

The Biblical Basis for Multiethnic Churches and Ministry

Ken L. Davis

Project Jerusalem Director, Baptist Bible Seminary

North America is populated by a wondrous variety of people, nearly all of whom are immigrants. And in recent decades more and diverse kinds of immigrants have arrived on our shores. The notion that America is a melting pot for all the world's ethnic groups has been revealed to be a myth. A better analogy is to see our nation as a giant salad bowl or stew pot in which each cultural component retains its own integrity and identity, yet contributes to the overall national flavor.

Immigration and rising birth rates have brought tremendous change to American society. America's total ethnic population now numbers over 110 million.¹ The nation's streets teem with over 500 ethnic groups speaking more than 630 languages and dialects.² Multiculturalism in America is now an established fact.³ Over the next fifty years, the white population is projected to decrease by 30 percent, while other ethnic groups will increase 92 percent. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2042 ethnic "people of color" will collectively be in a majority in our land. With no one ethnic group in a majority, whites will be the largest minority in a nation of minorities. By mid-century our minority population—everyone except for non-Hispanic, single-race whites—is projected to be 235.7 million out of a total U.S. population of 439 million. By 2050, the Hispanic population is projected to nearly triple to 132.8

¹ 2008 U.S. Census Bureau updates to actual 2000 census data reveal that our total ethnic population now include an estimated 46.7 million Hispanics, 41.1 million African Americans, , 15.5 million Asian Americans, 4.9 million Native Americans and Alaskan Natives, 1.1 million Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, and 5.2 million Americans who count themselves as "multiracial." This actually adds up to *114.5 million ethnic Americans which is 37.4% of our estimated 2008 population of 306 million!* This means that roughly one third of American residents are "minority" or "people of color." To put this in perspective, there are more minorities in this country than there were people in the U.S.A. in 1910. In fact minority population in the U.S. is larger than the total population of all but 11 countries.

² Oscar I. Romo, *American Mosaic: Church Planting in Ethnic America* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press: 1993), 44.

³ This *fact* of demographic multiculturalism must be carefully distinguished from the relativistic *ideology* that goes by the same name and is seeking to transform America's educational and political institutions. Conservative Christians can accept the first while rejecting the second.

million (from 15% to 30% of our population). Our black population will have increased to 65.7 million (from 14% to 15% of our people); Asian-American population to 40.6 million (from 5.1% to 9.2%); Native Americans and Alaska Natives to 8.6 million (from 1.6% to 2%); and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders more than doubled to 2.6 million. By 2050, the number of people who identify themselves as being of two or more “races” is projected to more than triple, from 5.2 million to 16.2 million.⁴ According to some projections, 21% of Americans will be claiming mixed ancestry by midcentury.⁵ Truly, we are a nation that is “browning.”⁶

Consequently, in the 21st Century the United States will need a variety of multicultural interracial churches. Missiologist Charles Chaney observes, “America will not be won to Christ by establishing more churches like the majority we now have.”⁷ In an increasingly multiethnic and urban society it will take new multiethnic churches to reach the full spectrum of peoples a Sovereign God has brought to our continent. The twenty-first century holds great promise and exciting potential for congregations that are intentionally intercultural. The most recent research reveals that though multiethnic congregations are still “few and far between,” their numbers are steadily growing. A pioneering nationwide study by a team led by Michael Emerson, a sociologist at Rice University, has found that ethnically mixed churches number

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau News Release, 8/14/2008, “An Older and More Diverse Nation by Midcentury.” Accessed on 8/26/08 at <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>. Other Census releases (such as 8/09/07) estimate more than 300 counties are now “majority-minority.” That is, nearly one in every 10 of the nation’s 3,141 counties has a population that is more than 50% minority. Los Angeles County, Calif., for example, has the largest minority population with 7 million or 71% of its total. Their ethnic population is actually higher than the total population of 38 states! Majority-minority status is a growing reality in some states as well. For example, California’s population is now predominately “minority” – Hispanics, African Americans, Asians and “mixed” groups now comprise over 50% of the state’s population. This is also a currently true in Arizona, New Mexico, Hawaii and the District of Columbia. Texas will be predominately minority by 2010.

⁵ Martin Kasindorf and Haya El Nasser, “Impact of Census’ Race Data Debated,” USA Today, 13 March, 2001.

⁶ The 2000 Census for the first time gave people the opportunity to choose more than one race to describe themselves, and 2.4% of the country’s 281.4 million citizens did so. Multiracial or mixed race Americans currently number at least 6.8 million (not all choose to identify as such to census workers). As this “blending of America” continues, racial lines may blur until the “melting pot” becomes a harmonious “we-are-the-world” reality. The U.S. is mestizing! That is to say, we are a “browning” nation which is shifting rapidly toward being a polyglot of brown, yellow, black, white and mestizo (mixed).

⁷ Cited in *A Guide for Planting Multicultural Churches* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1999), 6.

five and a half percent of Christian bodies.⁸ The cutting edge for mission and church growth in this century will no doubt be a movement toward more multiracial assemblies. A growing body of literature is now available to convince church leaders and missionaries of the biblical imperative⁹ and the many practical reasons¹⁰ for establishing multiethnic churches. Perhaps the most convincing rationale for pursuing

⁸ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: the Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 74. These researchers define a “mixed” congregation as one in which no one racial group is 80% or more of the congregation. Actually Emerson’s team calculated that overall just 7.5% of America’s 300,000 *religious* congregations are racially mixed. But the percentage for *Christian* bodies drops to 5.5%. Overall, the study found 7% of Protestant congregations nationally are “mixed.” Integrated Protestant churches tend to be those that are theologically conservative and nondenominational. Surprisingly, among mainline denominational churches, only 2 to 3% are mixed on average. Furthermore these researchers calculate that half of America’s racially mixed churches are *mixed only temporarily* as they transition from one group to another (2003, 2). For specific examples and descriptions of the growing number of multiracial churches in America, see DeYoung et al. (71-96); also Charles R. Foster and Theodore Brelsford, *We Are the Church: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1996); Charles R. Foster, *Embracing Diversity* (Alban Institute, 1997); Michael Pocock & Joseph Henriques, *Cultural Change & Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002); George Yancey, *One Body, One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Kenneth Davis, “Multicultural Church Planting Models” in *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* 7:1 (Spring 2003): 114-127; Tony Matthews, *There’s More Than One Color in the Pew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003); David A. Anderson, *Multicultural Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004); Michael O. Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006); Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007) .

⁹ For other authors discussing the biblical /theological basis for both racial reconciliation and the need for multiethnic churches see Stephen A. Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); Norman Peart, *Separate No More* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); DeYoung et al. (2003, 9-37); and DeYmaz (2007, 3-37). For building a theology of race/ethnicity, see Kenneth Davis, “Building a Biblical Theology of Ethnicity for Global Mission” in *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* 7.2 (Fall 2003): 91-126; and J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). To understand the biblical rationale for reaching unreached ethnic groups (or *ethne* = peoples = “nations”) see John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993, 167-218). Piper (1993) best summarizes God’s overarching missiological purpose: “God’s great goal in all history is to uphold and display the glory of His name for the enjoyment of His people from all the nations.”

¹⁰ For solid current discussions of both the demographic and sociological rationale for multicultural churches see George Yancey, *Beyond Black and White: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation* (1996); Stephen Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet* (1998); Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Establishing a Multiethnic Church* (1999); Yancey, *One Body* (2003); and Emerson, *People of the Dream* (2006). Emerson, DeYoung et al. (2003, 99-127) give one of the better recent summaries of the rationale for homogenous churches, citing historical and present-day arguments commonly used by Asian Americans, Native Americans, African Americans and white church leaders for racially separate churches. In response, they present a solid case for multiracial churches, citing numerous pragmatic, theological, cultural and sociological reasons (128-144). Most of the pragmatic reasons for building multicultural churches can be boiled down to one basic premise: culturally and racially mixed congregations make a stronger statement to a watching world about the power of the Gospel. For other arguments for maintaining racial boundaries in congregational life/worship, see Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980 rev); C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979); and Lincoln (1999, xxiv). By contrast, others see homogenous churches as contributing to the “racialization” of society. See Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race* (New York, NY: Oxford Press,

multicultural congregations is the premise that these bodies “can play an important role in reducing racial division and inequality” in our land and therefore should be, when possible, a worthy goal for Christians to pursue.¹¹

Before we seek to develop a multiethnic church or ministry, however, it is vital that we remind ourselves of the biblical imperative for multiethnic ministry. It is essential that our outreach motivation, strategy plans and ministry implementation be thoroughly grounded on the Word of God and not driven by demographics, pragmatism or expediency. The staggering diversity of our postmodern world will overwhelm us unless we are fortified by a careful understanding of God’s plan and purpose for ethnic diversity.

Old Testament Foundations

The foundation for multiethnic ministry and church planting can legitimately begin where the Scriptures begin. Beginning with the Genesis accounts of creation, the Old Testament progressively reveals a God who loves and values both unity and diversity. Five theological principles emerge from a careful study of the older testament.¹²

2000); René Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 6:1 (January, 1982); and Bruce W. Fong, *Racial Equality in the Church: A Critique of the Homogeneous Unit Principle in Light of a Practical Theology Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996).

