cultures and ethnicities; identify (where undiscovered) and highlight (when ignored) those elements of God's truth which exist in each of our cultures; and recognize that reflecting the image of God requires both racial reconciliation and ethnic identity formation.

A) As part of the creation of humanity in his own image, God commands Adam and Eve to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28), issuing what Reformed theologians call "the cultural mandate." More than just "having babies", Adam and Eve share in God's act of creation by developing "human-made" items -- patterns of relating and social processes -- which help them to "fill-in" the otherwise rich diversity of God's creation. In response, they create the things by which people distinguish one culture from another -- methods of agriculture, family organization, taxonomy, language, poetry. (Gen. 1:26, 28-31; 2:19, 23). God places only one limitation on their activities (Gen. 2:16, 17); otherwise, humanity was free to develop its own culture. Cultural formation reflects God's desire to love mankind, honor his image in men and women, and give expression to humanity's God-given creativity.

B) Scripture assesses the creation of humanity and the issuance of the cultural mandate with the refrain, "And God said.... And it was so. . . And it was *very good*." (Gen. 1:26-31) Like procreation, partnership in marriage, work and child-rearing, cultural formation exists as part of God's good and perfect created order. The creation of culture by humanity reflect God's good intentions for an unfallen humanity and a sinless world. Therefore, we should value the different cultural expressions God has blessed us with.

C) As beings created in God's image, humanity's exercise in cultural formation will naturally reflect the nature of the Creator who endowed the world with incredible diversity of environment and life form. Human cultures also will reflect some aspect of their creators -- and, consequently, the Creator. As a result, all cultures reflect and contain some amount and aspect of truth and beauty. (Rom. 1:20) All truth is God's truth, and any truth and beauty found in a culture derives from God.

D) The Table of Nations (Gen. 10) describes how each ethnic/language group coalesces in fulfillment of the cultural mandate issued to both Adam and Noah. (Gen. 1:28 and 9:1) It reflects how cultural formation manifests itself in the development of specific ethnic/language groups. Scholars interpret the numerical symmetry and perfection of the Table of Nations (seventy people described) as proof that the dispersion occurs through and because of divine providence.<sup>1</sup> (The table also offers a redemptive theological interpretation for creation of linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Driver, S.R. *The Book of Genesis*. (London: Methuen & Co, 1904), p. 134f.

diversity in the Tower of Babel narrative. (Gen. 11) God fulfills his own good purposes to increase diversity even in the act of judgment.) The existence of linguistic and cultural diversity is not a de facto expression of human sinfulness.

E) A natural implication of the creation of different ethnic and cultural groups is the concept of a corporate *imago dei*, which is the corollary of the *imago dei* reflected by each individual (and perfectly by the second Adam, Jesus). “[T]here is no one human individual or group who can fully bear or manifest all that is involved in the image of God, so that there is a sense in which that image is collectively possessed. The image of God is, as it were, parceled out among the peoples of the earth. By looking at different individuals and groups we get glimpses of different aspects of the full image of God.”<sup>2</sup> Racial reconciliation must involve more than assimilation, valuing the differences as well as the similarities so that we adequately reflect God’s image corporately.

**II. The Fall.** The account and explication of the Fall and its effects teaches the following truth about culture: all aspects of culture -- as the product of sinful humans -- are tainted and warped by sin. *Implications:* Our ministries must examine, soberly but sensitively, every aspect of our cultures in light of Scripture to identify those attitudes, assumptions, or actions which have been warped by sin and which must be repudiated or redeemed. We also recognize both an individual and a corporate responsibility for sin.

A) God explains the impact of the Fall to Adam and Eve by stating “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.” (Gen 3:17) Though his announcement focuses specifically on issues of agriculture, the curse impacts cultural formation as well. Paul emphasizes the Fall's creation-wide extent when he writes, “For the creation was subjected to frustration . . . in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth.” (Rom. 8:20-22) No aspect of human interaction -- including cultural formation -- remains free of sin's effects. Scripture is unequivocal that all aspects of sinful aspects of creation will be judged and condemned. (Is. 2; Rev. 21:1)

B) Paul specifically expresses the negative effect of the Fall on human cultural patterns by instructing the Romans, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Rom. 12:2) He carefully distinguishes between God's holy will and the patterns of the world and assumes that Christians will be able to discern the difference.

C) The great intercessors of the Bible (e.g., Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah) recognized their corporate responsibility for a people group’s sins. (Ex. 33, Neh. 1, Daniel 9) Sin is not merely an individual transgression. Corporate transgression by a people and corporate responsibility are scriptural truths.

**III. The Cross.** The Cross teaches the following truths about culture: Christ has begun the processes of redeeming culture and he has removed the barriers between cultural and ethnic groups. *Implications:* Our ministries must submit all aspects of our individual cultures to Christ’s Lordship (through celebration, repudiation, or redemption, as appropriate) and must pursue racial reconciliation as a key component of our witness.

