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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Unity and diversity: the church, race and ethnicity

by Sujit Sivasundaram

Summary

The affirmation of ethnic diversity can give the individual believer and the local congregation a sense of cohesion and belonging. Yet, if ethnicity becomes a primary criterion defining identity, we risk marginalising ethnic minorities. This paper brings the twin principles of *unity* and *diversity* to bear on four contexts: the individual Christian, the local congregation, the global church and the church in society. In each case, it advocates the celebration of both the *unity* of how being in Christ sees ethnic differences disappear and the *diversity* that emerges in understanding and respecting ethnic differences amongst believers.

Ethnic conflict

In preparing this paper, I had the privilege of sitting in on a class on 'Race and Prejudice' at the Colombo Theological Seminary in Sri Lanka, a country divided by a long-standing ethnic conflict between the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, who tend to be Hindus.

The students in the class discussed how to respond. A Sinhalese Christian told how she was learning the Tamil language. The class advocated trilingual church services, in English, Sinhala and Tamil to avoid ethnic segregation. There was discussion of the prejudices which prevented Christians marrying across ethnic lines. Could Sinhala-speaking congregations collect money for Tamil-speaking ones? There was a broader debate about the need for Christianity to put down cultural roots in Sri Lanka so that it did not belong to one ethnic group, or appear to be the by-product of European colonisation. Could the church embrace aspects of different ethnic heritages – such as traditional lamps or dances – in order to allow converts to embrace the gospel without Western cultural packaging?¹

Ethnic cosmopolitanism

In some of Europe's largest cities, a new phenomenon is increasingly apparent – the ethnic church. It is pertinent to note the status in the US of black majority churches – such as that formerly attended by Barack Obama.

In 2005 it was found that 17 per cent of UK church attenders were from ethnic minorities. Black churches are thought to be those that are the fastest growing. The most established example is the network of African neo-Pentecostal churches associated with the African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance. In 2005–6, there were 526 multiple congregation and 189 single congregation African and Caribbean churches in the UK.² Meanwhile, Chinese churches have their institutional organ in the Chinese Overseas Christian Mission with a list of affiliated churches in the UK and Europe.

In a previous issue of *Cambridge Papers*, Julian Rivers discussed how Christians should engage with debates about 'multiculturalism' in the political sphere. He urged a middle path, between liberal universalism and narrow nationalism, by alerting us to the importance of two principles – personal freedom and cultural integration.³ This paper seeks to address the function of the church and the self-identity of the believer. Unity with believers from different backgrounds is crucial; for all believers are equal in worth in God's sight. Yet diversity can be celebrated as God-given and ethnic heritage can give a sense of rootedness.

Terminology

Discussions of race and ethnicity are prone to misunderstanding, and it is important that the terms of this paper are examined before proceeding further. Three words are of importance: *race*, *racism* and *ethnicity*.

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1 For more discussion on these themes, see the Colombo Theological Seminary's publications, for instance, G. P. V. Somaratna, *The Foreignness of the Christian Church in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, 2006.
2 Peter Brierley, ed., *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends*, No.5, London: Christian Research, 2006, Tables 9.13–9.15.
3 Julian Rivers, 'Multiculturalism', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol.10, No.4, 2001.

Of these race is the oldest, and yet its appearance is relatively modern. There is vigorous debate in the humanities about whether the idea of race is older than the word itself: some anthropologists claim that racial consciousness is primordial; others suggest that it is connected with modernity, the rise of biological science and the consolidation of a world system of nation states. *Race* is used now to characterise a set of persons with common biological lineage and inheritance. The active articulation of prejudice or use of discriminatory policies on this basis is termed *racist*. It is a common assumption that race is a stable term because there are obvious indices of differentiation – such as skin colour, hair, eyes. Yet on which particular basis do we differentiate? A completely different map of races appears if we use fingerprints or body hair. This has led scholars in the humanities to urge that race is an imprecise term, which has been stretched in different ways in different periods.⁴

Because of the negative baggage attached to race, recent commentators have preferred *ethnicity*. Unlike race, ethnicity is seen to encompass both cultural and physical aspects of difference; it is generally seen as an affirmation of difference. It took hold after the end of the Second World War, in the immediate context of the Holocaust.

