

# ***LET US BREAK BREAD TOGETHER: THE CHURCH AND MULTICULTURALISM IN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>***

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**T**his paper examines the phenomenon of multiculturalism and the church<sup>2</sup> in contemporary America. It argues that multiculturalism presents unique challenges for the church, and that the church must embrace these challenges by embodying the teachings and practices of Jesus that call for Christians to break down the culturally constructed barriers of racism, classism, and nationalism. In making these arguments I draw upon the ideas of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas on the unilateral obligation for the

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented at Pepperdine University in 2001. The conference was cosponsored by Pepperdine University and Emmanuel School of Religion.

<sup>2</sup>The term “church” is used here as a designation of the christian communities in the Christian tradition. This is the location from which I construct meaning. It must be acknowledged also that scholars see things from a particular socio-cultural and geographical location. As one of those interpreters, living in America with an African heritage, I draw from my own experience and interpret things from that location. While I cannot see everything, my position obscures some things as it illuminates others.

“other.” The central focus of this paper is to provide a biblical and theological basis for engaging the other in our midst as a Christian commitment to the neighbor. It is through such engagement that the church can help to confront and overturn the complex phenomenon of “otherness” in a constructive way that preserves diversity while appreciating “human commonality” and “oneness.” In this light multiculturalism in America can be viewed as an asset and an opportunity for the church to make “the others” from other cultures feel at home, not as constant visitors but as members of the same family—the family of God.

## **THE STATE OF MULTICULTURALISM IN AMERICA**

In June 2003, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the University of Michigan’s use of affirmative action in the admission of minority students.<sup>3</sup> The Court’s decision acknowledges the fact that racial diversity can serve the interests of American society. People from different races, ethnic origins, and religious traditions make up America’s diverse population. They all live in the same cities and neighborhoods and shop in the same stores and shopping malls as the majority. Their children go to the same schools and play on the same teams. In spite of these shared spaces and experiences, deep-rooted tensions exist based on racial differences. In other words, racial traits can be and have been exploited with the aim to demarcate one group from another. Sometimes these tensions are linked to other problems such as religious differences and economic disparities.

In an attempt to deal with the challenges of multiculturalism, it is necessary to explore the historical development of American ethnicity over many generations. In the past, the majority of American immigrants came from western Europe, some of whom were responsible for bringing African people to America as slaves. They were followed by another influx, arriving mostly from southern

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Lane, “Affirmative Action for Diversity is Upheld,” *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2003, A1.

and eastern Europe. As their numbers increased, America's face gradually became broadly Eurocentric. Such transformations led to much prejudice and resistance on the basis of ethnicity, race, and religion. By the turn of the nineteenth century, such hostility had led to the formation of nativist organizations such as the Supreme Order of the Star, the American Protective Associations, and the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>4</sup> The latter directed its racist sentiments mostly toward Jews and African Americans. This was indeed the context within which W. E. B. Dubois addressed the problem of racism and predicted that the challenge of the twentieth century would be that of racial divide.<sup>5</sup> Dubois's prediction seems to apply to twenty-first-century America, for today the majority of immigrants are arriving from the Southern Hemisphere, thus transforming America into one of the world's most ethnically diverse societies. Ruben Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes note how dramatic this change has been for America:

While the proportion of immigrants arriving during 1880–1900 came overwhelmingly from Europe (97 percent), the proportion of European immigrants arriving during 1980–1999 plummeted to just over 10 percent of the total number of legal admissions. By 1999, of the 27 million foreign-born—already the largest immigrant population in history—fully 90 percent arrived after 1960. Of these post-1960 immigrants, the majority (52 percent) came from Latin America and the Caribbean. Nearly a third (29 percent) came from Asia and the Middle East. The Filipinos, Chinese, and Indo-Chinese alone accounted for 15 percent of the total, or as much as all of those born in Europe and Canada combined. By 1999, the number of their U.S.-born children—the new second generation—had

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<sup>4</sup>Fernando F. Segovia, "Minority Studies and Christian Studies" in *A Dream Unfinished*, ed. Fernandez and Segovia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>5</sup>W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Premier Books, 1961), 137.

