

Celebrating Our Multicultural Ministry From Paul's Perspective

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“Celebrating Our Multicultural Ministry” is the theme of our annual conference. This theme can be addressed from several viewpoints. I am going to touch on it from *Paul's perspective*. Namely, the way in which Paul redefined the meaning of the Christian mission and of being God's people in a multicultural environment.

Paul championed the mission to the gentiles. From the very beginning of his conversion, he received the revelation that the field of his calling would be in a gentile –multicultural– context (Acts 9).

One of the bigger battles that Paul had to fight was with the judaizing Christians who believed that gentiles, in addition to converting to Christ, should also keep the religious and cultural way of life of the Jews. The more radical judaizers would teach that to become part of the people of God they had to become Jews.

Studies on “Paul’s new perspective”¹ commonly accept today that the Judaism of Paul's time was dominated by what is called “*Covenantal Nomism*.” This covenantal nomism taught that the requirements to become a member of the people of God were:

Keeping the deeds of the Law

Circumcision

Keeping the Sabbath

Keeping the rituals of clean and unclean foods.

Celebrating the Jewish feasts.

And, most of all, ethnically belonging to the Jewish race.

¹ See James D. G. Dunn. *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990), 183-203.

Loyalty to the covenant and to the Jewish race was demonstrated by keeping these practices, which Paul will later call the “deeds of the Law.” One of the reasons for which Daniel and his friends are celebrated is because they “purposed in their heart that they would not defile themselves with Babylonian food.” During the time of the Maccabees, the features cited above were stressed as typical symbols of a godly Jew, especially in the martyrs who stood “firm without eating unclean food.”²

This was the reason Paul confronted Peter in Antioch. The Church there was ethnically mixed, that is, it was constituted by Hellenistic and gentile Jews. When Peter saw the Judaizers sent by James from Jerusalem, he withdrew and separated himself from the table of fellowship with the gentiles. In Galatians 2, the reason for not sharing in the table of fellowship with the gentiles was due to the Jewish scruples regarding clean and unclean foods. In the larger context of Galatians, these scruples included the fact that gentiles were uncircumcised and no ethnically Israelites.

It is in this context that Paul, in Galatians 3, presents the promises of salvation made to Abraham to all nations without any *reference to national identity*. It is in this context also that we should understand justification by faith. In other words, the requirement to belong to the people of God is no longer an ethnic-racial identity, but faith in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is in this context that Paul makes a spectacular declaration in Galatians 3:26-29 on the practical impact of liberating the gospel from nationalistic, ethnic and racial systems:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ... There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

² Op. Cit. 193

Connections

However, what does this have to do with the theme of our annual conference?

I believe that this study has several junctures in view of our evangelistic multicultural ministry.

I

According to my exegesis, justification by faith means that all races have access to salvation without the need to becoming racially Jewish. That is, God kept His promise of salvation for Jews and gentile, but He did so through Jesus Christ the Messiah. Therefore, in order to become a member of the people of God and to have salvation, the ethnic label of been Jewish is no longer needed. One only needs to believe in the Messiah.

We must be careful that in our evangelistic or missionaries efforts we be not only “americanizing, hispanicizing, africanizing, etc.” people of other cultures. It is true that for practical reasons, it is important for people of other cultures to be assimilated within the dominant culture, but that is secondary³ to Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. In his mission to the gentiles, Paul did not require them to be assimilated into Jewish culture. No matter how reasonable and advantageous the process of integrating into another culture may be, for the effects of reaching people for Christ in multicultural contexts, they do not have to be as I am, culturally speaking, to be converted to Christ or to be good Christians.

³ I will write another paper addressing the sociological aspect of a multicultural ministry; in it I will deal with the need of cultural assimilation/integration. So I do not deny the need of integration, but in this paper I am dealing with the biblical and theological dimensions of the theme.

II

As biblical Christians, we should get our identity from our relationship with Christ and not primarily from our ethnic identity. When Paul defines himself, he says that he has “no confidence in the flesh” that is, in his rich Jewish background as a Pharisee. He says about all his religious and ethnic labels that he “counts them as garbage.” Paul has a new pivotal point around which his life revolves. That new pivotal point is Christ and the gospel. Paul gets his identity from these (Phil. 3).

Humanly speaking, nobody can deny that cultural backgrounds close or open doors (Paul himself sometimes used his Roman citizenship as recourse). Nobody can deny the reality of “technologically developed or underdeveloped” regions. However, as Christians, we are called to surpass the human criteria that determine the way we perceive ourselves and the way we see and treat others.

