

The Church and Ethnicity

Twenty-eight foreign students were killed and 366 assaulted in Russia in 2005 for being of an outcaste ethnic group¹. The Han Chinese and the Muslim Hui Chinese battled in November 2004, leaving a dozen dead over four days of violence². In Boston a white man was tortured and left unconscious by blacks on railroad tracks for dating a black woman³; on the same dateline threatening letters were sent to two black athletes in Cleveland, Ohio, warning them not to date white women⁴. Racial and ethnic tensions are ubiquitous. They exist between Koreans and Japanese, between Lithuanians and Polish, between Cherokees and African Americans and among Coats, Serbs and Bosnian Muslims (Bosniacs). They exist between the French and English, between Jews and almost everyone, and infamously between Hutus and Tutsis.

What is ethnicity? It derives from the Greek word “ethnos.” In the New Testament it refers to larger people groups generally than are represented by tribes and language groups. In Acts 2:5-11 the term is used for various and generally small political entities around the Mediterranean, each having its own language, customs and history. The overarching usage is of the largest people units⁵. A classic definition of ethnicity is George DeVos’: “An ethnic group is a self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include “folk” *religious beliefs* and practices, *language*, a sense of *historical continuity*, and *common ancestry* or place or origin.”⁶

With inclusion comes exclusion. An ethnic group considers itself to be unique, interconnected and usually better than others, and is of a somewhat higher order than culture. The same ethnic group can vary culturally according to the country in which it resides, such as ex-patriot Chinese or Indian merchants thriving around the globe.

Ethnicity differs from the concept of race, which refers to physical features (phenotypes). “The term *ethnicity* is usually used to stress the cultural rather than the physical aspects of group identity. Ethnic groups share language, dress, food, customs, values, and sometimes religion.”⁷

Physical differences—hair, color, and dimensions of various parts of the anatomy, seem to indicate radical differences among humans. But genetically, Africans and Europeans actually have more in common than do Africans and almost anyone living to the east of the Middle East⁸. “The primary result of gene frequency studies is that most human polymorphisms [physical variations] are dispersed across the globe. According to the Human Genome Project (HGP), 93 percent of the variation that does exist is found within human populations, and only 7 percent between them.” That is, 93 percent of genetic differences can be found within my own “race” or ethnic group, and only 7 percent found between “racial” or ethnic groups⁹. These differences are bunched around geographic barriers such as oceans and deserts, indicating widespread selective inbreeding created by these barriers, but aren’t significant enough genetically to constitute “races”¹⁰. Races seem real enough, but have been overemphasized in an effort to keep one’s own race “pure.”

Are culture and ethnicity the same? Ethnicity is not defined so much by “How?” (culture) as by “Who?” (identity). Culture can be defined as a group’s accepted solutions to life’s

problems. How do we eat; how do we clothe and house ourselves? How do we relate to higher or spirit beings? How do we marry, live married and raise children? What and how do we eat? How do we relate to others in our family, clan and tribe or nation, and how do we relate to outsiders? Yet this unique combination of solutions does contribute toward an identity.

Humans need an identity. We need to know who we are, and to whom we belong. Babies may die in the crib without interaction with a person. God's creation is biased toward diversity in every direction, yet we need to belong to others like us. All of us are "ethnic," deriving from larger ethnic groups. Almost all of us eat ethnic food. There is even "belonging" within the Trinity (John 17:23). How far back does our ethnicity reach? I go back to Wales, England and Scotland and play Celtic music (to the distraction and threats of dinner guests). Biblically, my ancestry radically predates Great Britain, arching back to Mesopotamia and Adam and Eve--then after the Great Deluge, to the three sons of Noah. Humans share 75% of all genes, indicating a common ancestry¹¹. So our family tree roots and genetics are pretty much alike, despite obvious physical ("racial") and cultural differences.

Toxic ethnicity

When ethnicity causes unbiblical separation, sanctions, disdain, hatred, violence, and favoritism-- it is toxic. God enlightened the ethnocentric apostle Peter, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Acts 10:34-35 (NIV). Godliness is to not show favoritism. Will I truly accept only those of my own ethnic group? Can those of out-groups do right at all? Can Haitians, Mexicans, Russians, Nigerians, English, Swedes and Navajos also do right?

Am I an ethnic cop? Recently in an African American church I mentioned that I dress a little "baggy" when I go into the inner city to witness. A man took exception indicating that other ethnic groups dressed "baggy" (he, of course, understood what I meant, but was speaking up for others less mature who might take offense). I didn't indicate that only guys in the "hood" dressed that way. The guys I'm around do. Do people of other ethnicities have to avoid innocent references to my ethnicity? Many people take offense at my mentioning their ethnic characteristics (they, of course, say they have matured beyond personal offense, but caution me on behalf of others). Unity in Christ did not make Peter a Gentile or Cornelius a Jew. Conversion to Christ does not neuter ethnicity. Heaven is ethnic. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation [ethnos], tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9. Notice there is no mention of fighting! Our primary identity will no longer be ethnic. Christ becomes the main descriptor, not my color or country of origin. I will not be compelled to correct others who notice my ethnicity. Does your ethnicity become my pain--or my pleasure?

An ethnic safe house?

The church is the one institution that should mirror what will be in heaven, because of the Holy Spirit's love that is given to us for others (Rom. 5:5; 1 John 4:7). Love both recognizes and accepts ethnicity (that which is in accord with Scripture). In the 1970s and 1980s Dr. Donald McGavran's "homogeneous unit principle" was advocated to facilitate church growth by creating churches designed for a particular ethnic and social group, supposedly resulting in faster church growth¹². This seems to be the dynamic equilibrium of most churches—homogeneity. Are other ethnic groups welcome in my

church—to stay? If there is a significant minority in our church, are we adjusting worship and leadership to be more inclusive and accommodating? Since 80% of current immigrants to the US are people of color¹³, and since the birthrates of most minorities exceed that of whites, the US church is opportunely faced with diversity.