surpassed the prior record set up by children of earlier European immigrants.<sup>6</sup>

Decennial Trends in the U.S. Foreign-Born and Foreign-Stock Population (1890–1998)<sup>7</sup>

Decade	Immigrants (in thousands)	Europe, Canada (%)	Latin America (%)	Asia
1881–1890	5,247	97.8	0.6	1.3
1891–1900	3,688	96.5	1.0	2.0
1901–1910	8,795	93.9	2.1	3.7
1911–1920	5,736	88.3	7.0	4.3
1921–1930	4,107	82.5	14.4	2.7
1931–1940	528	86.3	9.7	3.1
1941–1950	1,035	76.6	14.9	3.6
1951–1960	2,515	67.8	22.2	6.1
1961–1970	3,322	46.3	38.6	12.9
1971–1980	4,493	21.6	40.3	35.3
1981–1990	7,338	12.5	47.1	37.3
1991–1998	7,605	14.8	50.4	30.1

The American census is projecting that the percentage of the non-Western population will reach 33 percent by 2015 and 50 percent shortly after 2050, as shown on the following diagram.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ruben G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, “Introduction—Ethnogenesis: Coming of Age in Immigrant America,” in *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*, ed. Ruben G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. Cited from the U.S. Census Bureau, 1992, Table 1, 5–6, 45: 1999.

<sup>8</sup>Segovia, 1. Original Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1999.

	2000	2005	2010	2030	2050
A	71.8%	69.9%	68.0%	60.5%	52.8%
B	12.2%	12.4%	12.6%	13.1%	13.6%
C	0.7%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%	0.9%
D	3.9%	4.4%	4.8%	6.6%	8.2%
E	11.4%	12.6%	13.8%	18.9%	24.5%

- A: White (not Hispanic)
- B: Black (not Hispanic)
- C: American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut (not Hispanic)
- D: Asian and Pacific Islander (not Hispanic)
- E: Hispanic of any race

As Segovia, Rumbaut, and Portes show in their statistics, approximately 55 million foreign-born or children of immigrants constituted the immigrant population of the United States in 1997. Today, they represent more than one-fifth (20.5 percent) of the total U.S. population.<sup>9</sup> The ethnic demography continues to increase rapidly with the Hispanic population, showing significant gains as shown in Segovia's projection. Of note is the decline in persons of European origin relative to the rise of those of non-European origin. Some see these changes as threats to traditional Euro-American values and lifestyles, while others see them as providing an opportunity for equally attractive value systems to emerge.

The current wave of immigrants from the Southern Hemisphere is cresting in the metropolitan areas of a handful of states. California leads the chart with one third of the nation's immigrants, followed by New York, Florida, New Jersey, and Texas. The flow continues to rise unabated because it is a network-driven phenomenon and the United States remains the premier destination.<sup>10</sup> This ethnic composition has immense implications for the future of American society. Some new immigrants are clearly on an upward path, moving into society's mainstream in record time and enriching it in the process with their cultural and economic potential, while

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<sup>9</sup>Rumbaut and Portes, 8.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 9.

others seem poised for a path of blocked aspirations and downward mobility, resulting in today's urban poor.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, however, multiculturalism is a positive feature of American society. It seems that multiculturalism becomes a problem only when fear of what is perceived as different sets in, periodically leading to violence and simmering hatred. Sometimes the differences are couched in ultimate terms to justify hostile behaviors toward others. This often begs the question of why people do such hideous things to each other; and even worse, why such hideous things are often done in the name of God.

## REASSESSING THE OTHER IN OUR MIDST

In modern philosophical circles, the notion of "otherness" highlights human separateness and differences that often lead to conflict and intense rivalries. Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher whose people endured the European Holocaust, made otherness the center of his thought. He developed his ideas from another Jewish scholar, Martin Buber, who worked on I-Thou categories earlier in the 1920s. Buber's 1923 book *I and Thou*<sup>12</sup> distinguishes between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It relationship. In his view, the I-It relationship is expressed by manipulation and exploitation of the other person. In this sense the other becomes a giver of comfort, a money machine, a slave. The one who should be an end is then made into a means. As Buber observes, the "other" is not to be an "it," which connotes both detachment and depersonalization, but rather a "thou," which expresses the dignity of human personhood for the other. The I-Thou relation stresses the other as subject and senses their freedom of self-determination.