III

Closely related to the above is the fact that as Christians, we should see ourselves as part of a “new creation” in Christ and not use the standards of the old creation. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:16 “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.” In Colossians 3 Paul says that we should “put to death our members which are of the earth.” The reason to doing so is that now we are part of a new creation in Christ. This new creation in Christ is the new humanity that God is forming in us. This is the new community of the Spirit where: “There is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or

uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” All this teaches us that as Christians we no longer treat our brothers and sisters based on nationality or social class labels but based on our unity in Christ. National identities are important, but in a multicultural context, these identities should be integrated in the larger identity of God's international family.

IV

As Christians, developing a multicultural ministry sometimes means having a polemical relationship with the gods of the secular culture. Paul, in the best prophetic style of the OT, makes a clear criticism of the polytheistic paganism of his time. In 1 Cor. 10: 4-6 Paul says:

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

In the same way, Paul challenges paganism's immorality.

We see then, that having an open multicultural attitude does not mean to be in agreement with everything our permissive society accepts and values. The gods of this postmodern world must be questioned. These gods are normally power, money, influence, beauty, fame, pleasure, and sex. Paul's alternative to the idol of power and pride of knowledge is love. He says: “Knowledge makes us feel important, but love edifies”.

Post-modernism has crushed (with a great deal of reason) the myths of modernity. However, post-modernism offers neither alternatives nor a safe haven. The one sure thing that post-modernism offers is to question and deconstruct everything. However, I believe that, in our

attempt to be culturally sensitive, we should not hide God's meta-narrative. I believe that the Christian meta-narrative continues to be God's offer to the postmodern world. That is, the meta-narrative of the cross, the meta-narrative of the gospel, the meta-narrative of the Kingdom of God.

V

Paul states in chapter 1 of the letter to the Ephesians, that Christ is Lord over creation and the head of the Church. Christ is over all. In chapter 2, God, by means of the cross (Christ's death and resurrection) has broken down the middle wall that separated the gentiles from the spiritual inheritance of the Israelites. Now the gentiles who were ethnically removed from the privileges of salvation are “fellow citizens and members of the household of God.” Thus, out of two people God made one people.

In chapter 3, Paul talks about a “hidden mystery” that was revealed to him. That “hidden mystery,” is nothing more and nothing less than the salvation by faith through Christ available to all the races. “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

The Church is the result of the accomplishment of this mystery. It is a multiracial and international church. In the context of Ephesians chapter 3, this Church of Christ, constituted by all the families of the earth, has now the mission to make known to “the principalities and powers in the heavenly places,”⁴ that their end has come. That God's redemptive, multicultural,

⁴ See also “Stoicheia” in Herald Hawthorne et al. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 229-233.

multiracial and international plan has succeeded through Jesus Christ our Lord. That salvation⁵ (the *soteria*) of Roman pax and security were not enough. That God's plan includes a “new creation” personal, congregational and cosmic. That God has already begun in the Church the creation of that new humanity. What is required in this new humanity is unity in Christ not uniformity of cultural ways of life.

Conclusion

The vision of our denomination and of our conference is “to be a healthy biblical community of holy people multiplying disciples, leaders, groups, and churches. One of the strategic priorities of our conference is for “each church to be sufficiently healthy to plant a daughter church in its own culture and another church in a different culture...” We are one of the conferences that ministers to more ethnic groups in foreign soils as well as in Southern California. Isn't this grand?

We are going to meet with great challenges when we put in practice this multicultural ministry. We are going to discover that each ethnic group has its own way of doing things. We are going to discover that not everybody has the same concept of time. We are going to discover that some cultures within our own conference are going to be more relationally oriented and others more oriented to producing results. Some like contemplative worship and will use biblical

⁵ See N.T. Wright. *Paul*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 74. I paraphrased some ideas of this author elsewhere.

and historical Church symbols. Others will prefer to worship with the loud sound of drums, base guitars and dances. Friends I have the feeling that God is very creative!

If every pastor and church in the Los Angeles urban environment is going, not only to survive but also to grow, they will have to experience the miracle of Paul's call to the gentiles. Except that, in our situation, the work is done in our own city because the world has come to us.

I invite you to reconsider and to accomplish our multicultural ministry made clear by the principles we have learned from the apostle Paul. I invite you that this or next year we all start a new ethnic church. I invite you as pastors, delegates and churches that we personally support with our prayers, and with our increased offerings the worldwide missions of our conference and our denomination.

Our world needs a little more than the “pax and security” of the United Nations. The world needs more than the American “soteria, pax and security.” Our world and city need the gospel.

Let us celebrate then our multicultural ministry!