

LIFE TOGETHER IN GOSPEL-COMMUNITY

III. EMBRACING THE OUTSIDER

Introduction:

"If the Church is to be effective and advocating a new [Kingdom]...order...it must itself be a new social order. The deepest root of the contemporary malaise of Western culture is all individualism that denies..., that we grow into trite humanity only in relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another. The local congregation...stands in the wider community of neighborhood and nation not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change (although it will be that) but primarily as itself the foretaste of a different social order. Its members will be advocates for human liberation by themselves being liberated. Its advocates for justice and peace will be, and will be seen to be, the overflow of a life in Christ, where God's justice and God's peace are already an experienced treasure."

-- Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*

One of the most important ways that the Christian church embodies the gospel is in the unity of Christians who are different from one another--temperamentally, culturally, racially. In general, the job of the church is to show the world that people who cannot live in love and unity outside of Christ *can* do so in Christ.

One of the main problems that post-modern people have with both modern and traditional world-views (and Christianity is seen as falling within one or the other) is the way in which they exclude. Their contention: if you think you have 'the truth' or even 'enlightened science', then you think you are superior to others--that excludes and divides. But as Newbigin himself shows (pp. 1-65), 'Relativism' is extremely exclusive in its claims--even more so, since it will not admit its exclusivity as other religions and philosophies do--and in the end can be a warrant for terrible oppression. Ultimately, the main way for Christians to demonstrate the grace of the gospel (and how *it* has the most *inclusive* of all exclusivities) is in how Christians learn to embrace other Christians who are deeply different and even non-believers to a great extent.

EMBRACING 'OUTSIDER' CHRISTIANS.

A. Theology of 'the New Humanity' - Ephesians 2:11-22

1. v. 11 - The Necessity of Christian Unity. *"Therefore"* connects this section on the church to everything that has gone on previously. In 1:18 Paul ends by asking God that the readers will know *surpassing greatness of his power*. Then he goes on in 2:1-10 to show the great power in our individual lives (bringing us into eternal life by the new birth), and in 2:11ff. to show his power in our corporate lives, by uniting us in the church. Apply: Is Paul saying we can't be saved without being a member of a church? No, he's not saying that. But he is saying that the power of God does not change you individually without also incorporating you into new kinds of relationships, into a community of love, truth, and mission. You can't functionally know the power of God in your life without the church. 81% of all people say "I can be a good Christian without going to church". God says however that he doesn't change you individually without changing you corporately.

2. w. 19-22 - The Intensity of Christian Unity. Paul uses images to characterize the church--each with greater intensity, a) *v.19a-FeUow citizens with God's people*. Here we are called a new nation. Our relationship to each other in Christ is to be stronger than our relationship to other members of our racial and national groups. When you become a Christian, you are not primarily from Ohio or Germany or Asia; you are not primarily Anglo, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, you are not primarily WASPy white collar or blue collar. We are citizens of God's nation, b) *v. 19b-members of God's household*. This means, moreover, that we are adopted into God's family, we are brought into his home. We are not only citizens, but sons and daughters. c) *v.21-22--in him...a holy temple...built together, a dwelling of God the Spirit*. We are a building, in which the glory- of God's *shekinah* dwells bodily. Here we see the increasing intensity. First, each gets us closer to God: a king lives in the region with his people, but a father lives in the same house with his children, but the Spirit actually lives *inside*, inhabits, the very- temple. Second, each gets us closer to each other. Citizens are tied by social contract, siblings by genetic code and upbringing, but stones of a temple are literally cemented to one another. d) Finally, there is the most remarkable image of all. v. 15 - His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of two. Probably (even if not motivated to gender neutral language!) the better translation

would be: "His purpose is to create a new humanity.' (Grk. *kainon anthropon*) Amazing! This is what Newbigin said--this is a new way of being human beings together, a new social order.

Apply: What's this mean? Can these images be squared in any way with simply attending church on Sunday and coming to classes afterwards? Even every week? No it means at least these three things. (1) (Image # 1) We are making close friends with people who otherwise we'd never know or care to know. (2) (Image #2) We are letting our whole lives be in contact with whole lives of some other Christians. You are accountable personally to some others. You have shared enough about your sins, and you spend enough time with others so that people really see whether you are growing in Christ. (3) (Image #3) We are praying with others and letting them see how you really feel about God. It is *together* that we are inhabited. You experience God *with* people with some consistency.