This paper uses these terms with a sense of their history and recognition of their changeability and scientific instability. However, for the sake of consistency, their most common contemporary meanings are kept in view: race as biological difference, and ethnicity as biology plus culture.

A brief biblical overview of ethnicity

When we come to biblical interpretation, it is important to put aside modern ideas of both race and ethnicity. Though senses of nation, people, language, tribe and kingdom are present in the Bible's salvation story, these are not linked straightforwardly to biological relationship.⁵ From God's perspective the lineage that matters most is the spiritual one: death comes through Adam and life through Jesus.⁶

The Old Testament covenant affirms the importance of kinship or lines of descent, while not excluding foreigners from the people of God. It foreshadows the New Testament covenant whose explicit theme is the breaking down of dividing walls. Yet even in the New Testament ethnicity is not dispensed with so much as transcended and repositioned.

Common origins: The Genesis creation story describes Adam and Eve as the originators of the whole of humanity. Adam and Eve are distinguished from the rest of the created realm and placed in authority over it.⁷ Later on in Genesis, we come to the passage that has been most ill-used for racist purposes, the account of Ham discovering drunken Noah's nakedness. Noah cursed Canaan, the youngest son of Ham, as 'the lowest of slaves'.⁸ It is difficult to believe, but this curse was used as one of the prime justifications for European enslaving of black peoples; in fact the Canaanites should not be confused with Africans or Cushites.

Table of nations: If the start of Genesis bears out the common origins of all humanity, the narrative quickly points to the emergence of different lines of descent. It is important to note the emphasis on clans, languages, nations and territories in Genesis 10–12. Yet '...the majority of Old Testament scholars while acknowledging that Genesis 10 is quite complex, do nonetheless maintain that the central organizing feature of the breakdown of

nations in Genesis 10 is not based on physical descent, but rather related to territorial or geopolitical affiliations.⁹ Genealogies in Scripture show how God takes note of descent, yet should not be read in simple terms as a comprehensive account of the generations.

Tower of Babel: The table of nations is followed by the Tower of Babel – and shows how humanity unites in rebellion against God. The sinfulness of this act arises from pride. 'Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered...'¹⁰ While God had ordained humans to spread over the earth, these men had resisted, settling in one place, the plain in Shinar. In response, God scatters them and confuses their language. God is thus sovereign over ethnic and linguistic differentiation; he intended for humankind to spread over the face of the earth, and to cultivate different cultures.

Chosen people: God calls Abram and tells him, 'I will make you into a great nation.'¹¹ In choosing to honour Israel over others, God demonstrates that he can utilise particular ethnic groups for particular purposes. The final words of God's call to Abram promise that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' In calling Israel to be his people, it was God's purpose to use them to reach and serve others. It is important to take a longer view of this covenant: 'The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham.'¹² The Old Testament covenant always pointed to how the New Testament gospel would be open to all.

Ethnicity in Israel: It is in this context that some foreigners could become part of the chosen people of Israel.¹³ In fact the people of Israel who returned from Egypt were a 'mixed crowd', not ethnically homogeneous.¹⁴ One of the largest tribes, Manasseh, and also the tribe of Ephraim, were in origin half-Egyptian.¹⁵ Furthermore, Israel's experience in Egypt is taken as a reason for the showing of mercy to aliens.¹⁶