¹¹ DeYoung et al (2003, 3). The release of *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race* (Emerson and Smith 2000), raised lots of concern in the evangelical Christian community showing how theology, history, and the very structure of religious organizations often combine in powerful ways to divide American Christians along racial lines. This book also demonstrated how the consequent separate congregations have many negative consequences perpetrating division and inequality. The more recent publication of *United By Faith: The Multiracial Congregation As An Answer To The Problem of Race* (DeYoung et al. 2003), is meant to show that multiracial congregations can have the opposite effect. The book is based on the multiethnic team of authors’ three years of intensive research, funded by Lilly Endowment, studying both multiracial and unracial congregations. The “Congregational Project,” based at Rice University, is believed to be the first large study focusing on racial and ethnic diversity within Christian houses of worship. The project began with a telephone survey of 2,500 Americans about their congregations. Nearly 500 of these churches, selected at random, were sent mail surveys. Researchers then visited 30 churches in four metro areas – Houston, Los Angeles and unnamed cities in the Midwest and Northeast. Of these visited the team concluded only 18 of these were truly “multiracial

¹² For a fuller discussion of the progressive unveiling of a theology of ethnicity in the OT, see the author’s article,

First, ***the human race is one***. All the diverse peoples of earth belong to one family. God’s singular act of creating male and female progenitors of all peoples is foundational to our theology (Gen. 1-2). Jehovah God is the ***God of Creation***. That the “nations” (or “peoples”) are all part of created humanity is confirmed by the ancient song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32: “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples” (32:8).¹³ God’s rule over the nations,¹⁴ a reality amply affirmed in the OT, is simply a function of the fact that he created them in the first place. Since He is the creator of humankind we are all His offspring. Since we are His offspring by creation, every human being is our brother and sister. Furthermore, we are all made in His divine image. Being equally created by Him and like Him, we are equal in His sight in worth and dignity, and thus have an equal right to respect and justice. If God has made us all from one set of original parents (see Acts 17:26 cf. also Rom. 2:29-30), then no individual or “race” may consider itself above others. This truth of unified origin should restrain the temptation to boast in ethnic uniqueness as well as keep us from ethnocentrism and racism, both, properly seen, forms of idolatry – lifting ourselves or our ethnic group above the true God.¹⁵

From the early Genesis record we see a second and balancing theological principle emerge: ***the diversification of peoples is good***. The whole creation witnesses to the fact that God enjoys diversity, and

“Building a Biblical Theology of Ethnicity for Global Mission,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, vol.7, no. 2, (Fall 2003): 91-126.

¹³ Paul later draws from the language of this very OT text when he speaks as a Jew to Gentiles in an evangelistic context at Mars Hill in Athens: “From one man he made every nation [*ethnos*=people group] of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26). In this classic text and the verses that follow, it is noteworthy, Paul takes for granted the diversity of nations within the unity of humanity and attributes it to the Creator and his world-governing providence.

¹⁴ In this paper, I use the term “nations” in a broad people-group sense, as commonly used in the OT, not in the more restricted sense of “nation-state” that developed in post-Reformation Europe. For a good discussion of ancient Near Eastern and biblical concepts of nationhood in relation to ethnicity, language, kinship, territory, etc., see Daniel Block, “Nations/Nationality,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. William A. VanGemeren (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996).

¹⁵ Both the OT biblical understanding of creation in the image of God and the NT gospel radically undermine any racist assumptions. For a fine biblical discussion of this issue see J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

different ethnic groups are but one expression of this divine joy. He is the *God of Variety*. His initial command was clear: “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth” (Gen. 1:28). The inference was to “spread out and diversify.” From the very beginning, God intended for us to be different. God wanted mankind to be a variety of cultures with different foods, different music, different clothing, different languages and customs. People group distinctives are part of the kaleidoscopic diversity of creation at the human level, analogous to the wonderful biodiversity found at every other level of God’s creation. Significantly, in the biblical record both God’s creational diversity and post-flood dispersion of peoples are viewed as “good” not evil. God’s purpose is that a plurality of peoples would populate the planet. He never intended people to be monochrome and uniform, either as individuals or groups. The human race is one, yet many—which demonstrates that *God loves both unity and diversity*. Modern-day ethnic peoples have all sprung from the three sons of Noah, divinely dispersed for His purposes after the flood. Thus, human differences, languages—even ethnic peoples—are not to be viewed as the result of man’s sin or God’s judgment. Ethnic identity is rooted in God’s creative design and part of His original purpose. None of the various ethnic groups and “races” of mankind are products of the mark of Cain, or the curse of Ham, or the dispersion of Babel.¹⁶ Diversity is not a response to an accident of history. The diversity of the “nations” (ethnic peoples) is God’s idea. This truth is clearly taught in the OT record (Ps. 86:9 “*all the nations you*

¹⁶ The Tower of Babel narrative has often been misunderstood and given a negative interpretation. Some have inferred from it that human differences of language and culture are the result of man’s sin and God’s subsequent judgment. A better way of interpreting the Babel incident is to see the people of the earth attempting to *counteract* what they correctly understood to be God’s purpose in diversifying and scattering the human race. From the beginning God had been in the process of separating people from one another in order to implement His desire that man should “be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth...” (Gen. 1:28). Thus, the scattering of Genesis 11 is not to be seen as a *curse* (something to be reversed in redemption or in the age to come) but simply a *continuation* on God’s creative intent. True, God was judging human pride and man’s self-made unity, but the judgment at Babel is not to be seen solely as punishment. In God’s act of scattering humanity, He was also fulfilling His original intention for mankind. The act was preventative as much as punitive. It was designed to prove to earth’s peoples that they could not frustrate His plan for human diversity and pluralism. Note also that the diversifying of languages is reported in the “Table of Nations” (in Gen 10:5, 20, 31 specifically) *before* the Tower of Babel. Gentile peoples were being “separated” or scattered and spread out across the earth “according to their languages.” Genesis 10 lists 70 different people groups that were in existence by that time. And from these 70 “nations” God shoes one man Abram to build a nation to bless all nations.

have made”) and later confirmed in the New Testament (again Acts 17:26 is a key text: “*he made every nation [ethos]* ”).¹⁷ The origin of the peoples is not in spite of but because of God’s will and plan.

A third principle is first revealed in the OT record: ***the destiny of “nations” is in God’s sovereign control.*** Peoples and kingdoms rise and fall under His providence. He is the ***God of History***. He is the supreme mover on the stage of international history. Deuteronomy 32:8 clearly states the “when the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples.” The living God not only made every “nation” from one man, and made each unique and different, but He also “determined the times set for them, and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26; cf. also Deut. 2:9-12, 19-23¹⁸). That is, both the histories and locations of the ethnic nations are in the hand of God (see also Is. 40:15ff). Two conclusions can be drawn from this principle. First, it is clear that, in the long view, no people are a permanent entity. The ethnic “nations” begin, grow, flourish, decline and die like humans. Thus to idolatrously absolutize one’s own nation or group (as is often done in nationalism gone awry) is foolhardy. Second, all nations stand accountable and under God’s judgment.¹⁹ God has

¹⁷ Scripture suggests at least two reasons why God desires ethnic diversity. First, no one ethnic group could ever adequately express the glory of Almighty God. God is infinite, and in order to mirror his infinity, all kinds of cultures and peoples are needed. Each is capable of illuminating one or more of the attributes of God. None can express all that God wants to be in the world. Only in an immense and grand variety could we begin to capture the character, grace and glory of God. God is seen and understood better through a multiplicity of cultures than He could be through a monoethnic humanity. Put another way, He cannot adequately be revealed in a creation of similarities. The beauty of a diamond consists in the number of facets it has. The greater number of facets, the greater the glory of the individual diamond. Likewise ethnic diversity is meant to express the full glory of God in different ways. Second, belonging to an ethnic group is for people’s well being. Authentic living is only found in corporate connectedness. God believes in the value of groups—family, clan, tribe, and ethnic peoples. The need to belong to a group is deeply ingrained in our human nature as created by God. The Old Testament shows that God values cultural/ethnic heritage and identity because they bring us a sense of belonging and security in a sin-cursed, fragmented world. The meaning and purpose of human life is best worked out in the relational context of collectivities.

¹⁸ Three times in Deuteronomy 2 (vv. 5, 9, and 19), Jehovah directly says he had given land to non-Israelite people. Significantly he uses the same vocabulary as is characteristically used of his land gift to Israel. Furthermore, the broader passage (2:10-12, 20-23) makes it clear that the process of multinational migration and conquest had also been under Jehovah’s sovereign control. The same language is used for Israel’s settlement in the land God had given them (see Deut. 2:12). As the prophet Amos (9:7) later warns Israel, they must not claim “*we belong to Jehovah*” as if *no other* nation mattered to God. He had been active in the histories of other nations as well as theirs!

¹⁹ For Westerners who have absorbed a predominately individualistic way of thinking about life and our relationship to God, it may be difficult to understand that God can and does deal with nations as wholes. Yet the Scriptures unquestionably affirm this reality. It is illustrated repeatedly in the long history of the OT from the book of Exodus onward. For example, the battle between Jehovah and Pharaoh is not just between God and one recalcitrant individual; the whole nation of Egypt is implicated in the sin of oppression against the Israelites and suffers

sovereign moral purposes in dealing with nations/peoples. For example, repentance can save a nation from God's impending judgment (Jer. 18:7-10; Jonah 3), and one nation can be used of God to punish another for its sin. This is why God permitted Israel to destroy the Canaanites (see Deut. 9:4, 5) and later allowed the Assyrians and Babylonians to drive out the Israelites as punishment for their sin. Yet His use of a nation to fulfill His purposes does not mean their moral superiority.