Unlike Buber, who seeks to express the value of dialogue in his distinction, Levinas argues for the unilateral obligation to the

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<sup>11</sup>Rumbaut and Portes, 10.

<sup>12</sup>Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

other.<sup>13</sup> In order to recognize this obligation, it is crucial that human beings step out of their symbolic worlds—the worlds through which they define and experience the others whose worlds impact their own. Levinas and others, such as Johannes Baptist Metz and Paul Ricoeur, acknowledge the despicable human tendency to deny not only rights but also existence to the other in the pursuit of some misguided universalism. However, they do not lose faith in the human conscience to confess, repent, and recognize the rights of others to exist. Levinas argues along these lines that reconciliation across cultures is not a matter of simply acknowledging the other as other and refusing to impose any similarity upon them. He recognizes how difficult this can be, given the evil symbolized by the Crusades, Auschwitz, slave auction blocks, Apartheid, the Trail of Tears, the Rwandan genocide, and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Levinas acknowledges that such awful occurrences provide constant reminders that God belongs with the other whose reality has been suppressed and discarded, despised and rejected. According to David Power, “God can be known only through the mediation of a servant who is embodied amid the access of evil, in the rejectedness of the rejected in the otherness.”<sup>14</sup>

What matters, as Paul R. Sponheim contends, is not *that* the other is there in our experience, but *how* we go about the complex process of “defining” that other.<sup>15</sup> In other words, how are we to identify and define those we encounter face to face as collective others, those known to us through filters of ethnicity, culture, gender, or religion? Do we define them as reflecting God’s image, or does some kind of demeaning image shape our definition? These are the questions seldom articulated but lived out daily by all of us at our churches and workplaces.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Sean Hand, ed. *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 28.

<sup>14</sup>David N. Power, “Communion within Pluralism in the Local Church: Maintaining Unity in the Process of Inculturation,” in *The Multicultural Church: A New Landscape in U.S. Theologies*, ed. William Cenkner (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 92.

<sup>15</sup>Sponheim, 172–173.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

In American society, the other stands for varieties of “people categories.” First and foremost, there is the “ethnic other,” a category which has contributed to racist attitudes and practices. This is what Reinhold Niebuhr once called “tribalism,” by which he meant the “paradoxical and ironic fact that human beings...seem able to recognize a common humanity only in the unique distinguishing marks of a tribal ‘we-group.’ Those ‘lacking these obvious marks of a tribal identity, whether racial, linguistic, cultural, or religious are [often] treated brutally as if they were not a part of the human race.”<sup>17</sup> The treatment of the so-called other that is not like us rests ultimately on how we define that other. The problem of poverty compounds the picture by creating class tension. The majority of the poor immigrants live in a different world than the majority of the American population. They are often ignored and are only known collectively in a negative light. Incidentally, their collective definition informs the way they are treated. For example, if the majority defines a particular ethnic minority as lazy, inferior, or trapped, then the general behavior toward them and those that identify with them will be altered dramatically.<sup>18</sup>

## **THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR RENEWAL**

Such concerns form the heart of the theological reflections that take us to the very core of the Bible and the Christian tradition. Genesis 1:26 announces God’s creation of humankind in the very image of God. The worth and dignity due all people is conferred by that special and intimate relationship with God. This is the foundation of the equality we share with one another. Unfortunately, humankind chose to reject the relationship offered by God, desiring instead to deify itself. This is the meaning of the Fall story in Genesis 3, where the serpent offers this irresistible temptation: “God knows that when

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<sup>17</sup>James M. Childs, Jr., *Preaching Justice: Ethical Vocation of Word and Sacrament Ministry* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 36.

<sup>18</sup>Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 117.

you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). I take this as the beginning of human alienation from harmony and community with God and one another. It is the foundation of hatred, division, and injustice—the tear in the fabric of our cohumanity as illustrated by the story of Cain and Abel. These biblical stories tell the truth about both our dignity in the Garden of Eden and our alienation from it. Our sin obscures the image of God, which in turn causes us to deny that image to others in order to justify their subjugation and exploitation. This means that sin has the capacity to rob us of the image of God, because we do not follow God’s will. Thus we efface our own *imago dei* by failing to bear God’s image in loving others.