A) Through the cross, Christ reconciled all things to God, including the patterns, products and processes of cultural formation. Every level of existence falls under Christ's Lordship. (Col. 1:17-2) Reconciliation is possible because, as the *Logos*, Christ provides any meaning, truth and coherence found in a culture.<sup>3</sup> (John 1:1-4) Christians must therefore bring all areas of their life -- personal, cultural and social -- into conscious submission to Christ.

B) Through the Cross, Christ also reconciles all people to himself by destroying the wall of hostility (originally the Mosaic law, but, by implication all things which encourage division) between different ethnic, gender, social, and cultural groups, uniting them in a new people. (Gal. 3:28, Eph. 2:14-16, Col. 3:11) However, “When we say that

<sup>2</sup> Mouw, Richard J. *When the Kings Come Marching In*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), p. 47. Jesus, as the second Adam, obviously does display the full *imago dei* in a unique way.

<sup>3</sup> Sire, James W. *Discipleship of the Mind*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p 97.

Christ has abolished these distinctions, we mean not that they do not exist, but that they do not matter. They are still there, but they no longer create any barriers to fellowship.”<sup>4</sup> The cross gives the Church the ability to celebrate the unity of the Body of Christ amidst the diversity of our backgrounds.

C) Christ asserts that the unity of his people will confirm to the world that he was sent from the Father. (John 17:21) In the words of Francis Schaeffer, this is the “final apologetic.”

**IV. The Consummation.** The Consummation teaches the following truths about culture: God celebrates the diversity of cultures and their distinctives in his Kingdom and desires to redeem the riches of our ethnic cultures for his glory. *Implications:* Our ministries not only must mine the riches of our culture for God’s glory but also must celebrate our multiethnic unity and cultural diversity in anticipation of our community in the Kingdom.

A) When the Kingdom of God is fully established, we will continue to enjoy diversity of language and ethnicity. By choosing words which ethnic and cultural difference (e.g., languages, tribes, peoples) to describe the worshipping Body of Christ, John emphasizes that cultural distinctives continue to exist even in the consummated kingdom. (Rev. 7:9) In fact, the heterogeneity of the multitude reflects God’s glory – only he can draw such diversity into unity. The people of God come into the Kingdom of God “as nations with their respective ethnic identities.... This eschatological vision of the consummation of God’s purpose does not envision a homogenized humanity but human diversity in unity.”<sup>5</sup> Humanity includes discrete groups of peoples who have different cultural, linguistic and social characteristics -- even at the consummation of the Church.<sup>6</sup> We must treasure our cultural distinctives as an integral part of true reconciliation.

B) Not only people, but cultural processes -- the wealth of the nations/peoples -- will be brought into the Kingdom. Isaiah envisions the New Jerusalem filled with foreign cultural objects: camels of Midian, gold and incense from Sheba, ships from Tarshish. (Is. 60:6-9) In his vision, Isaiah stresses the importance of each culture’s contribution to the richness and beauty of the Kingdom of God. (Is. 60:10, 11) Almost everything identified by Isaiah originates within a particular pagan culture or Gentile ethnic group. In the New Jerusalem he describes everything brought into the city serves a singular purpose: the worship of God. “When Isaiah looks to the fulfillment of God’s promises, he envisions a community into which technological artifacts, political rulers, and people from many nations are gathered.... God will redeem and transform that which is presently perverted and distorted by human disobedience to his will.”<sup>7</sup> John ratifies Isaiah’s vision in his own description of the Kingdom. (Rev. 21:24, 26, 27)

### **The Nature of Mission**

The missionary experiences and practices of the early Church confirm that God values ethnic-specific, culturally-sensitive ministry. The early Church reduced barriers to hearing the gospel, contextualized the medium of its message, targeted specific people groups, and chose to work in partnership across ethnic and cultural lines. In God’s economy both multiethnic fellowship and ethnic-specific fellowships have a role in proclaiming and establishing the Kingdom of God.

**I. Lowering Barriers.** The early Church recognized the importance of removing or reducing cultural barriers which prevented others from hearing or accepting the gospel (e.g., circumcision, observation of Jewish festivals, etc.) (Gal. 1; Rom. 15:5-6) Because Christianity arose from within Jewish culture, the early church struggled with the cultural issues seemingly embedded within the Gospel. (Essentially, the Judaizers argued that you had to be Jewish to be Christian.) The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) recognized that unnecessary Jewish cultural conformity created barriers which wrongfully inhibited, and possibly prevented, people from

<sup>4</sup> Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Galatians*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Ng, John L. “Cultural Pluralism and Ministry Models in the Chinese Community.” Unpublished dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology, Fuller Seminary, January, 1985. p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, Leon. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Revelation of St. John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), p. 244.

<sup>7</sup> Mouw, p xv, xvi.

accepting the Gospel. It emphasized that Gentiles should retain their ethnic identity and cultural integrity. The council did ask, however, Gentile Christians to graciously abandon the ceremonial and cultural practices which would unnecessarily offend Jewish believers. The decision implies that not all cultural patterns will successfully make the transition into the Kingdom.