A fourth theological principle is seen first in Genesis and then progressively revealed in other Old Testament texts: ***God's purpose is to bless all the nations redemptively.*** As the ***God of Redemption*** He intends to bring the peoples the gift of His salvation. From the very beginning this salvific plan of God had the central figure of the "Seed" who was to come in the person of the Man of Promise (Gen. 3:15; 9:27; 12:1-3, etc.). To Abraham, the man of faith, God unveiled a global plan to reach all ethnicities: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). Through this one man who left his people, all peoples on earth were to be blessed with the gift of the Messiah.²⁰ The Old Testament reveals a merciful and

accordingly. The OT narrative goes on to show how successive nations either set themselves against Jehovah and his people (e.g., the Moabites, Amorites, and Amalekites) or become so wicked that they must be destroyed in the execution of God's judgment (the Canaanite nations) – see Deut. 9:4-6. The prophets in their oracles against the nations demonstrate the conviction that the nations (peoples) stand under the imminent judgment of God for a variety of reasons (see Isa. 24:5-6, etc). Jehovah can even use Israel as an agent of judgment on the nations; he could also equally use the other nations as agents of judgment upon Israel (see Lev. 18:24-28; 26:17-33; Deut. 4:25-27; 28:25, 49-52; 20:25-28).

²⁰ In Genesis 12, we see God's plan is to *bless* the nations. Three times he promises blessing—a key to understanding this grand OT missions text. Abraham was blessed by Jehovah (the passive verb stresses it was a matter of divine grace not human works) to *be* a blessing to the nations (or earth's "families"). This man and his descendants were to be missionaries and channels of the truth to all the other surrounding nations (or ethnic peoples). They were to be blessed in this man's "*seed*." In fact, the "seed" of the woman (Gen.3:15), the seed of Shem in whose tents God would come to "tabernacle" or "dwell" (Gen. 9:27), and the "seed" of Abraham formed one collective whole. The recipients of this Messianic blessing initially are listed in Genesis 10—the seventy nations listed as all the families of the earth. That this is good news indeed for all earth's peoples is confirmed by later NT revelation: Romans 4:13 and Galatians 3:8. Note too that this promise of universal blessing to the families of the earth is so important it is essentially repeated in Genesis on four other occasions (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:18; 28:14) lest God's people should forget their calling. Significantly, in Gen. 12:3 and 28:14, the Hebrew phrase for "all the families" (*kol mishpehot*) represents "smaller clan-like societies within the main group or nation" [according to Gerhard Kittel, ed., Geoffrey Bromily, trans. *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 365]. It is roughly equivalent to the Greek *phylai* ("tribes") and so is used in the Greek OT translation of Gen 12:3. Thus, the blessings of Abraham are intended by God to extend down to fairly small groupings of peoples. Piper (*Let the Nations Be Glad*, 2003, pg. 167-169), comparing the Hebrew words found in all five Genesis texts with their NT counterparts (see texts above) and the equivalent Greek terms used in both the Septuagint and NT (*panta ta ethne*, etc.), concludes that "God's purpose for the world is that the blessings of Abraham, namely, salvation achieved through Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, would reach to all the ethnic peoples of the world."

compassionate God²¹ who is on mission to the nations. This is clearly seen in the Psalms and in Isaiah. This God-on-mission, therefore, has chosen and commissioned two Servants to take His message of salvation to earth's ethnic peoples: His servant Israel and His servant Messiah (Is. 42-54). *Israel's vocation*, her role in the divine purpose, was to represent and mediate His mercy and grace to the peoples. As the recipient of divine blessings, the Hebrew nation was to exalt God in its life and worship, attracting individuals from among the nations, inviting and incorporating them into the covenant family.²² *Messiah's role* was to be Yahweh's Sent-one, the Suffering Servant, offering his life as a sacrifice for the peoples, satisfying the plan of the Father (Is. 53; Ps. 22). This hope of salvation is summed up in the prophets as the "desired [One] of all nations" (Haggai 2:7).²³

²¹ Just as all nations (peoples) stand under the judgment of God, so the OT text makes clear that they are recipients of the mercy of God. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion," says Jehovah in his self-revelation to Moses (Ex. 33:19). This principle operates not only on behalf of Israel; any people group could benefit from it. One of the clearest OT illustrations of God's impartiality in his dealings with mankind is given by Jeremiah, after visiting a potter's house (see Jer. 18:1-4). The abiding lesson, articulated by the Lord himself (18:5-10): any nation (people) that repents in the face of God's impending judgment will be spared that doom and can become a [clay] vessel restored and shaped by God into a good vessel to fulfill his purposes. This thread—that he is a "gracious and compassionate God" who "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked"—runs through numerous OT texts: see for example, Genesis 18, Exodus 32-34, Psalm 103:6-10; and Ezekiel 18.

²² The OT is not content to leave the nations/peoples in a passive role of merely being spectators of all God was doing in/for Israel. They were to come to see that *they* were to be the beneficiaries of Israel's ultimate blessing. This is seen in numerous OT texts. Seeing God's hand of blessing upon them through Israel, the nations were invited to join in applause to Jehovah (Psalm 47:1-2) and to praise Him for his salvation showered upon all nations (Ps. 67:1-7). In both these psalms, God's renewed blessing on Israel is seen as "*the firstfruits of God's wider harvest among all nations on earth*" (Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP: 2006], 477. For his fine discussion of these two psalms, see pg. 474-8). Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., [in *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000)], builds a strong case from numerous OT texts that Israel had a duty to *actively* take the message of YHWH's salvation to the nations and call them to trust in God's promised Seed. He interprets the OT to imply *an actual missionary mandate* that ought to have resulted in Israel's engaging in centrifugal missions to the nations. Among others, C. J. H. Wright (2006, 502ff) is not convinced, believing there is "no clear mandate in God's revelation to Israel over the centuries for them to undertake 'missions,' in our sense of the word, to the nations." Wright does agree, however, that Jonah is an exception to this principle (see footnote 23 below for the missiological significance of the prophet Jonah).

²³ Other OT prophets reveal Jehovah's desire to redeem all earth's people groups. One of the most vivid OT confirmations and illustrations of God's saving purpose for the nations is found in the Book of Jonah. Significantly God commissioned the prophet to preach to the pagan city of Nineveh. He tried to run away because he knew God would be gracious to the people and forgive them. The Jews also had a long history of hating the idolatrous and wicked Assyrians (see the book of Nahum). The point of the book is not the fish. It's more about missions and ethnocentrism and racism. The lesson for all: be merciful like God, not miserly like Jonah! As Christopher J. H. Wright (2006, 461) points out, the real missional challenge of the book of Jonah lies in its portrayal of God, not the prophet: "If Jonah is intended to represent Israel, as seems likely, then the book issues a strong challenge to Israel regarding *their* attitude to the nations (even enemy nations that prophets placed under God's declared judgment), and

Finally, the OT first reveals that *God's passionate desire and purpose is to be worshipped and glorified by all people groups*. Above all else, He is the *God of Glory*. The Old Testament is filled with optimistic and hopeful expectations that Jehovah God will one day be worshipped by people from all the nations of the world. Significantly, this hope is repeatedly expressed in ethnic people group terminology (families, tribes, nations, peoples). God's intent in blessing the nations is to lead the nations to both obedience and worship.²⁴ This long-anticipated and certain hope of the nations is expressed in several ways in the Old Testament. There are outright *promises* that the nations will one-day worship the true God,²⁵ confident *prayers* that God would be praised and honored among the nations,²⁶ and even striking *exhortations* to the people of God to declare His glory among the nations.²⁷ The much-anticipated praise of the nations for Israel's God is said to occur for numerous reasons.²⁸ This Old Testament expectation is premised on the reality that God is forever passionate for his own glory. Over and over God reveals that He is zealous to maintain his name and fame among the nations; His glory He will not give to another (Is. 48:9-11). The Old Testament makes clear that God's ultimate goal is to uphold and display the glory of His name to all peoples. He created all peoples for His glory (Is. 43:6-7). He called Israel and did numerous

regarding their understanding of *God's* attitude to the nations. The concluding open-ended question of the book is an enduring, haunting rebuke to our tendency to foist our own ethnocentric prejudice on to the Almighty.”

²⁴ C. J. H. Wright (478) points out: “*How* the nations will be brought to such worship and obedience to YHWH the God of Israel remains, within the Old Testament era, a mystery (as Paul acknowledged). But *that the* nations will one day bring all their worship to the one true and living God is left in no doubt. The sheer volume of texts that envision it is quite remarkable.”

²⁵ See Ps. 2:8; 45:17; 47:9; 86:9; 102:15,22; Is. 49:6; 51:5; 52:10; 52:15; 55:5; 56:7; 60:3; 66:18-19, etc.

²⁶ See Ps. 67:1-5; 72:11, 17, etc.

²⁷ See Ps. 9:11; 96:3; 105:1; Is. 12:4, etc.

²⁸ The psalms give at least four reasons for the nations in the future to break forth in almost universal praise and worship. Their response will be for: 1) *the mighty acts of God*--see Ps. 66:3-4,8; 68:30-32; 86: 8-10; 96:1-3; 138:4-5; 2) *God's sovereign and cosmic rule*--see Ps. 2:10-11; 22: 27-28; 67, etc.; 3) *God's restoration of earthly Zion* (which will ultimately be fulfilled in Christ's messianic reign over the world and be for the nations' benefit)—Ps. 102:13-22; and 4) simply because *He is worthy of the praise of the whole universe*—Ps. 47, 100, 117, 145, 148, etc. George Peters [A *Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), 115-16], claims there are more than 175 references in the Psalms of a universalistic note relating to the nations, many of them bringing the hope of salvation to the nations. This breath-taking missiological hope for the nations, a theme so evident in numerous psalms, has led Creighton Marlowe [“The Music of Missions: Themes of Cross-Cultural Outreach in Psalms.” In *Missiology* 26/4 (1998), 452)] to appropriately call the psalms the “music of missions.”

acts of power through her for His glory.²⁹ In fact, God's plan is to *fill* the earth with the *knowledge of his glory* (Hab. 2:14).