God’s promise continues with the hope of the creation through the Spirit and through Christ, whose miracle of resurrection reveals God’s future as one in which God fulfills creation. In his own words and practices, Jesus continues the vision of God’s love. As the Gospels clearly state, Jesus’s love and compassion for the disadvantaged grounds his message of the Kingdom of God: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Who are my brother and sister and how shall I treat or behave towards them? Who is the stranger, how many different kinds of strangers are there, and how should I react to and interact with such a myriad of strangers? Who are those under me or above me and how will I define them in my daily dealings?

Jesus preaches a radically different message from that of the Temple leadership. According to Brian Blount, the Temple leadership presided over a world where non-Jewish others were condemned in light of the theological ideals of holiness and purity.<sup>19</sup> “Others” were

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<sup>19</sup>Brian K. Blount, “The Apocalypse of Worship: A House of Prayers for All Nations,” in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. Brian K. Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 17.

rejected on the basis of holiness codes rooted in the principle of wholeness. Only those who were whole and set apart were welcome in the holy places of worship.<sup>20</sup> Jesus flirts with danger by making contact with those perceived to be unclean, such as lepers, but instead of becoming impure himself, he heals their skin and makes them whole. He offers forgiveness to sinners and appropriates a power that was reserved only for God. When the custodians of purity challenge him, he responds that a healer comes to the sick and broken and not to those who are whole (Mark 2:23). Several days later he breaks another law by healing someone on the Sabbath. In his defense, he argues that human wholeness is not fully achieved by observing the law.<sup>21</sup>

The purity codes, which distinguished clean from unclean, created boundaries between Israel and others. Observance of the codes distinguished the Israelites both nationally and religiously, particularly within the dominant Greek culture and the imperialist Roman Empire.<sup>22</sup> These purity codes were centralized in the Temple, the symbol of national identity. Any threat to the Temple was a threat to the overall social and religious fabric of the Jewish people.<sup>23</sup> Against this background, Jesus announces his intent to tear down the Temple; elsewhere he speaks of destroying and rebuilding it. For him the Temple had become an institutional symbol of nationalist exclusivism. It had to be destroyed before the inclusive Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed could take root and yield fruit in the present.

In Mark 11, Jesus enters the Temple, but what should have been a house of prayer for all the nations had become a house of banditry. He casts out the sellers and buyers in the same way that he expels unclean spirits from the possessed. In a sense, Jesus exorcises

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 19, 20.

<sup>22</sup>David Rhoads, "Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries," in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 148.

<sup>23</sup>Blount, 18.

the Temple!<sup>24</sup> For Jesus, God's Temple should be a house of prayer for all the nations, where God's acceptance would not be based on the ritualistic acceptance of one community's holiness codes and purity. On his way to the Temple, Jesus curses a fig tree to its death for not bearing fruit. After clearing the Temple, his disciples notice that the tree had withered. To extend the metaphor, the "fruitless" Temple would suffer the same curse for not bearing fruit.<sup>25</sup> It failed to bear fruit because it refused to become a house of prayer for all the nations.

The creation of such a Temple marked by its multicultural worship is also the work of Jesus's disciples, past and present. Jesus gives authority to his disciples so they might transform things for the Kingdom. They would be able to move mountains, or as Blount puts it, to "ask anything, even as outrageous as a house of prayer for all the nations in a place and time where many are opposed to it."<sup>26</sup> That prayer is as difficult in the twenty-first century as it was then. Today, the American church is successful in terms of its great numbers and billions of dollars in assets, yet the oft-quoted observation of the civil rights era is still true: eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in American life. Why should it change when our church planting strategies are done along ethnic, racial, and socio-political lines, where we produce Christian communities of people "just like us"? Admittedly, most people, particularly visitors, may likely be comfortable and likely to join churches with others of their kind (much like joining a social club). But this was not Jesus's style; he was a man of the borders, a reconciler of enemies.