Marriage and ethnicity: The reception of foreigners may be studied alongside the conditions of marriage to outsiders. For instance, Moses married two outsiders, the Midianite, Zipporah, who was the daughter of a priest, and a black African Cushite.¹⁷ From God's judgement against Aaron in Numbers it is apparent that he approved of Moses' second marriage. How do we make sense of this in the light of Deuteronomy 7:1–4, which seems to forbid Israelites marrying outside the fold? The issue is shared faith in Yahweh; differences in ethnicity are not objectionable in God's sight. Yet the danger of too much contact with neighbouring peoples of other faiths was keenly felt, particularly in the return from exile. Ezra's prayer confessing the sin of intermarriage led to communal weeping and the shaming of those who had married foreigners.¹⁸

The Old Testament idea of the people of Israel must be recast in light of the cross, which inaugurates a new kingdom, the body of Christ, the new people of Israel. The Old Testament 'nation' is fulfilled in the New Testament 'kingdom' and the church.

Jesus, Jews and Samaritans: Jesus' attitude to Samaritans is especially important, demonstrating the radical inclusiveness of his ministry and kingdom in the face of the Jewish hatred of Samaritans. Luke refers to Samaritans for this purpose six times in his two books.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Jesus' own ministry was directed

4 See for instance, the introduction to Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Atlantic World, 1600–2000*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

5 This section relies heavily on J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A biblical theology of race*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2003.

6 Rom. 5:17–19.

7 Gen. 1:27ff.

8 Gen. 9:25.

9 Hays, p.59.

10 Gen. 11:4.

11 Gen. 12:2.

12 Gal. 3:8.

13 See Jonathan Burnside, *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants*, Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 2001.

14 Ex. 12:38.

15 Gen. 46:20.

16 Lev. 19:33–34.

17 Num. 12:1.

18 Ezra 9–10.

19 Hays, p.167.

mostly to Jews. His mission to the Jews was expected to set the context for Gentile reception of the message.²⁰

The message for Gentiles: Acts underscores from the start the gathering in of the nations. Pentecost can be seen as a recasting of the Tower of Babel. Those filled with the Holy Spirit were able to overcome the barriers of language, but not by imposing a common language.²¹ Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch occurs early in the narrative. Peter, initially reluctant, proclaimed in Cornelius' house: 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'²²

All one: Being in Christ should dissolve division and discord.²³ In Ephesians, Paul reminds his Gentile readers that at the cross Jesus made in his flesh one new man out of Jews and Gentiles, by abolishing the dividing wall of the law. While the cross is where hostility between God and man ceases, Paul explains how it also put to death hostility between people who are part of 'the body'.²⁴ Christ's kingdom brings belonging, membership, communion, equality, common purpose and familial bonds. This was a politically radical message.

New creation: This kingdom's complete fulfilment awaits the Second Coming. In Revelation we have a wonderful picture of the Great Commission fulfilled, as people from every nation, tribe, people and language stand before the Lamb.²⁵ The unity of humankind seen in Genesis is redeemed. Yet Revelation does not suggest that differences are obliterated. These are still worshippers from different nations, tribes, peoples and languages. This diversity reflects God's glory even further, in that different people are united in a common act of worship.

Through both the Old and New Testaments it is possible to trace the twin principles of unity and diversity.

A historical glance

At times the church has successfully campaigned against the dehumanising treatment of peoples on the basis of ethnicity. At other times it has lost sight of the Bible's unique message of unity and diversity.

After 1500, there were those who dispensed with the idea of the unitary creation of humankind and advocated multiple creations for different peoples.²⁶ This was a distortion of Scripture in an effort to fit newly discovered peoples from the great explorations of this period into the lineages of Genesis.

In Britain, evangelicals were at the heart of the movement for abolishing the slave trade; and the impact of the evangelical emphasis on human unity meant that a harsher racism did not arrive until later in the nineteenth century. Yet at the same time in the American South, slavery was seen to be scriptural, with 'Ham's curse' cited as a justification. The expansion of new empires saw the worldwide dispersal of missionaries who held to the 'one blood' of humanity. They acted as cultural critics of other societies, by seeking to protect those from lower castes or ill-treated women. Yet they often sought to make their converts European in dress, language and imperial loyalty.