3. ~12-17- The Causality of Christian Unity. How do you become a living stone--a child, a citizen? a) w.14-15. Diagnosis of *the cause of division between peoples*. What was the division between Jew and Gentile? "*The law*". Wasn't the law a good thing? Yes, it was the Jews' greatest gift and asset (see Rom.9:4), but it is our gifts and strengths that are always the "dividing wall of hostility". It is our strengths, our goodness and righteousness that trips us up. It is our self-righteousness--our need to shore up our own fundamentally insecure sense of worth and image that makes us take our gifts and look at any without them and say, "look what I have--what's wrong with you that you don't?" b) v.12-13 and 17. *The first part of the cure-seeing that 'near' and 'far' is no different*. In vv. 12-13 it speaks of Gentiles as being 'far' and Jews as being 'near'. That is an honest assessment of the fact that the Gentiles lived immoral and ignorant lives, not having the Scriptures and the traditions of faith. But surprisingly, Paul says that Christ *preached peace* (the gospel) *to those who were far and peace to those who were near*. His using 'peace' twice shows that the two groups equally needed the gospel or were lost! We must see that religious people are as much estranged from God, they are as much trying to control and escape God's authority and be their own Savior and Lord as are the irreligious. Religious people simply try- to escape God by *obeying him*. Until you see that, the dividing wall's not down--you're still self-righteous, c) v.14-16. *Second part of the cure-faith in the imputed righteousness of Christ*. Paul says that on the cross God slew the enmity. How? The only thing that died on the cross was Jesus. But we have another example of imputation. Jesus *became* enmity. It can't mean he actually became hostile, angry, hateful. It means he became it legally--God treated him as if he were guilty for all the violence and anger and disunity of us all. What does this mean? 2 Cor.5:21--God *made him sin...that we might become the righteousness of God*. If "becoming sin" doesn't mean becoming actually but legally sinful, then when we believe, we don't immediately become actually righteous--but legally.

Sum: The gospel delivers two blows to our old self-image. It tells us that we are no better at all than those people who have lived what we consider less moral or disciplined lives. But then it tells us that v. 18- "*we both have access to the Father by one Spirit*". We are legally righteous, holy and blameless and perfect in his sight. We are more humbled and more affirmed (at the same time) by the gospel than by any other view of life or of the world. This brings down the dividing wall. If we had *either* a superiority or an inferiority feeling toward the other, we would not be able to embrace them, accept them, or become vulnerable to them.

B. Embracing Across Racial-Cultural lines.

1. The gospel breaks down barriers that separate people (Eph 2,4; Acts 1-13). A multi-ethnic body of Christians is not just the result of the communication of the gospel, but is an important way to communicate the gospel itself. It challenges cultural idols of each race and class, and it points to the restoration of love and the healing of injustice.

2. A Biblical view of Racial unity and diversity.

a. Unity. Acts 17:26 - *Froth one man he made every nation 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*. The homogeneity of the human race is so well documented by scientists that many posit the possibility that all human beings today had common ancestors. Paleontology, serology, comparative anatomy all points to the truth of what Paul says: "from one man".

b. Diversity. The Bible celebrates the diversity of culture, because different cultures have different glories and splendors (analogous to the differing gifts of the Body of Christ). That must not be forgotten in any effort to work for equality. The New Jerusalem will be enriched because, *the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it" and 'the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it"* (Rev.21:24,26). Each culture/race brings 'peculiar honors'--particular gifts.

e. Duality. The Bible also says some remarkable things about race when it tells us that the only *real* division in the human race is

one of faith, there are only two "nations" or "peoples" on earth (I Peter 2:9-10) Only believers are adopted by grace into God's spiritual and legal family, with rights as children (John 1:12; Romans 8:14ff.) God forbids marriage between unbelievers and believers (II Cor.6:14-16). The reason--because that is the only way to marry- outside your "people" (II Cor.6:17-18)! In Numbers 12:1-16 we have an amazing example of all this. Moses' wife is a Cheet--someone of the black race, and a believer in the Lord. Miriam opposes the inter-racial marriage and God punishes her by turning her leprous, "white as snow" (v. 10). God punishes her prejudice by making her more white! Thus Christians have a special test for racism. If racial differences are more important to you than religious differences, you are moving toward (or you are in) racism. Put another way: if you would rather your Christian friend/relative marry a non-Christian of the same race than a solid Christian of a different race, your racial prejudices have not been gospel-cleaned.