In the first century, Jesus envisions a Temple where Jews and Gentiles can worship as one. In the book of Acts that vision expands in the conversion of the Gentiles and the debate it generated among the disciples in Jerusalem (Acts 10:11). The debate focused on what the Gentiles, who were treated as outsiders, had to do in order to be accepted into the community of faith. Today, the church must ask

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<sup>24</sup>Douglas Cunningham, "God's Order Versus the Jewish/Roman Social Order: An Exegesis of Mark 11:15-19," *Ugon* 8, no. 3 (1988): 318.

<sup>25</sup>Blount, 21.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

what it must do in order to accept so-called outsiders. On what terms should the church engage peoples of other cultures?

Paul was occupied with similar questions regarding the Gentile believers, and he knew that such questions had a considerable bearing on the way people treated each other in the Christian community. In Galatians 3:26–28 he addresses the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and reminds them that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Paul argues that Gentiles need not observe any of the laws of Moses, and in particular, circumcision, in order to be accepted into communion. In the context of his argument, Paul tells the extended story of his dealings with the Jerusalem Council (Gal. 1:18–2:21). He cites the experience of Titus, whose exemption from circumcision meant a victory for Gentile freedom from the law.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit broke into the community in a strange and surprising way to heal the divisions of the Tower of Babel. Similarly, the Spirit empowers the church as the body of Christ to break into history to restore its brokenness and bring new life and vitality. In the words of Samuel B. McKinney, “Pentecost is God’s reversal of Babel and the Church’s mission to be the sign of that reversal. Pentecost therefore calls for a new nation and a new people.”<sup>27</sup> The point of Pentecost, among other things, was to inaugurate the church as a “catholic” reality. This speaks of the church’s spirit of inclusiveness while retaining its distinctiveness despite the multitude of cultures and races that would be a part of it. The Spirit did not inspire or enable a single language but a single message. The apostles spoke this message in many tongues, seeking to unite all people in their diversity.

In Galatians 3:26–28, Paul does not envision a community in which differences disappear but one which affirms and celebrates differences. To deny the validity of our distinctions is to deny each person’s God-given uniqueness. If this is true, then we must not interpret this passage through a color-blind lens that fails to recognize

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<sup>27</sup>Samuel B. McKinney, “The Hot Winds of Change,” in *Best Black Sermons*, ed. William M. Philpot (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1972), 46.

the richness of human diversity. Instead, we should look at each other through what Marcia Riggs calls a cross-racial, cross-cultural kaleidoscope and accept current and future levels of racial and ethnic diversity. By affirming our differences as members of the human family, we can recognize others as members of the same family, though they may belong to distinct social and ethnic groups.<sup>28</sup> The Galatians passage therefore calls us to affirm the wealth of human diversity; anything less is a violation of the good news.

### **THREE MULTICULTURAL APPROACHES TO THE OTHER**

James M. Childs, Jr. describes three models that characterize how the church has responded historically to the other. The first is the Blender model, which takes diverse ingredients and blends them together so that they are indistinguishable from one another. This is the position of those who speak of gender and color blindness or the melting pot theory. This approach fails to recognize the creative potential in the diverse cultural makeup of society. Also, those in power, armed with their “normative” definitions, establish the standards of uniformity. Early European missionaries embodied the Blender model when they expected natives of other cultures to conform to their culturally conditioned versions of Christianity. The assumption that Western Christianity could be perceived as a universal and authentic expression of Christianity demonstrated a sense of cultural imperialism.

The second is the Menu model. Each item on the menu is separate and distinct from the others, and every dish retains its own color and flavor. In terms of multiculturalism, the Menu image affirms cultural differences but not cultural interaction. Many in the church-growth movement operate on the premise of this image as they plant churches on the basis of economic or cultural similarities.

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<sup>28</sup>Marcia Y. Riggs, “What Happened to a Dream Deferred?” in *A Dream Unfinished*, ed. Fernandez and Segovia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 95.