Throughout the later nineteenth century, the belief that Americans and Britons were really Israelites surfaced in a number of denominational strands ranging from Pentecostalism to Mormonism. This again was a misreading of the role of genealogies in Scripture: the lineages of the Old Testament always pointed forward and were to be transcended after the inauguration of the

kingdom of Christ. In the context of Nazism, the Confessional Church played a heroic role of dissent. However, in South Africa Dutch Reformed clergy used their theology to legitimise segregation. Yet liberation theology was vital to black protest against apartheid and was also espoused by some white churches, especially after the massacre of Sharpeville in 1960.

Some more recent ethnic conflicts, such as that in Nigeria, have also been affected by an alignment of ethnicity and Christianity. In contemporary America, churches are said to be among the most segregated places on a Sunday morning.²⁷ In the 1950s and 1960s, black church leaders led the Civil Rights Movement, showing how important Christianity could be for social change; yet Southern white evangelicals usually stood against them or were indifferent.

The record of the church's stand on race and ethnicity, encompassing both those who are evangelicals and non-evangelicals, has therefore been mixed and contradictory.

Practising unity and diversity

The individual Christian

It is very difficult for us to understand what it means to be a member of another ethnicity; it is particularly difficult for majority ethnicities to imagine how it feels to be in a minority. The influence of race on our thinking or our interaction with other people is often subconscious. Christians need to awaken their consciences in this area, and reflect on their thoughts, words and actions. Rather than denying that we often stereotype people on the basis of ethnicity, or subtly seek to disassociate ourselves from people of other ethnicities, we need to take positive and practical steps to appreciate the wonderful unity that is the one body of Christ.

As individual Christians we might make friends with believers and non-believers from other ethnicities – by inviting an international student from church home for lunch or by making contact with ethnic minority parents at the local school. By talking to Christians with radically different backgrounds, it is possible to renew our faith and to become conscious of some of our failings and how culture has distorted the gospel. Too often Christians follow the world's model of friendship, seeking to get alongside those who are like them. This is natural, and yet in this increasingly globalised world, we have all the more opportunities to meet and befriend people from other backgrounds for the sake of the gospel.

Yet even as we befriend those of other ethnicities, there should still be opportunities for us to identify our own heritages, for instance, considering what it means to be a Nigerian Christian, or a white English Christian. This can involve an appreciation of the way God has formed our particular cultures – their history, music and language – and how this shapes how we apply our faith. There will also be areas, such as relationships with the wider community or family and particular forms of social interaction, which mean that we will feel more at home with believers who are like us. This should not be denied.

The individual believer should thus seek to live out the twin principles by seeking after those unlike themselves, and also by finding comfort from those of a similar heritage.

The local congregation

The local congregation of believers should seek to live within the tension of unity and diversity. Corporate worship may thus involve the coming together of peoples from multiple backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, class and age, to glorify God and to help each other to follow him. Such gatherings will require sacrifices in terms of preferred styles of singing and preaching. Yet there will need to be other occasions where differences are recognised – such as in the organisation of small groups for fellowship. Each congre-

20 Matt. 15:22–28.

21 Acts 2:4.

22 Acts 10:34.

23 Gal. 3:28.

24 Eph. 2:11–22.

25 Rev. 7:9.

26 David N. Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion and the Politics of Human Origins*, Johns Hopkins Press, 2008.

27 See Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

gation will have to find a balance between the unity of the gospel and how God calls us as people with different identities. One issue which is particularly important is that of leadership: the local congregation should seek to recruit into its leadership members that reflect the multiple backgrounds of which it is composed. There are many successful multiethnic churches that can serve as models, particularly in large capitals: for instance, Times Square Church in New York and Kensington Temple, London.