Thus, even without the fuller and completed revelation of the New Testament, we can boldly assert that God has always been on mission to bring glory to Himself. *The Lord Himself is the missionary* who ultimately gathers and rescues, not simply the dispersed of Israel, but also people from all nations, *so that they may see his glory*.

The Four Gospels

Against this Old Testament backdrop of God's purpose and plan for the ethnic peoples of the world, the Gospel writers present the Promised Messiah as the One passionate about fulfilling His Father's mission. The four Gospels clearly display the message and ministry of Christ as inclusive of all ethnic "nations." This is seen first in the birth narratives. Both Luke and Matthew's accounts of Christ's humble birth foreshadow and allude to the inclusion of Gentiles (*ethnos* = "peoples") in God's salvation story. Matthew narrates the story of rich magi from Asia who come to Bethlehem to pay respects to the infant Jesus and offer Him gifts; this gospel writer also tells of Jesus' family traveling by night to Egypt in Africa to secure the safety of their son from the murderous threats of Herod. Luke, for his part, is careful to record that Jesus' birth was at the time of Caesar Augustus sitting on the Roman throne. He also notes the prayer of Simeon in Jerusalem who foretells that this baby will be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of Your people Israel (Lk. 2:30-32). All of these incidents were recorded to position the birth of Jesus in the context of the broader Gentile world and to help readers see that even at Christ's birth He had an outsider status and attracted the attention of those who felt excluded by the Jews.

The Gospel writers also seem to highlight that Jesus had roots and was raised in "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt 4:15-16 cf. Isa. 9:1). Jesus prepared for His public ministry by calling a "congregation" of disciples that was a radically inclusive fellowship. He is seen as intentionally broadening His social circle

²⁹ Ex. 14:4; Ps. 106:7-8; Jer. 13:11; Ezek. 20:14; 36:22-23, 32; I Sam. 12:20-22; II Sam. 7:23; I King 19:34.

(“table fellowship”) to include sinners, tax collectors, outcasts and other untouchables, people often excluded by the Jewish religious authorities of His day. Furthermore, the Gospels record numerous occasions when Jesus stepped outside His own ethnic group and ministered to Gentile peoples and in Gentile regions. Some examples of our Lord’s intentional encounters with non-Jews: a Roman Centurion (Matt. 8: 5-13); a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-55); a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15:21-28); the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-38) and his later witness to the entire Samaritan village (4:39-42); and Greeks at Jerusalem (John 12:20-24, 32).³⁰ In these passages we find that Jesus often exploited encounters with Gentiles and Samaritans to help His disciples think in cross cultural terms and to develop an “all peoples” perspective. In all this He was modeling what He intended for His future Church to be.

One of the most illuminating encounters Jesus had with a non-Jew was with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). This episode represents the first instance of cross-cultural evangelism and so has much relevancy for our day. From our Lord’s approach and conversation with this despised woman, we learn principles for reaching out across ethnic and cultural barriers. Jesus declares God’s future for her and other Gentile nations: “An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be his worshipers” (4:23). Jesus also uses the occasion to rebuke his disciples for their apathy for (and probably their bigotry against) the Samaritans (cf. John 4:34-35³¹ -- “don’t give me this four month’s stuff”) and then uses the surrounding crops growing in the fields and waiting to be harvested, to instruct them about the urgency of reaching the lost (symbolized by the ripened “harvest”) while there is yet time. Pointing to the Samaritan woman and people of Sychar (“lift up

³⁰ In the John 12 passage, as Jesus is at the crescendo of his ministry, in his most public hour on earth (the grand worship procession we have come to call “Palm Sunday”), He is approached by a group of Greeks asking to see Jesus. The Pharisees, looking on, could only say, perhaps with some measure of prophetic force: “Look, the world has gone after him” John 12:19). Jesus did not refuse to see them and saw afresh in this event his purpose to be lifted up higher, by death and by exaltation, so that all people could be drawn to him (John 12:12-32). “All men”—Greeks as well as Jews; Gentiles and Hebrews alike—were being prepared for His redemptive mission which was to be culminated by His approaching atoning death.

³¹ These verses are contextually not a foreign missions text (as commonly preached) but a “home” missions text. In reality there is no biblical distinction between “home” and “foreign” missions. The field is the “world” and wherever there are unreached people(s), we can do mission.

your eyes”) who were at that moment coming on the scene, He calls them to join him in doing the work of evangelism, of “gathering” in the ripened Gentile harvest. In light of this passage and the long history of animosity between the Jews and Samaritans,³² it is not by accident that our Lord includes Samaria in the Acts 1:8 version of the Great Commission mandate.³³

What was implicit in the Gospel accounts becomes explicit when our Lord publicly declares the purpose and passion of His ministry. Standing in the temple area where He dramatically confronts the moneychangers and challenges the status quo, Jesus makes the issue the worship of the peoples. As he cleanses the temple of excessive commercialism, He echoes David’s OT desire for the nations to come to God in his courts. He asks, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all the nations*’?”³⁴ Significantly this account is recorded by all the Gospel writers, but only Mark includes the last four words of the Isaiah quotation (Mark 11:18; cf. Isa. 56:7). Clearly, Jesus understood this “to be the culmination of three years of preaching, healing, and ministering... .”³⁵ Brian Blount summarizes the significance of this statement when he writes: “In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is a preacher of multicultural worship. He envisioned a future that was radically different from the one espoused by the temple leadership.”³⁶

³² See footnote 47 below.

³³ As his disciples took the Gospel to the ends of the earth, they were not to forget their own Samaria, those who were geographically close by but culturally far away. The Church has often made this “great omission,” sending the Gospel abroad while neglecting those close at home who are ethnically and culturally different than majority Christians.

³⁴ The phrase “all the nations” here is *pasin tois ethnesin* which clearly has a people group understanding; this is confirmed by a study of Isaiah 56:7. Isaiah’s point is not that every individual Gentile will have a right to dwell in the presence of God but that there will be converts from “all peoples” who will enter the temple to worship. Jesus, of course, knew well this prominent OT hope. Jesus and the religious leaders listening knew immediately the rest of the Isaiah 56 passage: “The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, and to love the name of the Lord, ... even those I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar.” (56:6-7).

³⁵ DeYoung et al. 2003, 20.

³⁶ Brian K Blount, “The Apocalypse of Worship: A House of Prayer for ALL the Nations,” in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. Brain K. Blount and Lenora Tubbs Tinsdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

The passion of Christ for unity-in-diversity is also seen in His high priestly prayer recorded in the seventeenth chapter of John. In this longest of all prayers attributed to Jesus, the true “Lord’s Prayer,” He clearly defines his own mission: he has been sent by the Father to give eternal life to all who would believe, that men might truly and fully know God. (17:2, 3). Then as He intercedes for his first disciples (17:6-19), He lays out *their* mission to the world: they are being commissioned to carry out *his* mission (17:18 “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world”). Their success in this mission will largely depend upon their being true to and sanctified by the Word he has given them (17: 8,14,17), being “kept” and “guarded” by the Father and Son (17:11,12), and on their “be[ing] one” (17:11). Christ then begins to pray for the Church (17:20-26), those who would believe “through their [the apostles’] word” (17:20). Significantly, Christ reveals that those in future generations who embrace his message and mission will also need the same oneness of love, mind and purpose. Three times in three verses he prays that we would be one, or “perfected in unity” (17:21-23).³⁷ The intended purpose or result³⁸ of our Christian unity, he declares, is that the world may “believe” (17:20) and “know” (17:23) that the Father sent Jesus and truly loves the world of sinners. In other words, their unity before a watching world would be a visible witness of God’s love for all peoples. It would demonstrate to all mankind that He is indeed the Messiah who alone can bring peace to a divided world. Visible oneness, then, is vital for the sake of the Gospel. It enables us to bear a convincing testimony before a lost world.³⁹ Thus, when believers of diverse ethnic backgrounds

³⁷ The word “perfected” is translated from the Greek *teteleiomenoi* and is the perfect-passive subjunctive of the verb *teleo*. In this context it means “to become mature or completely one.” The use of the perfect tense indicates a permanent state as the goal and final result (according to the *Linguistic Key to the New Testament*). In other words, Christ intends for all believers to become mature in our faith, completely united as one with the Father and with one another.

³⁸ Twice Christ prayed that believers would be one “so that” the world would be impacted (17: 21, 23). In both verses “so that” is a translation from the Greek preposition *hina* and introduce what Greek scholars call an “hina clause” which always point to the intended result or purpose of something. According to Dana and Mantey, “The function of a ‘purpose clause’ is to express the aim of the action denoted by the main verb. This aim may be of a deliberate design . . . or merely of contemplated results.” In other words, a hina clause introduces an “if-then” propositional truth. If *X* occurs (though there’s no guarantee it will), then *Y* is the guaranteed result. So Jesus is interceding, “I pray for the Church of future generations that they may be completely united as one (and there’s no guarantee they will be one); and if they do demonstrate oneness, then two things will result: lost people will know God’s love and believe in me.”