This narrow approach is perpetuated all too often in theological curricula that fail to appreciate the full spectrum of God's gifts within the human family. As Childs puts it, "we aren't thinking together or singing a new song together."<sup>29</sup>

The third image is the Stew model. While the Blender model seeks to eliminate differences and the Menu model seeks to preserve differences, the Stew model offers an image of diversity in unity. In a stew, all the ingredients retain their own appearance and flavor, but they are together in a common pot, flavoring each other even as they contribute their own distinctive tastes. There is no reason why the rich variety of Christian traditions should not retain their own distinctive flavors while remaining catholic.<sup>30</sup>

This calls the church to consider very seriously the model of loving the neighbor as a test of one's faith commitment. God loves us into loving. The neighbor is the stranger with whom we must extend hospitality, as Paul indicated in Romans 12:13. Also, as noted earlier, the stranger is what Ricoeur and Levinas identify as "the other." Unfortunately, we are oriented from childhood not to trust strangers, and there are good reasons to be wary. In Africa we were told as children never to look at a stranger in the eyes.

The stranger is someone who is genuinely different and sees life from another perspective. As we entertain and come to know strangers better, we may discover that our differences do not crumble but become more pronounced. Strangers tend to threaten the way we perceive ourselves. The way of Jesus and his gospel call us to a life where we take risks to welcome the stranger and extend hospitality to that person. The primary focus of the Lord's Supper, after all, is communion with God and one another. It must be an open table for all God's children. This is the central place where God breaks down the dividing walls of hostility, racism, tribalism, and sexism and builds up the body of Christ. As Keifert writes, "at the table we surrender ourselves to God and to the service of others instead of

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<sup>29</sup>Childs, 53.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 54.

protecting ourselves from the stranger.”<sup>31</sup> To this end, the way forward is not by pretending that differences do not exist but rather by respecting the mystery of the other as God’s gift to us. The stranger, like us, brings something special to the table.

## **A NEW MISSION FOR THE CHURCH**

The church should pause for a moment and rethink its mission. It should seek conversion from its lack of family spirit and unwillingness to affirm the goodness of diversity in God’s people. As Darrell L. Guder points out, the church in America has become captive to the postmodern culture and detached from the struggles of marginalized people. Guder also points out that the church turned a blind eye and at times endorsed such evil acts as the destruction of native people and the enslavement of Africans. He writes that the culture of the western church, since the time of Constantine, has exerted an enormous influence over nonwestern cultures.

Our Colonial history has meant that, from the outset, North American society would be multicultural. Our conquest of the Native Americans, our history of slavery, and our formation by waves of immigrants have ensured that we must always contend with the fact of many cultures living within the same country and contributing to the same culture. This is the fundamental cultural challenge for our churches as well. It is also sadly true that our primary way of dealing with this challenge has been through various forms of segregation and of domination of minorities by the white majority. The integrity of the incarnational witness of predominantly white American denominational churches is on the line when they address the multicultural reality of North America. It starts for many of them with the way they deal with the Korean, Chinese,...Hispanic and Native American congregations that are a part of the

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<sup>31</sup>Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 79.

churchly reality in North America. These communities are rapidly growing and often threaten the established forms of the church creating tension and disagreements.<sup>32</sup>

This is the situation that calls for the continuing conversion of the church. Evidence of this conversion will be the incarnational witness to the gospel through the practices of the church.<sup>33</sup> The Second Testament depicts the church as experiencing continual conversion. For example, the Jewish-Gentile tension in Samaria (Acts 8) is replaced by joy at the surprising work of the Holy Spirit. Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10 leads him through a spiritual battle and a conversion to the gospel that crosses all cultural boundaries. Another example is the controversy over Gentile Christians by the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). These biblical examples attest to the presence of an incarnational witness in situations of conflict and disagreement. Every one of those controversies was in fact an occasion for the continuing conversion of the church.<sup>34</sup>

The contemporary situation in America, with its challenges of multiculturalism, calls for a constant conversion that leads to more creativity in finding ways to translate the message of Christ. This means tearing down walls where others draw lines and assign people to camps. In so doing, we become brothers and sisters of those who are completely different from us or even disagree profoundly with us.<sup>35</sup> What unites us is our mandate to be witnesses in the world. We take our orders from Jesus first and not from the culture we live in. Our continuing conversion will always remind us of our contrite struggle with our shortcomings. As we respond to the gospel, we become its messengers of reconciliation in the world.

