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Is the Church prepared to do what it takes to become authentically multicultural?

Recently, a new face showed up at a large thriving congregation in a growing community near a major urban centre. The man's face was a light brown colour. A church greeter spoke to him politely in distinct syllables welcoming him to the church. When asked where he came from the man replied that he had recently moved into the community from the major urban centre. The greeter said, "Oh great, but where do you come from originally?" The man replied, "Ecuador." At this the greeter responded, "Buenos dias. Let me direct you to where our Hispanic group meets for their worship service." The man protested but was shown into a large room where fifteen or twenty other Latin Americans were gathering. The man participated but did not return to the church the following Sunday. It turns out that this man has lived in North America for thirty years, has a Ph.D and had come to take up a high-ranking position in a local company. He speaks fluent English and feels uncomfortable interacting solely with other Hispanics.

True story. And it highlights the manner in which the church-growth model of addressing ethnic diversity has affected our thinking about ethnicity and the church. People of like language and culture should be grouped together to best meet their spiritual needs. But is there another way of looking at this issue that is true to Scripture and authentic to the needs of people from diverse cultural backgrounds?

The Present Situation

One of the realities of the North American experience is the diversity of peoples who make up the populations of the United States and Canada. Both countries are the result of mass immigration movements over several centuries. Until the turn of the twentieth century, however, most of the immigration to North America was from Europe, which tended to reflect a certain degree of ethnic and cultural homogeneity. The United States has used the metaphor of "the melting pot;" i.e., that new peoples must blend in with the predominant values of the culture and assimilate. In contrast, the Canadian context has wrestled with the uniqueness of its two founding cultures—English and French—and prefers the "mosaic" metaphor, i.e., that distinctive groupings of peoples could immigrate and still maintain their cultural identities with little disturbance.

In the modern, urban context, however, the diversity of peoples living in close proximity to one another and still desiring to maintain some level of cultural distinctiveness, has been a challenge. This challenge is not only to civil society and its structures of government, but also to the community of the church. One concern of the Christian community in North America is the threat to the unity of local congregations that is posed by the entry of persons of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, even if they are fellow believers.

Multiculturalism is one of those areas of current philosophic discussion that has received little treatment in the Christian community. Yet it is precisely the Christian community that offers a most striking foundation for the development of multicultural micro-societies.

Contemporary Models

In recent decades, several ways of responding to ethnic diversity have emerged in North American evangelical churches. One method, with a wide number of advocates and practitioners, has been that of the **homogeneous, or mono-cultural congregation**, as illustrated above. The homogeneous congregation emphasizes the development of a particular ethnic, or sub-cultural consciousness as the focus of their outreach vision. Thus a Khmer-language, Cambodian congregation develops as a response to Cambodian immigrants locating in a particular community. This is seen to be the most effective means of reaching this people group for Christian evangelistic purposes. This homogeneous approach would appear to be the dominant model in the church growth movement and carries a lot of weight among church leaders and ministry practitioners. This ministry model responds not only to ethnically diverse communities, but also to sub-groupings within the dominant culture, such as “Boomers,” “GenXers,” etc. These groups are all to be treated as mono-cultural targets for effective church ministry development.

A second pattern, that is not so much a model or conscious way of doing things, is that of the **mono-cultural, multi-ethnic congregation**. In some ways this is the transitional congregation: the church that has been mono-cultural for much of its history and now finds itself in a community undergoing social/cultural transition. This congregation is still maintaining its traditional cultural values, its familiar ways of worship, and “in-group” power sharing. People of diverse backgrounds are essentially expected to assimilate to the existing way of doing things. For those leaders who have developed some conceptual framework for this pattern, it is seen to promote the unity of the faith and the community, rather than breaking the congregation down into special interest groups.

A third model that has emerged more slowly has been that of the **heterogeneous, or multicultural, congregation**. The heterogeneous congregation emphasizes the enriching aspect of culturally diverse peoples worshipping and interacting together. Thus peoples of Anglo, European, Asian, Caribbean and African backgrounds seek to find ways that affirm, rather than sublimate, their cultural identity in the context of the church which is a community of solidarity—sharing similar beliefs and religious heritage. This is seen to be an affirmation of the gospel message of reconciliation and the concern to break down barriers of separation. In general, multicultural churches tend to have a more wholistic view of the connection between the individual and the community of faith—rather than merely as strategic goals, as typified by the church-growth model.

Identifying the Christian Ethical Issue

The ethical question from a Christian worldview should be: “how do I understand my identity as one who stands in relationship to God and how do I understand and interact with another whose identity is also related to God?” If God has created both the English-speaking American and the Hausa-speaking Nigerian, and accepted them as part of his family, how is it that I am to think and act responsibly about the interaction of these two diverse persons? Further, how is the collective gathering of the Body of Christ—the church—to think and act responsibly about how it conducts its corporate life when encountering cultural diversity?

In Micah 6:8, the prophet asserts that God has shown humanity what is good, acceptable and required: “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” To merely identify these norms for the Christian life is not enough, however. When we look at the issue of cultural diversity and the automatic barriers of difference that are erected, how is it that justice and love can be worked out in the lived experience of the Christian community?