*Implications:* Our ministries must identify those non-Scriptural cultural assumptions which shape our gospel and methodology and eliminate (or mitigate) those which would inhibit or prevent people from accepting the gospel. We also must recognize that conversion may entail the repudiation of dearly-held cultural attitudes and expressions for both the majority and minority.

**II. Contextualization.** The early Church valued cultural diversity by contextualizing the medium of their message. Empowering the disciples to reach across cultures and ethnicities, the Holy Spirit grants the believers the experience of glossolalia. (Acts 2) The disciples speak in the native, “heart languages,” of their audience (Acts 2:6, 8, 11) expressing the multi-ethnic nature of the Kingdom. However, the unifying power of the Spirit does not erase the unique, identifiable, and discrete elements of culture. “In Acts 2, having been visited by the Holy Spirit, the disciples speak not one language that all can understand but a variety of languages that each respective ethnic group can understand. Confusion is eliminated and communication is made effective, but the diversity of linguistic groups remains.”<sup>8</sup> In a less supernatural context, Paul similarly contextualizes the medium of his message. When speaking to Jews, he refers to biblical history, but when speaking to Gentiles, he refers to natural revelation. (Compare Acts 13:14-41 with Acts 17:16-31) He also recognizes that the different ethnic and cultural groups have different “roadblocks” to understanding the gospel. (1 Cor. 1:23)

*Implications:* Our ministries must present the Gospel in the “heart language” and native tongue of our audiences, taking into account the unique roadblocks to communicating and understanding the gospel inherent in the cultures of the speaker and listener.

**III. Targeting Groups.** The early church commissioned different people to reach different ethnic groups. Even though Paul successfully speaks to both Jewish and Gentile cultures, he intentionally directs his ministry to the Gentiles. Peter, on the other hand, focuses his ministry to the Jews even though he was the first apostle to convert a Gentile. The early church clearly affirms this distinction between their ministries. (Gal. 2:7-9) Capitalizing upon their different backgrounds and training, the Holy Spirit called Peter and Paul to different people groups. Both apostles long to see both groups come to Christ, and both apostles minister successfully in either group. They recognize, however, that their calling and gifting leads them to different communities as their primary focus of ministry.

*Implications:* Our ministries may choose to target a specific people group as a reflection of God’s calling, gifting, and provision of sovereign foundations (e.g., culture of birth, language skill, cultural familiarity, training, etc.)

**IV. Multiethnic Partnerships.** The early Church pursued ethnic-specific strategies while valuing the multiethnic reality of the Kingdom. During New Testament times, different synagogues existed which represented different language, ethnic, and trade groups.<sup>9</sup> (Acts 6:9) “The pattern of house churches within the early Christian community tended to preserve this cultural diversity as believers gathered to worship in already de facto segregated neighborhoods

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<sup>8</sup> Stuckey, Steve. "Multi-Ethnicity and Genesis 11". Unpublished paper, drafted September 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Hopler, Thomas. *A World of Difference*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 81.

and synagogues.”<sup>10</sup> This same pattern was repeated in Antioch, one of the first multi-cultural outposts of the Church. The leaders of the Antiochene church represent different ethnic backgrounds (Acts 13:1): Simeon, who was called Niger (black); Lucius (Greek), and Manaen (Jewish). They probably represented different house churches which formed around the specific language and cultural groups.<sup>11</sup> Though they preserved the ethnic and cultural character of their individual congregations, the Antiochene church demonstrated their unity by working together in mission and discipleship through a larger body that was multi-ethnic.

*Implications:* Our ministries may pursue ethnic-specific ministries without necessarily denying the multiethnic nature of the Kingdom by working in partnership with each other.

### **Conclusions**

Salvation history challenges us to take cultural diversity seriously: celebrating the God-given truths inherent in each culture, repudiating those areas which have been warped by sin, acknowledging the Lordship of Christ through repentance and redemptive stewardship, and by anticipating the diverse, yet unified, worship of all of God’s peoples in the consummated Kingdom of God.

Our multiethnic and ethnic specific ministries each have unique roles in each of these endeavors. If ethnic-specific fellowships help us identify the God-given beauty and truths inherent in any specific culture, multiethnic fellowships celebrate the diversity of cultures. Multiethnic fellowships help us identify the sins which frustrate the unity that God intends between cultures; ethnic-specific fellowships enable us to focus on the inherent sins within a culture. If ethnic-specific fellowships are best able to work at redeeming sinful aspects of any one culture, multiethnic fellowships remind us that no single culture accurately reflects God’s image.

Biblical multiethnicity must involve both racial reconciliation and ethnic identity formation. Racial reconciliation is merely assimilation without the celebration of our cultural distinctives. Reconciliation requires ethnic identity formation so that both parties recognize the gifts they bring (and others have), as well as the sins they (and others) bear. Ethnic identity formation needs the balance of racial reconciliation, which provides cross-cultural critique and insight into ways that a homogenous group’s reading of Scripture and culture may be culturally biased. Ethnic identity formation similarly requires racial reconciliation because no single culture adequately reflects God’s image. These two values work together to create truly biblical multiethnicity.

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<sup>10</sup> Hopley, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Hopley, p. 109.