The multiethnic church is a tremendous resource for evangelism. By drawing attention to the diversity of its members, the church might present an attractive alternative to the cultural relativism so prevalent today. The post-modern onlooker might reduce Christianity to the needs of a particular local community, or might explain it in terms of the attractiveness of its symbols and ideas for individuals. They might seek to differentiate black Christianity from white Christianity. The multiethnic church challenges these assessments by presenting the gospel as something that holds for people everywhere, and which is visibly followed by all ethnicities.

Against this, a now-controversial case has been made for the evangelistic potential of mono-ethnic churches. This argument, routinely used in church planting, is called 'the homogenous unit principle', and is tied to the claim that people become Christians when there is as little change as possible to their identities. It is said to work better in rural rather than urban contexts.²⁸ It is my own conviction that churches should not seek to be organised primarily in terms of ethnicity, or for that matter class or age, as this detracts from the biblical principles of unity in diversity. Yet it may be that for some categories of people – such as recently arrived immigrants – ethnic churches are vital to aid integration.

The global church

The centre of gravity in the Christian church is speedily shifting away from Europe to Africa and Asia. Christianity is not owned by one continent. The Bible is not a European, let alone an English text.

In thinking through the principles of unity and diversity at the global level, it is important to remember that ultimately there is only one church. Believers should therefore see themselves as members of a global communion of Christians from multiple nations and backgrounds. All of us might find ways of learning from and supporting the expansion of the church elsewhere by praying and giving.

In addition, believers across the world need to learn humility in their dealings with others. One practical application may be for the West to prepare itself to receive more African and Asian missionaries. It is a fundamental mistake for one ethnicity to believe its understanding of the gospel is somehow superior to that of the other; or that it has the right to teach and not learn. In learning from each other, it will be possible to challenge aspects of culture and cultural influences on theology that are not consistent with the Bible's teaching. At the same time, in keeping with the principle of

diversity, there will undoubtedly be differences in how we apply the Bible's message in different cultures, and there will be a need to respect this.

The church in society

In this fallen world, the church will inevitably continue to take a too exalted view of race and discriminate on the basis of ethnic identity. In symmetric fashion, in writing and campaigning about ethnicity, it is very easy to fall into the trap of having an agenda-driven interpretation of the Bible, where activism will in the end dispense with racism. Both those who feel marginalised as well as those who feel wrongly accused should repent and forgive. Christ calls us to serve rather than to be served. In doing this, the church will then be able to model an effective grass-roots cosmopolitanism, that is quite distinct from that which emanates from abstract government directives.

It is important that Christians are willing to denounce racism and to encourage their leaders to work against racism. In Europe, if unemployment becomes an issue with the economic crisis, and race riots appear again, Christians will have a role to play, in petitioning the state. In situations of ethnic conflict, the church must be very careful not to become politically biased and end up supporting the policies of repressive regimes or supremacist rhetoric. It should stand up for the victimised. The church must also be conscious and critical of the re-emergence of old ideologies of racism – such as eugenics and fascism. In all of these ways and others, it should challenge policies and philosophies that do not fit with both the unity and equality of humankind and the diversity of ethnic cultures. This critique of society ought to be conducted in public, without fear. The church's integrity will be assessed by whether it is itself practising inclusion.

We need to beware of the danger of becoming religiously pluralist: the need for unity and diversity does not equate with the idea that all religions are the same. The gospel hinges on Christ's action on the cross. Christians need to defend the gospel and stand up for the victimised. Persecution may come our way, for violence often tends to accompany racism directed at Christians. Remember the Rwandan students who were martyred as they proclaimed: 'In Christ there is neither Tutsi or Hutu.'

It will not be humanly possible to get the right balance between unity and diversity, and yet the time is soon coming when both will take their proper place. It is a glorious prospect to look forward to the multiple nations, tribes, peoples and languages of heaven!

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28 This arose from Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner, *Understanding Church Growth*, Eerdmans, 1970.

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