3. A Biblical view **of culture**. Closely linked to race is the issue of culture.

a. **The relative nature of culture**. The book of Acts (along with specific teaching b-v Paul in I Cor.8 and Rom. 14) shows us that Christianity is not to be directly culturally "imperialistic". It did not insist that the Gentiles, in order to become Christian, had to become culturally Jewish. In Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council officially recognized that the New Testament faith (unlike the Old Testament faith) had to be free from cultural requirements of food and dress etc. Why? Remember the 'kings' gifts'. One culture is very warm and emotional, another is rational. Both of them bring out aspects of the splendor of God's image in us--each shows off different divine gifts to humanity.

b. **The absolute nature of culture**. However, cultures are not neutral (for nothing can be (I Cor. 10:31). The Bible provides a set of absolute, transcendent ("trans-cultural") standards by which to judge each culture. "At the heart of any culture is a system of norms and values...commanding truths...by which we comprehend ourselves, others, and the larger world..." Every culture has certain views of the meaning of life, God, the afterlife, history-, the individual, the group, time, right and wrong, etc. These central commitments are not religiously neutral (how can they be?), and from them flow the many customs and mores. Another way to put it--every culture has its idols¹, and therefore, when Christianity enters a culture, it is "subversive", in that it affects one's central core commitments.

For example, many Asian cultures are affected in their cores by Confucianism, and thus one's family is given essentially ultimate value (i.e. it defines and justifies your existence). On the other hand, many Western cultures now are affected in their cores by Enlightenment rationalism, and thus the freedom of the individual to choose is given essentially ultimate value {i.e. it defines and justifies your existence). Now Christianity will eventually "demote" either the family OR the individual will from its central power. So to the Asian culture, thoughtful Asian Christians may appear radical and anti-traditional, while to secular Western culture, Christianity may appear neo-conservative.

c. **The mixed nature of culture**. Each culture is therefore 'mixed'--with grace-elements and sinful elements. As a result, Miroslav Volf says we are all to be like Abraham, who was called to 'depart' from his family and people, but who stays a pilgrim. (See "Distance and Belonging" in *Exclusion and Embrace*.) Volf concludes that this means every- Christian must get distance from his or her home culture, yet stay connected to it as well. A Chinese Christian must not think to "arrive" in some other culture--i.e., leave one's Shininess to take up some other world culture. Yet he or she must get critical distance, must be willing to critique the Chinese culture by identifying its idols. One of the main ways we do this is through exercising accountability and love with other Christians across racial and cultural lines to the fullest degree possible. Other brothers and sisters can help you see your own culture's idols. You must not be defensive when they do.

Sum: Christianity can take diverse cultural forms and yet bring a core of Trans-cultural absolute values in that transforms each culture. It is neither "absolutist" in its approach (i.e. that there is an absolutely 'pure' Christian culture) nor "relativist" in its approach (i.e. that all cultural forms are neutral and equally valid).

4. Steps toward Racial Unity in Christian Community.

a. Diagnose and treat racial prejudice with the gospel.

¹ Where does culture come from? Culture is the effort to bring the raw material of nature into the service of a core of "commanding truths", a set of answers to pre-theoretical issues like: what is true? what is the purpose of human beings? what is right and wrong? how do we know it? Culture arises out of the only primary human "need"--to worship--and out of our capacity as image-bearers to take dominion over nature to bring it into service of that which we worship (Romans 1:25). All cultural work is thus covenantal--done with a view to bring all of nature into service of our gods

(1) *Diagnosis.* As we saw in Ephesians 2, racism is a form of works-righteousness, one way we deal with life without the gospel. Sin is a proud independence in which we seek to be our own God, and to create a secure life independent of him. But because we were built to worship and know him, this effort at independence creates a sense of anxiety and shame. In response, we "cover our nakedness" and insecurity with some self-justifying belief system. We substitute some other ultimate value on which we now (frantically) seek as a way to justify our existence, feel acceptable and worthwhile. A common self-justifying system is one's culture and race. It is a way to feel superior and to cover up the sense of our nakedness.

"This those who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they cling not only to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ...Much that we have interpreted as a defect in sanctification in church people is really an outgrowth of their loss of bearing with respect to justification. Christians who are no longer sure [or nominal Christians who never were!] that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons-much less secure than non-Christians, because they have too much light to rest easily under the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and other branches on the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity." (R. Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, p. 198, 212)

(2). *Treatment.* In Acts 10-11 God showed Peter that anyone regardless of race and culture was equally lost in sin and equally loved in Christ, because salvation is totally by grace. Cornelius was brought into salvation not by his pedigree but by Christ's pedigree. Yet sometime later Paul saw Peter refusing to eat with Gentile Christians, and he confronted him about his racism. But how? He did not say, "you are breaking the rule against racism", but he said, "they were not acting in line with the gospel" (Gal.2:14). To act "in line with the gospel" is to take the fact that we are sinners saved by sheer grace and draw out the implications and live in total consistency- with that. Racial prejudice is wrong because it is a denial of the very principle of grace vs. works.