Must every local congregation be multiethnic? I think not. If a monoethnic church exists in a multiethnic neighborhood, it needs to open up. If it's in a monocultural neighborhood, it should not have to justify its existence. If other ethnic groups desire to come from outside the neighborhood, the church should try to be accommodating. If there are pockets of unreached ethnic groups within reach of the church, it should try to reach and enfold them. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Gangs and church

Antisocial gangs often develop in response to hopelessness and anger from failing to have respect and good jobs in the majority culture. The more marginalized the group, the more anti-social a minority's behavior¹⁴. "Gangs offer their members a sense of belonging, solidarity, protection, support, discipline, and warmth. Gangs also structure the anger many feel toward society that violently rejected their parents and them."¹⁵

Churches should offer more to these youth—belonging, protection, support, discipline and love. The church can become the primary reference group. A young friend in mid-teens joined a gang, saw that it was toxic and was able to leave, due to respect given him as a Christian. His African American church has since become an extended family, providing esteem, leadership opportunity, travel and a promise of college funding. The church can counteract anti-academic peer pressure, scholarship being sometimes considered to be cultural betrayal among some minorities¹⁶. I've seen African American churches honor graduates on Sunday mornings and give honor to good students.

Which way is your church looking?

Christianity has been classified as a future-oriented institution, providing hope for a better life now and eternity in heaven. The apostle Paul wrote: "[O]ne thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." All of us who are mature should take such a view of things." (Philippians 3:14b-15).

Sociologists note the corrective influence of hope. "The social trajectories of youth are more promising for those who are actively able to maintain and cultivate a sense of hope for the future. Whether they are resigned, oblivious, or resistant to the reflections in the social mirror, those who are able to maintain hope are in fundamental ways partially inoculated to the toxicity they may encounter."¹⁷

Ethnic groups by definition look back over their shoulders toward traditions, shared history and place¹⁸. Ethnicity can obscure the church's future orientation. African American physician Michael Johnson notes: "The traditional African American church if left in its present state will become extinct as it loses its power and moral authority. We are choosing literally to live in the pain of the past, rather than helping others who are living in present pain." His comments are in the context of the widespread failure of African Americans to help meet the needs in Africa¹⁹. Are we still the needy, or are others more needy? Does my ethnic past neutralize my Christian obligation to help the destitute with the gospel in word and deed?

Globally Christians give 2.2% of total person income to Christian causes. This is self-centered. Of this amount, 94% is spent on local ministries. This is basically ethnocentric. Less than 6% is given for global foreign missions. This is pitiful, amounting to 13 cents per one hundred dollars of personal income²⁰. If I and my church were not ethnocentric, what would our global missions giving be? If we were truly forward looking, understanding that Christ will not return until the Gospel has been proclaimed in all the earth (Matt. 24:14), what would we give and where would we go to take that Gospel? Do we have genuine concern for the 42,000 per day, on average, who die never having had the chance to hear the Gospel²¹? Is a person less important if s/he dies silently and is not one of us?

- 1 "Russian racism "out of control," BBC News 5/4/2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/4969296.stm>
- 2 "Ethnic fighting flares in China," Washington Post, 11/2/2004.
- 3 "Police: White man beaten for dating black woman" 12/9/2004 www.thebostonchannel.com/print/3984973/detail.html
- 4 "Threatening letters sent to local black athletes" 12/9/2004
www.newsnet5.com/news/3984521/detail.html?subid=22100405&qs=1;bp=t
- 5 It refers to "nations" in the New International Version, but is translated about as frequently as "Gentile," in distinction to "Jew." "People" (laos) also can be translated "nations" (Acts 4:25; Rom. 15:11; 1 Pet. 2:9)
- 6 George DeVos, "Introduction: Ethnic pluralism: Conflict and accommodation," in *Ethnic identity: Problems and prospects for the 21st century*, eds. L. Romanucci-Ross, G. DeVos and T. Tsuda, 4th Ed., 2006, p. 5. ISBN: 100759109737
- 7 Eloise H. Meneses, "Science and the myth of biological race," chap. 2 in *This side of heaven: Race, ethnicity, and Christian faith* eds. Robert Priest and Alvaro Nieves, 2007, p. 34. ISBN: 0195310578
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 38 Only "1.75% of the human genome varies between populations." P. 36
- 11 *Ibid.* p. 36.
- 12 http://community.gospelcom.net/printable_template.jsp?show_print=no&backPageID=14290&smpl_sakey=44819#3 accessed 3/20/07
- 13 Fabienne Doucet & Carola Suarez-Orozco, "Ethnic identity and schooling: The experiences of Haitian immigrant youth," in *Ethnic identity: Problems and prospects for the 21st century* (see above), p. 182.
- 14 "Migration and ethnic minorities," *Ethnic identity*, p. 158.
- 15 Doucet & Suarez-Orozco, p. 178.
- 16 DeVos, "Introduction: Ethnic pluralism," p. 25.
- 17 Doucet & Suarez-Orozco, p. 178.
- 18 DeVos, "Introduction: Ethnic pluralism," p. 14-15.
- 19 Dr. Johnson hosts teams of African Americans in Kenya, so understands that some care sacrificially.
- 20 David Barrett, Todd Johnson & Peter Crossing, "Missiometrics 2007," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan. 2007, p. 32.
- 21 David Barrett, World Christian Database

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