³⁹ It is also true that Jesus’ prayer has, in a sense, *already been answered*. That this prayer for our spiritual unity is not still a wish but a reality. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost all true believers without distinction were united in

are living out their faith together in a loving and caring faith community, this has tremendous attractiveness to a watching world which is so often racially and ethnically divided.

At the end of the Gospels we observe again the intentional universality of Jesus' message and ministry. At His death both Jews and Gentiles embrace Him. After His resurrection, He leaves His disciples with His final marching orders. At least two of the Great Commission accounts explicitly describe Christ's global mission to include all peoples. Luke (24:47) records Jesus' final words: "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations [ethnic peoples], beginning at Jerusalem."⁴⁰ Matthew's account (28:19) says Christ commissioned His followers to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations [*pante ta ethne*]."⁴¹ Acts (1:8) clarifies that His missional strategy incorporated a "both/and" process—witnessing in both Jerusalem/Judea/Samaria and the ends of the earth. Significantly, Jesus told His followers not to neglect their Samaria: those who are geographically near but culturally far.

Looking at the testimony of the total Gospel record, DeYoung and his co-writers state it well:

one body (1 Cor. 12:13 cf. Ephes.4:4-6) and henceforth share a unity of common life (a new nature) in Christ. Yet, it must be obvious that Jesus' intent is that our *oneness of life* (a community of nature) and *oneness of faith* (a community of sentiment) should manifest itself in a *oneness of love* (a community of affection) and *oneness of action* (a community of labor). Elsewhere the NT abundantly teaches this—that believers are to strive to be of the same mind and purpose (see 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 3:15, 16; 1:27, etc) and to maintain their Spirit-given unity and peace (Eph. 4: 3). In this same Gospel, on the same night, Jesus commands them to love one another so that the world would know that they were truly his disciples (John 13:34-35). Their loving unity was to serve as the distinguishing mark of discipleship, i.e., of being a Christ-follower. Consequently, the spiritual unity of believers in Christ must have some external expression that it may affect those outside Christ. That which is completed at once on the divine side is to be gradually realized and lived out by obedient believers.

⁴⁰ In the immediate context (Lk 24: 44-47), it is significant that Jesus reminds his followers that the OT "Scriptures" ("the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms"—v.44) all foretold three vital things about his messianic ministry: his death ("it was necessary for the Christ to suffer"), his resurrection ("and to rise from the dead the third day") and his message of repentance and forgiveness ("remission of sins"). But it is the God-intended *destination* of this threefold message (where it is to be "preached in his name")—equally predicted in the OT revelation!—"to all nations" (= *ethné*), which is most surprising to many 21st Century believers who are unfamiliar with (or misread?) the full OT revelation.

⁴¹ Jesus is commanding, "Go and make disciples of all the ethnic groups." The Greek term translated "nations" (*ethne*) in Matt. 28 refers not to political or geographic groupings, as we often use the word today, but to people groups. NT usage of the plural *ethne* (and the singular *ethnos*) is similar to the way we speak of the "Cherokee nation" or the "Sioux nation." We mean something like "people with a unifying ethnic identity." For a fuller discussion of how these words and the important phrase *panta ta ethne* are used in the NT, see Piper, *Nations*, 161-167.

The earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth began and ended with a worldview and mission that was inclusive. We suggest that the bookends of Jesus' life story display the message of the Gospels and provide a framework of inclusion for the congregations that were receiving and reading these first-century documents.⁴²

Acts Through the Epistles

A fair reading of the rest of the New Testament indicates that Christianity's first congregations were multicultural bodies ministering in multiethnic urban settings. When Luke's historical account of the early church's growth found in Acts is carefully compared with the epistles, we see how Christ's disciples sought to embrace His inclusive vision. The Book of Acts emphasizes how the Spirit of Christ equips the followers of Christ to cross cultural and ethnic barriers. Clearly the first congregations that emerged under their leadership were diverse and inclusive. They were crossing cultural boundaries from *day one*. This is evident with the birth of the Jerusalem "mother" church. On the Day of Pentecost Jews from the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, in Jerusalem for the feast, heard the Good News in the local dialect of their country of origin (Acts 2:5-11). Under the powerful preaching of the Spirit-emboldened Galilean disciples, over 3000 multicultural, multilingual Jews were saved and gathered into the church community. Whereas God confused the tongues at Babel to scatter the people, He multiplied tongues at Pentecost to unite believers from various ethnicities.⁴³ God lavishly demonstrated that His Spirit is now empowering the church to cross all cultural and linguistic barriers. Thus from the moment of its inception, the Church sought to be a house of prayer for all nations! Significantly, the Jerusalem congregation bridged a divide normally found in first-century Judaism—culture and language-specific synagogues.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid. 14.

⁴³ Mark Driscoll ("An Army of One," 42) points out that regarding diversity in the church, there are actually only two destinations: Babel or Pentecost. "Babel was the first human attempt at cultural uniformity—hanging out with people like me because I find myself so wonderful. . . . Conversely, Pentecost is God's attempt at kingdom unity through diversity—hanging out with people unlike me because God has been gracious to us all." See his insightful chart included as Appendix 1.

⁴⁴ Isaiah Sonne. "Synagogue." In *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, R-Z*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1962, 478-79.

There seems to be some evidence that the early congregations which emerged in Palestine during the latter part of the first century exhibited the same cultural diversity of the Jerusalem congregation, incorporating into their assemblies Hellenist Jews, Samaritan converts and other Gentile responders.⁴⁵ This growth of the early church into other Palestinian centers was no doubt sparked by the non-discriminatory outreach of two pioneering early church leaders: Philip, one of the seven Greek-speaking leaders, and Peter, one of the original twelve apostles. Philip left Jerusalem and witnessed to the Ethiopian finance minister (Acts 8:26-40), thus enabling the Gospel to enter Nubia, considered by many of that day to be “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) because it was outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire. The Apostle Peter, after some prodding from the Lord regarding his initial racist separation, left Jerusalem and preached to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast (10:1-48).⁴⁶ Significantly, God took the initiative to teach the preacher Peter a profound lesson growing out of his ethnic consciousness and his racist (anti-ethnic) attitude toward non-Jews. Philip the layman had earlier gone into despised Samaria and preached Christ (Acts 8:5-25). Given the animosity between Jews and Samaritans at the time,⁴⁷ this was an amazing development, but certainly consistent with the modeling ministry of Christ (cf. John 4).

⁴⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Lives, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press: 1979), 37, 39, 55.

⁴⁶ In Acts 10 we see how the apostle Peter struggled with his own ethnic pride and deeply ingrained racism toward non-Jews. When told to take the message of the Gospel to Cornelius, a Roman, he at first objected (“Surely not, Lord!”--10:14) on the basis of his Jewish traditions (cf. 10:28—it was “unlawful” [literally “breaking a taboo”] to even “associate with a Gentile or visit him.”). Finally, after a thrice repeated trance-vision from God grabbed his attention, Peter consents to go, confessing his new understanding: “God has shown me that I should [no longer] call any man unholy or unclean” (10:28). The Holy Spirit is clearly writing a new law upon Peter’s heart! If Peter, a Spirit-filled preacher (at Pentecost) and prominent church leader, can still have racist attitudes long after meeting Christ, then it should not surprise us today to find Christian leaders who are still wrestling with ethnocentrism or outright racism!

⁴⁷ Philip preached to the Samaritans at a time when they were a people largely estranged from the Jews. There had been a long history of animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, considered to be “half breeds.” In 722 B.C., the Assyrians conquered the Northern [ten tribes] Kingdom of Israel and its capital city, Samaria. Those deported from their homeland and dispersed to various provinces of the Assyria Empire were later required to intermarry to reduce the prospect of rebellion. Likewise many non-Jews were transported into Samaria and intermingled among the remaining Israelites. The resultant mixed race produced lots of tension, The Samaritans withdrew from the worship of Yahweh at Jerusalem and established their own worship at Mt. Gerizim in Samaria (John 4:20-22). The Samaritans regarded only the Pentateuch as authoritative. As a result of this history, the Jews repudiated Samaritans and considered them heretical. So intense were the ethnic and cultural tensions between the two groups, that they avoided contact with each other as much as possible (see John 4:9; Ezra 4:1-24; Nehemiah 4:1-6; Luke 10:25-37, etc).

These incidents in the life of the early believers are no doubt incorporated into the Acts record by Luke to dramatize and symbolize the future of the church.⁴⁸ Since Jesus ministered to both Jews and Gentiles in this same Palestinian region during His days on earth, the early believers were simply following His lead. The crucial role Greek minority leaders like Stephen and Philip played in liberating the gospel from Jerusalem shows the valuable contribution cultural diversity makes to Christian witness, expanding the possibilities for gospel advance. We also see in these early recorded incidents that Acts recognizes differences in culture but it does not cater to it. In fact, one thing is clear in Acts: the power of God through the gospel eliminates cultural divisiveness.

According to Acts, the first congregation of Jesus' followers that intentionally welcomed and enfolded both Jews and Gentiles into their fellowship, was at Antioch of Syria. Founded by Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who left Jerusalem during the persecution that arose after Stephen's martyrdom in the mid-thirties, this culturally diverse body was evidently composed of Jews, Greeks, Africans, Cypriots, and other Syrians (Acts 11:19-26; cf. 13:1).⁴⁹ Ethnic strife, violence, fear and hatred were common in this city of half a million, the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Yet the Antioch church lived out an inclusive table fellowship that emulated the ministry and vision of Jesus. This was modeled and encouraged by a diverse leadership team composed of: Paul and Barnabas, both Jews raised outside of Palestine who were immersed in Greek culture and bilingual; Manean, related to Herod Antipas, and thus probably a hated Roman; Lucius, who had come from Cyrene in North Africa; and Simeon, called Niger ("the black"),

⁴⁸ It is significant that the Holy Spirit has Luke record the ethnicities of these first converts. These early stories of Gentile conversions featuring the Samaritans, an Ethiopian, and the Roman soldier, Cornelius, are intended, no doubt, to show that God does not show partiality or favoritism (Acts 10:34-35) in reaching out to others, and thus his Church and churches should not show any partiality. If God welcomes men and women of every nation, tribe, people, and tongue into His Church, so must we welcome people unlike ourselves into our own local fellowships.