This means that gradually, the gospel transforms our identity. Identity is a complex set of layers, for we are many things. Our occupation, our ethnic identity, etc. are part of "who we are". But we assign different values to these components and thus Christian maturing is a process in which the most fundamental layer of our identity becomes our self-understanding as a new creature in Christ along- with all our privileges in him. For example, a person may begin:

5Christian
4Democrat
3Father
2Lawyer
1Irish

But come to:

5Democrat
4Lawyer
3Irish
2Father
1Christian

As our Christianity "moves down" in our identity, we find ourselves less shaken by- any professional, social, relational changes. We are less driven at work. We overcome racial prejudices, and become more open-minded about politics, etc.

"Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free...to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in I

Corinthians 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures." (Richard Lovelace, The Dynamics of Spiritual Life, p.199)

b. Increase multi-ethnic Christian friendships.

(1) For Anglos/members of dominant cultures: (a) Anglo Christians need to go way beyond Anglo non-Christians in acquainting themselves with the perspectives and experiences of minorities. Members of the dominant culture don't *need* to know about non-Anglo ways in order to survive. So there is no selfish reason to learn. But Anglo Christians have different motives. (b) Anglos must remember that non-Anglos *have* had to learn the Anglo ways in order to work and do business. So while they know what rankles, confuses you--you may not know what upsets or confuses them. to survive. So move out in humility. (c) Don't be too quick to deny racism in yourself. Any minority in a society will see racism in a way that you won't. You may be relatively free of conscious forms, but prejudice can be subtle. Do you have trouble finding spokespersons of other races credible? Do you make little snap judgements about someone based on their race? Do you find the idea of intermarriage creepy? (d) Don't deny all responsibility. Western individualism makes us feel that we are not responsible at all for racism done by other generations or by other members of the church. But Nehemiah confessed the sins of his people (though he wasn't alive when it was done-- Nehemiah 1:5ff.) The Bible is not as individualistic as we are today. There is a place for humility and special consideration and "fruits of repentance" toward groups historically ill-treated by our churches and people. (e) Seek to put yourself in the shoes of minorities. "Weep with those who weep; rejoice with those who rejoice" (Romans 12:15) means that Christians are to be seeking to understand the inner worlds of people around us. We are to listen to those who weep and discover why they do so and weep with them.

(2) For members of minority groups: (a) Beware of a 'reverse' moralism. It is very easy to feel superior to dominant racial groups, because you feel they haven't suffered as you and they are oppressors unlike you. Ironically, it can make you become a kind of Pharisee in reverse. (b) Overcome evil with good. Romans 12:9-21 should be read by racial minorities carefully. It is never right to allow someone to go on sinning. We must confront and ask for justice (v.9). But we neither avoid nor revenge ourselves on the oppressor (v. 18-19). Instead we see to melt their hearts and bring them up short with non-self-righteous deeds of kindness toward them.

(3) For everyone. Paul in Romans 14 and 15 gives us lots of guidance for cross-cultural friendship. In this church, Jewish and Gentile Christians had many different customs about what kind of meat to eat. (This is not an argument over meat offered to idols as in 1 Cor.8, but appeared to be a division over kosher foods.) (a) On the one hand, Paul insists that in the gospel we are free to eat any kind of meat (v. 14, 20) and Christians who are offended or upset by people eating non-kosher food are "weak" (v.2). (b) But it is striking that Paul does not advocate coercing or ridiculing the weaker Christians about their sensitivities and heritage (v.13,15,19-20). He says to those who think they are "strong"--don't regard people with scruples with contempt (v.3) When you do, you are not walking in love (v. 15) and you forget that a person's conscience, even if it is still being too sensitive through unnecessary cultural prejudices, should be honored and treated gently. (v.22). He then says to those who are "weak"--not to despise those who see things differently (v.3).