Shalom

Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests that the biblical, visionary concept of *shalom* communicates best the values of justice, love, mercy, peace and relationship. “Shalom is the human being dwelling in peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature” (in Boulton, et al 1994, 251). Shalom specifically addresses the requirement of right relationships with one’s fellow human beings. Shalom is absent when individuals do not make space in their own world for different others. Shalom is not present even if people “do not mind” when their identity is devalued or unrecognized. If the dominant-culture community does not seek

to address the devaluing -- the lack of recognition of those who are disadvantaged -- then justice is missing and shalom is hindered. The community characterized by shalom is responsible before God to respect and accept the multifaceted existence that he has created. The cultural identity of each individual is acceptable to God and therefore that acceptance and valuation should be translated into the community of faith.

Identity and Self Before God and the Body of Christ

In discussing our response to multicultural interaction, how do we understand the transcendence of God over all cultures, while at the same time identifying that he does recognize the individual within his or her own cultural context?

First of all, individuals before God must recognize a change of loyalty. Multicultural leader Stephen Rhodes asserts that “identity based on cultural or racial origin will never be sufficient to make us spiritually mature or whole persons.” Suppose the individual is a woman -- she is a new creation, someone different than she was outside of Christ. In one sense she is no longer the woman raised in a rural village in Nigeria, she has become part of the universal family of God. She has moved from the gods of a given culture to the God of all cultures. It is not that she is no longer connected to her culture, but that her primary loyalty is now directed toward the God who transcends culture.

Secondly, though, we only recognize the liberating universality in Christ because we come from particular cultural contexts that still impact our worldviews. The American must come to see the gods of our culture, from which Christ liberates us, while understanding that our personhood is still shaped and informed by those cultural values. Paul says we are all one in Christ and then specifically articulates the particularities that are now part of the unified community: Jews, Gentiles, male, female, slave, free – specific recognition of culture, gender and social status (Gal 2:28). We are not separated from who we are, instead we become new creatures in that context.

In Christ, one leaves behind the sacredness of cultural identity and holds it loosely. Maintaining the proper distance from one’s own culture does not remove the Christian from that culture. We are distant from the ideology of our culture and yet we still belong. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf suggests that we should not be seeking to develop a universal Christian culture, but that Christians should have “a catholic personality.” We should be people who are enriched by the otherness, the difference, of brothers and sister in Christ from other cultures. If we have opened up to God’s “different” presence in our lives, then we should also be open to other differences. The distance from our own culture that has been created by entering into relationship with Christ does not isolate us but creates space in us for the other. As we are enriched by the experience of difference, so we can enrich the cultures to which we belong.

The Incarnational Church

But where is this place where these “catholic personalities” can gather together to be enriched by difference, by the other, who is also in Christ? If the community of Christians, the church -- the *ekklesia* -- is not a place where gospel values can be lived out in tangible terms, where else is it possible?

The eschatological vision of Revelation 7:9, of all nations and tribes gathered around the throne, must begin to take place in the Body of Christ in this present age. The church community should become a place where people feel safe to reach out and embrace strangers—others—because those strangers have been, first of all, accepted and embraced by Christ. Parker Palmer paints this picture: “the holy city arises in the very process of strangers coming together and bringing the word of life to each other.” In fact, Palmer suggests, “the church could become a kind of halfway house between the comforts of private life and the challenges of diversity—but only if it can stay open to strangeness and help us experience our differences within the context of a common faith.”

It is precisely at this point that the issue of multiculturalism in the church encounters reality. Is the church prepared to do the work of being the diverse people of God, the differentiated Body of Christ? Pastor Stephen Rhodes comments, from experience, that Christian leaders will rationalize segregation along homogeneous fault lines; “they will argue that

homogeneous ministry is really the only way out of our decline—that transformational or multilingual ministry is a “wonderful concept” but certainly not practical. They will say that if we are serious about church growth, we should emphasize churches that are homogeneous, not heterogeneous. But clearly this is not what the Bible says.”

The Christian – who happened to be from Ecuador—in the story told earlier, was looking for a place to worship with other believers who would respect his different cultural background but not separate from him on the basis of that culture. He was looking for an authentic relationship with Christians who would listen to his distinctive cultural viewpoint without condescension -- and who might even be willing to adjust their own viewpoint because of what they learned from him.

In response to cultural diversity, ultimately we have to ask the question: “what would Jesus do?” Would he separate, or would he be inclusive? This is not a theoretical question when in fact we have the testimony of Jesus’ life; even in his inner circle were found the different, the marginalized. Christ opened himself to difference and therefore the church must open itself. What remains, then, is for the people of God to more adequately reflect this picture in the practical realities of congregational life.

The Multicultural Congregation

1. values, encourages and affirms diverse cultural modes of being and interacting
2. creates a congregational dialogue in which no one cultural perspective is presumed to be more valid than other perspectives
3. empowers all cultural voices to participate fully in setting goals and making decisions

Reading List

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