⁴⁹ The evangelists and church planters mentioned in Acts 11:20 were men of diverse ethnic, cultural and regional backgrounds: Cyprus was an island in the northeastern Mediterranean Sea (and home of Barnabas); Cyrene was a city on the north African coast (today Libya); they spoke to Hellenists, i.e., Greeks, not Greek-speaking Jews. It is noteworthy that these early evangelists chose not to return to their own homeland, to their own comfort zones. Nor did they speak just to Jews, to people more like themselves. Because they were very intentional about cross-cultural outreach, Luke reports that "the hand of the Lord was with them" (Acts 11:21) and as a result "large numbers" were converted (11:21-26—three times it is noted large numbers were being saved!). God evidently bless obedience!

probably a dark-skinned African.⁵⁰ Because this kind of social solidarity and racial reconciliation was so radical in that day and in that city, the locals began to call them “Christians” or Christ followers (11:26). The normal classifications and categories did not fit! Exactly as Jesus had promised and predicted (John 13:35; 17:21-23), He would be most clearly recognized by the love and unity of His children.⁵¹

That the Lord of Harvest used this Antioch model to spread the Gospel and expand the Christian church during the first century is evident. The Antioch church cared for the world because the congregation reflected the world! Mentored and sent forth by the Antioch leadership team, the Apostle Paul and his co-workers founded numerous other congregations, each started in a fashion similar to the strategy used in Antioch—and first given by Jesus.⁵² The result—many of these missionary planted churches of the New Testament era were multicultural. There is internal scriptural evidence of their multiethnic character. Scan the names of folk mentioned by Paul in the last chapter of his letter to Rome. Here we find a mix of Greek, Roman (Latin), and Jewish names (Rom. 16:3-16). Consider the historical record of the planting of the church at Philippi—we find a Jewish proselyte business woman, a Roman centurion, and a Greek slave girl (Acts 16:14-40). Remember the cities where the first missionary teams traveled with the Gospel—places like Corinth, Ephesus, Laodicea which often lay at the junctions of the Roman trade and shipping routes. As a result there was much ethnic interaction in these marketplace communities. In these cosmopolitan

⁵⁰ Significantly, when Luke lists these five leaders in the Antioch church, he does so not only by gifting but by ethnicity as well. Two are from Africa, one from the Mediterranean, one from the Middle East and another from Asia Minor. Luke is no doubt highlighting that Antioch was church for all people.

⁵¹ That Jews were openly loving Gentiles, Gentiles were loving Jews, and they were all worshiping God together in one local church at Antioch must have quite an impact on their city. This was unprecedented and amazing, something only God could do! That formerly estranged groups could now be reconciled and now unified, was a testimony, no doubt, of the power of the Gospel and the Living Christ to overcome century-old barriers of sin and separation. But not only was this a very ethnically diverse church, it was an economically diverse one as well. A careful study of Acts 16 and the founding of the Philippian church on Paul’s second missionary journey, reveals the socioeconomic status of the first converts. Lydia was a seller of purple fabrics and so evidently a successful business woman (she had a home large enough for the young church to meet in). Also converted early and enfolded into the fellowship of this new church was a poor slave girl (16:16-24) and a middle class (who else pulls the night shift?) jailer (16:27-40). NT churches, it seems, were both multi-ethnic and economically diverse. No wonder they attracted attention in the pagan world!

⁵² Paul’s teams of itinerant evangelists normally preached first in the synagogues and reached some Jews (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8, etc) and then reached out to other “God-fearers” and Gentiles attached to the synagogue.

crossroads between the eastern and western portions of the Mediterranean world, the apostolic teams established thriving congregations which undoubtedly reflected the ethnic diversity and confronted the religious pluralism of these urban communities.⁵³

The Example of the Ephesians Church

A look at one city church validates our premise. Ephesus, for example, was an important city in Western Asia with nearly a quarter of a million residents. Paul spent three years there establishing a strong congregation, one which Luke clearly states is multicultural. The author of Acts writes, “all of the residents of Asia, *both Jews and Greeks*, heard the word of the Lord” (19:10; see also 19:17 and 20:21). Ben Witherington writes, “It is here in Ephesus that [Paul] has the longest stable period of ministry without trial or expulsion, here that he most fully carries out his commission to be a witness to all persons, both Jew and Gentile”⁵⁴ Unlike some modern-day pastors and church planters who specifically target one ethnic group, Paul’s goal was evidently to ensure that the churches planted and nurtured under his care would both *begin* and *remain* multicultural. Biblical scholar Wayne Meeks affirms, “By the time the extant letters were written, the established pattern was instead to found in every city associations of believers in Christ, drawn from gentiles and Jews alike.”⁵⁵

This heterogeneous nature of the first-century churches is further validated by a careful study of Pauline theology of the church, best articulated in his epistle to the Ephesian church written sometime between A.D. 60–62. A key theme of Paul’s letter is the “mystery” (or truth heretofore unrevealed) of the church which is “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the

⁵³ In the missional model of Antioch, missionary outreach—both in their own community and beyond—was not just another program or budget line item; it flowed out of who they were! Mission is not something we do but what we are—believers are on mission with God. We also see in the Antioch church that one of the vital marks of a healthy multi-ethnic church is an awareness of and involvement in global needs.

⁵⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), footnote 389, 454.

⁵⁵ Wayne A Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1983, 168.

promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). This was truth completely hidden from OT saints (cf. 3:5, 9). Shedding light on the God-intended nature of the church, the Apostle reminds this mixed congregation that all believers in Christ are equal before the Lord as His children and as fellow citizens of his eternal kingdom. This was radical theology, a marvelous truth that only believers of this present age possess.

Earlier in Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul had directly addressed the Gentile component of the assembly. In plain and passionate language, he exhorts them to no longer view themselves as alienated, as “excluded from . . . [or] strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:12). No longer were they to see themselves as “strangers” and “aliens” (2:19), in a state of social and spiritual alienation.⁵⁶ Paul’s point is that the Gentiles have now not only been reconciled to God but also to their former enemies⁵⁷ through the cross work of Christ, the Great Barrier-Breaker. Consequently, they were no longer “far off” but had been “brought near” (2:13 cf. 2:17). In the midst of the alienation and animosity of their surrounding culture, Christ was their ultimate “peace” who had “broken down” the “dividing wall of hostility”⁵⁸ between Jews and Gentiles and had made both groups to be a part of “one new

⁵⁶ In the first century, Gentiles experienced two types of alienation: social and spiritual. The first was a result of the animosity that existed between Jews and Gentiles for thousands of years. Jews considered Gentiles to be outcasts, objects of derision, and reproach. Even more significant was the second. Spiritual alienation was a raw reality because Gentile people were cut off from God in five different ways vividly described by Paul in Ephesians 2:11-12. While Gentiles had many gods, they did not recognize the true God because they did not want him. Thus their spiritual separation from God and His chosen people Israel was no one’s fault but their own.

⁵⁷ Reconciliation is a common NT theme (see 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 5:8-10; Col. 1:19-23). Through the sacrificial atonement of Christ, believers are doubly reconciled. As Jews and Gentiles are brought to God through Christ Jesus, they are brought together with each other. This is the Gospel of peace which Christians are to “preach” (literally “bring or announce good news”) to a divided world because Christ Himself first came and preached this same message of hope (Ephes. 2:16, 17). He who is “Himself our peace” has come and preached the good news of peace (2:14, 17) and has then given us this ministry and message of reconciliation to share with others (2 Cor. 5:18-19). The Greek word for “reconcile” (*katallasso*) means to “change” or “exchange.” The essence of the Gospel is that God initiates a change in the sinner’s status in that He brings him from a position of alienation to a state of forgiveness and right relationship with Himself.

⁵⁸ The “dividing wall of hostility” (or “middle wall of partition”) alludes to a wall in the Jewish temple that partitioned off the Court of Gentiles from the areas accessible only to Jews. Paul is referring to this wall as symbolic of the social, religious and spiritual separation that kept Jews and Gentiles apart. This is vivid description of the total isolation Jews and Gentiles experienced from each other.

man,”⁵⁹ the united body of believers, the church (2:14-15). In Christ, God had shattered the Jewish Temple’s ethnic barrier (2:14), and established a new temple composed of all peoples by the Spirit (2:19-22).⁶⁰ For Paul, this doctrine of reconciliation was not to be merely theoretical or an otherwise unobservable truth. It was to be a very visible reality, lived out in the local church where saved people of diverse backgrounds now worshiped God together as one, loving and caring for each other. This was the Apostle’s inspired vision and theology for the church, one to be realized by all future generations.⁶¹

Ethnic reconciliation is in fact a central message in the NT epistles: if we are reconciled to God, then we *must* be reconciled to one another. Keener challenges us:

If God called first-century believers to surmount an ethnic barrier he himself established in salvation history—the barrier between Jew and Gentile—how much more does he summon us to surmount all other barriers of our making? Overcoming the Jewish-Gentile barrier is one of the dominant themes in the New Testament, and it provides a model for us today for overcoming every other barrier dividing God’s people.⁶²

The Struggle to Preserve Unity-in-Diversity

Adjusting to this fresh perspective of culturally diverse communities of faith, and thus maintain authentic unity, was no easy task in the early church. While Jesus ate with tax-gatherers and sinners, not all His followers wanted to eat with Gentiles! Differences brought challenges, conflict, and even tension. The

⁵⁹ “New” translates a Greek word (*kainos*) that refers to something completely unlike what it was before. It refers to being different in kind and quality. Those in Christ are spiritually no longer Jew or Gentile, only Christian (cf. Romans 10:12, 13; Galatians 3:28). Christ never excludes any who come to Him, and those who are His are not *spiritually* distinct from one another—no matter what their ethnic or socioeconomic background. At the same time, people do not give up their culture and ethnicity when they become believers. One is now a *Christian Jew* or Gentile.