This is remarkable. Different cultures have very different definitions of basic Christian virtues. For example, a young Asian-American pastor was candidating at a "1st Generation" Asian church for a position on staff. Things were going along fine until he asked: "what is the salary?" Immediately he was rejected. The search committee concluded that anyone who cared about the salary, was greedy and uncommitted to the ministry- of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, in many U.S. churches today, we have stopped even thinking about greed. By any Biblical standards, many Christians are spending far too much money on themselves. The individualism of western culture sees the 1st Generation Asian church as potentially exploitative. The collectivism of traditional Asian culture sees the western Christians as deeply selfish. Are not both partially correct? That means that our cultural 'hang-ups' always have an element of truth in them, but they need to be 'gospel-cleaned' and balanced. And since none of us are looking at anyone else from a culture-neutral position, we must be slow to condemn and patient with others. We should, like Paul says, be willing flex for people who are upset and offended because.

Another very- normal cultural difference is on emotional expression. Group A may see members of Group B as uptight and unfriendly. But the Group B may have been taught since childhood that the same expressions valued by Group A are rude and would be impositions. Which group should 'get its way'? Paul's answer is that the more gospel-cleaned and mature you are (the "strong") the more you *~11 be the* group that flexes to make others feel at home.

c. Work for multi-ethnic congregations.

(1) *Definition:* A "multi-ethnic church" cannot have an exact definition. Manny Ortiz says that it is a church which: a) quantitatively, has a significant presence of at least two distinct ethnic groups [at least 33-66%], and b) qualitatively, a significant/similar presence of the groups in the structure and the leadership of the church.

(2) *Theological Balance*. Too much emphasis on distinct "peopleness" inside a church overlooks the fact that all natural group identities have an idolatrous aspect--they are substitutes for Christ and his Body. Every- people group "*has a demonic side as well as God given authenticity*" and to exalt it too highly is to "*stress the pluriformity of the church more than its catholicity [its universality] If breaking down barriers between separate people in the world is an essential part of the gospel, not merely a result of it, doesn't an overemphasis on people groups' inhibit the expression of gospel 'oneness'.*" (Conn, p.194) Yet, on the other hand, too little emphasis on group distinctives will mean that we unconsciously will be exalting the ways and customs of one or two groups over others and will make our outreach to them ineffective. Each distinct group and culture has a '*God given authenticity*'.

(3) *Practical Limitations*. Ultimately, no one congregation can possibly embrace the full range multi-ethnicity, a) First, there are tons of practical issues--like language, decision-making--that will have to be decided one way or the other, immediately taking someone's cultural approach over another. There is no such thing as a culture-free way to do anything. So for example--in one culture, the senior members of the staff would simply make the decisions; in another culture, there will be a call for participative discussion and group decision-making. Which way will we go? We cannot go both ways. Is one way more Biblical than another? Not especially. Therefore, there are some limits to diversity, b) Second, however, it means that in every church there should be some Christians called to help the church be more reflective of the new social order, help Christians of other cultures understand their own idols, but who will accept the fact that they will often they will be living in somewhat alien cultural territory. Members of a minority culture in a church will patiently accept the fact that they will often not have their culture's accustomed ways followed. But the majority should always be working to listen to their minorities and find ways within practical limitations

EMBRACING 'OUTSIDER' NON-CHRISTIANS.

A. Post-modern multi-culturalism assumes that all truth is socially constructed--thus the whole work we do in working for multi-cultural harmony is to help people "find their voices". Alasdair MacIntyre have show that there is no rational basis for human rights without God. If everything is relative, how can you impose 'tolerance' on anyone except as a power-play? Post-modernism, moreover, can be a way to justify- real oppression (e.g. Fluehr-Lobban).

B. Jesus says that a sign of gospel-faith: Matthew 5:47 *If you only greet your brothers, what do ye more than others?* Since the Jewish greeting was *Shalom!* and an embrace, Jesus is saying much. We must show our uniqueness by following our Lord who always embraced the moral and spiritual outsider.

1. Theological basis. Miroslav Volf, in *Exclusion and Embrace* sees in the cross a theological basis for embracing people of different cultures and also deeply different belief systems. He sees the cross as "*divine self-donation*" for people who are sinners at the time of the donation. What does that mean?

The will [willingness] to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them ~ is prior to any judgment about them...I immediately continue to argue, however, that the embrace itself--full reconciliation--cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice done. There is an asymmetrical dialectic between the grace of self-donation and the demand for truth and justice. While the will to embrace is indiscriminate, the embrace itself is conditional. (p.29)

B. Practical basis. Matt.21:31-*The prostitutes and the tax collectors are entering the Kingdom of God before you. If you understand the gospel of grace you treat the 'other':* 1) With respect. Grace means the non-believer may be a better person. 2) With courage. Grace means the nonbeliever's possible rejection of us is not so fearsome. 3) With hope. Grace means you are a miracle and no one is beyond hope. No other world-view can produce this combination of humility and confidence.