⁶⁰ NT scholar Craig Keener (“An Army of Ones” in *Leadership*, Spring 2005, 39) points out that Paul wrote this epistle from prison, thus modeling for his hearers that biblical diversity is worth sacrificing for. Paul spent the last quarter of Acts in Roman custody because he refused to compromise the message of God’s love to the Gentiles. The reason? “He was charged with profaning the Temple by admitting an Ephesian Gentile.” Thus he can forcefully teach the ethnically mixed Ephesian church about the *new* temple of God.

⁶¹ For another illustration of the theological nature and purpose of the intercultural church, see Paul’s speech in Athens (Acts 17:26-28). Paul states three illuminating truths: 1) that all ethnic people groups are created by God from one man, Adam; 2) that a sovereign God has determined the exact time and places where each group will live; and 3) He has done this so that they may grope/ seek after Him and perhaps find Him. The point: if the local church reaches out to all the different ethnic groups moving into the neighborhood, then there is a strong possibility they will find Him!

⁶² Keener, 39

New Testament confirms that the first-century churches often struggled to preserve unity in diversity. The Apostle Paul is compelled to often remind them that in Christ there was no Jew or Gentile (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-26; Col. 3:11 cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 10:12). In these passages, Paul does not teach that being in Christ obliterates our ethnicity, nationality, or sexuality. Rather, he is teaching that while our racial, national, social and sexual distinctions remain, they no longer divide us. They are transcended in the unity of the family of God. When the Apostle Paul teaches that the body is one unit with many members, he clarifies the kind of parts he has in mind: "whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free" (1 Cor. 12:13). That is, the body of Christ is one, and its different ethnic parts, its different socio-economic parts, are organically one in the Spirit. In fact, the different parts need each other (1 Cor. 12:14-20).⁶³

The New Testament faithfully records at least four occasions where early church leaders struggled to preserve the unity found in culturally heterogeneous congregations. In Acts 6:1-6 we see the Jerusalem congregation on the verge of an ethnic conflict. A crisis emerged over the neglect of Greek-speaking immigrant widows in the daily food distribution. The church leadership wisely addressed the issue promptly and prayerfully selected seven new leaders (6:3, 5); significantly all had Greek names. The goal was evidently to avoid favoritism and prevent an ethnically divided body.⁶⁴ We can learn from the early church the wisdom of being sensitive to the concerns of ethnic peoples in the affairs of the church.⁶⁵

⁶³ Many preachers today misunderstand the thrust of 1 Cor. 12:13, limiting the force of Paul's teaching by applying it solely to the exercise of spiritual gifts given to people in the local church (which is true to the context—see 12:1-11; 12:28-31). Why is Paul stressing so strongly the tendency of one part of the body to dissociate from another part? He seems to be drawing attention to sections of society and the church that were prone to declare, "I don't need you." Jews might say that to Greeks. Or freeman to slaves. Or today, Anglos might say that of Hispanics or Blacks. Koreans might say that of Japanese. Many today might say that of "undocumented workers." Paul says you do need them. The parts that seem weaker are indispensable. Those that seem less honorable should be treated with special honor. There should be no division over culture or class or color in the body. We should have equal concern for each other.

⁶⁴ Missiologist Francis M. Dubose points out: "When the conflict arose over the alleged favoritism shown Judaic Hebrew widows above Hellenistic Hebrew widows, the solution was not to divide these people according to their ethnic and cultural differences. The solution was to handle the problem administratively. Thus deacons were selected to give special attention to such matters *that there might be unity in the church.*" [emphasis in the original]. *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1978), 127.

⁶⁵ Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice [in *More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 155-57] see four vital lessons from Acts six: 1) "minority complaints should be taken very seriously;" 2) "culture-conscious choices may be needed to correct [past] injustices;" 3) "minorities need to be given a greater

From Galatians 2:11-14 we gather that a serious crisis also arose in Antioch when the apostle Peter visited the young congregation. Under pressure from visiting Judaizers from Jerusalem, Peter backed down from his earlier practice of open table fellowship where Jews and Gentiles ate together. This prompted “even [bicultural] Barnabas” and other Jewish Christians to follow his example. The Jerusalem group was convinced Gentiles must first become Jews culturally and religiously (be circumcised, etc.) before they could embrace the Christian faith and enjoy full communion. Sensing the seriousness of this threat, Paul confronted Peter publicly on his ill-advised behavior, telling him his action compromised “the truth of the Gospel” (2:14). Paul saw it as hypocritical and heretical. He chose *not* to take what seemed the pragmatic course of action, that of founding a separate and exclusively Gentile church. “He believed that it was not enough to maintain a spiritual unity in the universal church. Unity needed to be seen and experienced in the local congregation as well.”⁶⁶ Thus he challenged “the segregated lunch counter.”

The early church’s third attempt to preserve the unity of the church in the midst of ethnic diversity and cultural conflict was the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-31). With representatives from both the Antioch and Jerusalem congregations, this leadership summit met to settle once for all the vital doctrinal issue of whether Gentiles should be required to cross an ethnic barrier and become culturally Jewish in order to be saved. Significantly, the Jerusalem church’s biggest struggles involved not Christology or eschatology, but how to embrace fellowship with Gentile believers (essentially a soteriological issue)! After a lengthy and lively debate, the apostles and elders forever affirmed that salvation is totally by grace through faith in Christ alone. They defied efforts by the Judaizers to impose legalism and ritualism as necessary prerequisites to salvation. Significantly both Barnabas and Peter, now convinced of their previous error, supported Paul in his defense of the purity of the gospel. Table fellowship and social interaction was restored. Believers were warned against syncretism but allowed to be themselves and to worship God in

voice in church life;” and 4) “faithful response to cultural injustice can lead to greater fruit for the gospel” (cf. Acts 6:7). These could certainly help the church today overcome often unconscious racial barriers in our midst.

⁶⁶ DeYoung, 35.

their own way. The verdict allowed Jews and Gentiles to retain their distinctive cultures.⁶⁷ This wise decision at the Jerusalem Council ultimately preserved the unity of the churches and empowered Paul and others to forge ahead in their ministry of reconciliation. The result was that multicultural churches continued to be established. At the Jerusalem Council, there was not the slightest entertainment of the notion that the church should divide into a Jewish constituency and a Gentile constituency, as some church growth advocates might recommend today.

Finally, from Paul's letter to the Roman believers we learn that the church at Rome was ethnically mixed yet divided (see 16:3-16; 1:16; 2:11, 17; 9:23-24; 11:13, etc.). Thus, the Apostle emphasizes that theologically Jews and Gentiles must come to God on the same terms, through Jesus Christ. There was to be no difference. He also deals with the practical questions of not despising each others customs regarding food and holy days. Believers from different ethnic and economic backgrounds were to welcome, receive and embrace one another in the Lord (Rom. 14; 15:1-7), following the example of Christ who became a servant to all and embraced us all (15:7-9). Believing Jews and Gentiles were to not just tolerate one another but to sacrificially and warmly care for one another, living in harmony, thus preserving their unity-in-diversity in Christ (15: 5-7). In areas of preference and non-essentials, they were to pursue loving relationships. In Romans 14–15 Paul instructs Christians to demonstrate their maturity by becoming increasingly flexible and accommodating to those with weaker faith, no matter their cultural bent.

The Consummation of the Vision

The New Testament closes with John the Apostle's beautiful description of the redeemed in heaven gathered together to worship the Lamb for all eternity. In the Apocalypse we see a vision of the future that brings all peoples together. Because of Christ's finished cross work and the Church's Great Commission obedience, there is a great multitude of glorified saints from every tribe, language, people group, and nation

⁶⁷ That the early church recognized the value of converts retaining their own cultures is seen also in Acts 21:20-26 and Romans 14. Kenner ("Army of One," 39) properly observes, "When dominant culture churches do pursue integration, they must allow the diverse cultures they have welcomed a voice in shaping a truly multicultural church. ... dominant cultures must be mindful to not swallow up minority ones."

(Rev. 5:8-12; 7:9-10).⁶⁸ This teaches us that when Christ returns, the ethnic element of our identity will evidently not be eradicated. God's great goal in history to be worshipped by every people group will at last be realized.⁶⁹ These two key passages also teach us that the task of missions is not complete until at least some individuals in every people group have become Christ's disciples. If in the final company of the redeemed in heaven there are converts from all the peoples, then the missions mandate must include converts, not just proclamation.⁷⁰

In Revelation 21 this scene of multiethnic unity is again picked up so that believers of all ages might be convinced that God's never-ending purpose for ethnic peoples will ultimately prevail. This time we see the eschatological vision of redeemed humanity in the new creation. In Revelation 21:3, John records "Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his *peoples [laoi]*." Most modern translations persist in translating: "They will be his *people [laos]*."⁷¹

⁶⁸ The Greek terms here—tribe (*phyle*), language (*glossa*), people (*laos*), and nation (*ethnos*)—all clearly are people group concepts, as confirmed by both their consistent NT usage and their prevalence in the Greek OT as substitutes for Hebrew words. See John Piper's full discussion of these terms and their OT counterparts (*Ibid.*, 161-191). It is clear from the consistent use in the NT of the singular *ethnos*, used here in Revelation 5:9 (and found at least 10 times in Revelation), that it always refers to *corporate* people groups, not to individual Gentiles (Piper, 161-62). This is verified, for example, in another parallel passage, Rev 15:4, where we again see "all nations" (*panta ta ethnē*) worshiping the Lord, a clear allusion to Psalm 86:9 (Ps. 85:9 LXX). Unfortunately, none of the four terms in 5:9 will yield a precise definition of "people groups." Biblically, the concept of "people group," according to Piper's thorough study, is "flexible enough to provide an inclusive designation for groups of various sizes" (191). Nonetheless, the concept, which has become quite popular in missiological literature in the last 50 years, is thoroughly based upon the biblical terminology.

⁶⁹ That the worshipping multitude gathered in heaven described in Rev 7:9-10 are evidently tribulation martyrs (see 7:14) who did not go with the raptured church but came to salvation during the great tribulation, does not lessen our argument. Both before and after the rapture, *God's missionary purpose remains the same*: He aims to be worshiped by converts from all the tribes, nations, peoples and languages. And the identity of the worshipping multitude in Rev 5 is clearly the raptured church (the 24 elders of 5:8 are representative of the redeemed church). Both groups of saints are ransomed by the blood of Christ (see 5:9 & 7:14) and so among God's elect.

⁷⁰ It is difficult to define the specific task of missions as planting an indigenous church in every people group because, as Piper points out, we are unsure of the size and precise definition of biblical people groups. Piper (194) asks "When Paul said [in Romans 15] that his special missionary work was completed from Jerusalem to Illyricum, had he in fact planted a church in every family or clan [alluding to Genesis 12:3]?"

⁷¹ The genuine, original reading of Rev. 21:3 is in the plural. The United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament* (4th ed.) and the Nestle-Aland Greek NT (27th ed.) chose *laoi* as original. The NRSV reads "peoples" as do commentaries by Heinrich Kraft, Leon Morris, Robert Mounce and G.K. Beale. Piper (184) concludes from Rev. 21:3: "Therefore, John (recording the angelic voice) seems to make explicit . . . that the final goal of God in redemption is not to obliterate the distinctions of the peoples but to gather them all into one diverse but unified assembly of believers."

John Piper notes:

But what John is saying is that in the new heavens and the new earth the humanity described in Revelation 5:9 will be preserved: persons ransomed by the blood of Christ “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” The diversity will not disappear in the new heavens and the new earth. God willed it at the beginning. It has a permanent place in his plan.⁷²

We are also told that the kings of all “the nations” (literally “the peoples”) come into the New Jerusalem bringing their “glory and honor” (or “splendor”) to lay at King Jesus’ feet (21:24-27). In other words, the unique giftedness and goodness of each culture will be there at the end of time and will last forever. There is a recognition and celebration of the differences of a plurality of different peoples and cultures—yet oneness in their coming together to be in the presence of the one Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Christopher Wright correctly observes:

With undoubtedly deliberate intent, the final book of the Bible comes to its climax with the picture of the nations purged of all sin, walking in the light of God, bringing their wealth and splendor into the city of God, contributing their redeemed glory and honor to the glory and honor of the Lamb (Rev. 21:24-27). The brokenness of humanity is healed at the river and tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2).

. . . The inhabitants of the new creation are not portrayed as a homogenized mass or as a single global culture. Rather they will display the continuous glorious diversity of the human race through history⁷³

Thus, in the eternal city, there will be no more divisions, barriers, or exclusions because of race, religion or politics. God’s overarching missiological goal will be realized: to uphold and display His glory among all the world’s ethnic peoples in order that each people can fully enjoy Him forever. The mission of God, it is evident in the Apocalypse, is not merely the salvation of innumerable souls but more specifically the healing of the nations (peoples).

In the overall message of Revelation there is an evident contrast which shows us how multiculturalism can be a bane or a blessing. The values of Babylon (the prostitute—Rev. 17-18) are contrasted with those of the New Jerusalem (the bride—Rev. 4-5, 21-22). “In Revelation we see members of all peoples and languages worship the beast, but we also see members of all peoples and languages

⁷² 197-98

⁷³ Wright, 2006, 454, 456

worship the lamb.”⁷⁴ The lesson: while it is true that multiculturalism can be abused, under the Lordship of Christ, humanity’s rightful ruler, we can celebrate a true cultural diversity, one that honors its Creator.

Conclusions

Looking at the totality of biblical revelation, we conclude that ethnic diversity is both God intended and found throughout the eternal state. Diverse churches illustrate more clearly the truth that God created people of all races and ethnicities in his image. They display more visibly the truth that Jesus is not a tribal deity but is Lord of all races, nations and ethnicities. They exhibit more compellingly the aim and power of the cross of Christ to reconcile us both to God and to one another. They express more forcefully the work of the Spirit to unite us in Christ through our common Spirit baptism into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). And they demonstrate more clearly the blood-bought destiny of the church to be “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Intentionally intercultural congregations prepare us for the eschatological goal of the redeemed of all ethnicities worshipping the Lamb together throughout eternity.

Thus, the multicultural church not only prepares us for a picture of eternity but allows this divine objective to be fulfilled in some measure this side of eternity. Multiethnic congregations become an example of what can be done on earth now and a foretaste of what will be in heaven. If the church is to be a visible representation of the power of God and of heaven, and if all the saints will one day be together proclaiming the one reason they are together, namely Christ’s salvation (see Rev. 7:9-12), then it stands to reason reconciliation would be most visibly demonstrated through various cultures and people worshipping together here on earth. The church functions best in community and not with some separate-but-equal mentality that brings us together only on special occasions. In intercultural churches people come together to learn, grow, and interact with each other in dynamic community, rather than as separate enclaves.

Practically speaking, local churches are blessed immeasurably when they pursue diversity. Every culture benefits from the insights into reality that other cultures bring. None of us has a corner on the truth.

⁷⁴ Keener, “Army of One,” 43.

“Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1Cor. 13:12).

The first NT churches were certainly multiethnic. While this does not necessarily constitute a mandatory pattern for all future churches, it does establish a biblical precedent! The *admiration* we feel for the diversity seen in the NT and the early church should carry over into strong *desire* for the visible church today. In fact, if we *admire* it and *desire* it, then we should *pursue* this goal, by His grace and for His glory! In this age God is already drawing people of every ethnicity to worship Him for all eternity. And if this is what King Jesus is doing in our time, then this is what we need to be doing! His agenda should be ours.

North American ethnic diversity need not be an obstacle to intercultural ministry and developing multiethnic churches. On the contrary, we should be capitalizing on this grand opportunity, seeing it as sovereignly orchestrated. A biblically based conviction emerging from the scriptural meta-narrative should drive us forward in the pursuit of this objective: *local churches should reflect the demographics of their communities. Whenever possible, congregations should be multiethnic and multicultural.* Our desire and prayer should be to develop and to plant churches that are *diverse not merely by default, but by design!* Driven by both the demographic and biblical imperative, the twenty-first century should be the century of multiethnic congregations.

This should not be seen as a call for diversity at any cost. We are not saying, “Diversity is the top priority of the church that outweighs all others.” There are things more important than ethnic diversity. For example, certain theological and philosophy of ministry commitments are more important. This pursuit of diversity should be seen as part of the overall ministry and message of a healthy biblical church as it seeks to glorify God in its community.⁷⁵ It is not a panacea for other problems in the church.

⁷⁵ A good example of a church integrating this pursuit into its overarching corporate mission, is Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis, led by Pastor John Piper. Their mission statement reads: “We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things *for the joy of all peoples* through Jesus Christ.” See John Piper, “How and Why Bethlehem Pursues Ethnic Diversity” an elder paper released on Jan. 24, 2007. [www.desiringgod.org/resourcelibrary/TasteAndSee/ByDate/2007/1953_How_and_ ...](http://www.desiringgod.org/resourcelibrary/TasteAndSee/ByDate/2007/1953_How_and_...) Accessed 6/27/08.

Dynamic multiethnic churches best display the grace, power and glory of God to a watching often skeptical world. His *grace* is magnified because those once former enemies, once separated, are now brought together in Christ. His *power* is revealed because now both the oppressed and the oppressor are radically transformed to love one another. His multifaceted *glory* is put on public because each culture and ethnic group enfolded into the church reveals something unique to be treasured about our great God.

Appendix 1

Babel

A small city
Marked by walls
Intentionally resisted diversity

Avoided hospitality
Gathered a homogeneous people
Tried to make their name great

God came down
God judged their sin
God confused their languages

Pentecost

A cosmic kingdom
Marked by no walls
Intentionally pursued diversity

Practiced hospitality
Gathered all peoples
Made Jesus' name great

God came down
God forgave their sin
God unified their languages

Source: Mark Driscoll, "An Army of One," an interview with Craig Keener, Larry Osborne and Mark Driscoll, in "*Leadership*" [Spring 2005], p.42