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<sup>32</sup>Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 167.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 169.

When a storefront church gathers in an American inner city and praises Jesus Christ with the emotion and fervor of choices, clapping, shouting, drums, and guitars, it is witnessing to this central fact of our calling. When a liturgical procession forms in an Anglican cathedral to carry the Bible out into the middle of the nave, surrounded by candles and incense, with the entire congregation standing and facing toward the priest and the open book, and the Gospel is read as the holiest moment in the service, then Christ's presence is being witnessed and celebrated.<sup>36</sup>

While these Christian communities transmit the gospel in ways that relate to the culture in which they witness, they remain true to the unity of the gospel message. In a 2002 sermon at Duke Divinity School, Willie Jennings reminds us that God has created a church that must speak in many tongues as a sign of the Spirit's presence:

Before the world can be invited to a life of repentance, the Church must submit to its language. But this has been difficult for the Church to do, especially the Church in [America]. We spend our whole lives focused on color, kin and kind. We gear our visions for ministry toward our people. We are fundamentally segregationist. [Jim Crow thinking] is deeply engrained in our collective psyche, our collective imagination. We have clearly got the vision of the tower of Babel, but not the vision of Pentecost.<sup>37</sup>

The Spirit makes our churches strange places filled with strange power, places where we are joined to peoples not of our own choosing. If we don't know how to join with such persons, then like the disciples we must wait—wait at the table of the one who gave his life for the world.<sup>38</sup> I concur with Clark Pinnock that the Holy Spirit who brooded over the primeval water and turned chaos into order

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<sup>36</sup>Guder, 154.

<sup>37</sup>Willie Jennings, "Speaking in Tongues," Duke University Divinity School, September 25, 2002.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

(Gen. 1:2) continues to create and bring about order and beauty from the ugliness of human divisiveness.<sup>39</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: A NEW GOSPEL IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD**

My hope for the church is that it learn to see and interpret the gospel in a new light. This new way of seeing will hopefully lead to a new theology that reformulates the narrow, often egocentric definitions of “us” versus “them” that characterized the church’s perception of the other for so long. This renewed vision will enable the church to redefine the same people who used to evoke fear and hatred, and determine in a renewed way not just who they are but who and what they will be to us.

Recognizing how to perceive God in others is neither easy nor risk free. It requires commitment, discernment, courage, and vision. It means we will have to scrutinize and revise our symbolic world in order for the gospel to emerge. This will stir the churches once again to become agents of a radically new gospel in a multicultural world. The language of Levinas and Metz is helpful in providing a critical analysis and interpretation of “the other.” However, we need what Diana L. Hayes calls “home grown voices,” voices which can define and speak to the experiences of the culturally marginalized in American society. We also need to identify and develop a new language that expresses both our diversity as well as our unity in order to build the kind of community that can rightly be called the Body of Christ. Such a method must call into question old assumptions while at the same time raising new questions and new analyses for ecclesiastical reflection. These questions must be raised *by* a culturally diverse church *for* a culturally diverse church. As M. Shawn Copeland points out, “Intercultural understanding demands that we no longer measure people from the perspective of those who,

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<sup>39</sup>Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 11, 50.

because they ask the questions, feel they are the measure against which all things are validated or understood.”<sup>40</sup> Representatives from other cultures must feel comfortable not only asking the questions but coming up with answers that condition pastoral responses to multiculturalism. This is a great opportunity and a challenge for the church to be a witness of Christ in a multicultural society.

As people of faith, we are called to affirm that God created each human being in the divine image. Because God values all persons, the other is due our respect, dignity, and care. This shared belief in the worth of all human beings before God provides a common vision for all those who are marginalized due to their cultural backgrounds. Thus it is the moral responsibility of the church to oppose all socio-economic structures that dehumanize and alienate human beings. This opposition takes the form of living in solidarity with people existing on the margins of society. In so doing we jointly hope in God’s liberating grace and embody the liberating power of God’s kingdom in the present by acting in accordance with what God’s future kingdom promises. It is also a vision constituted by love, in which we value all people and seek the well-being of all humanity as a response to our faith in God. It is only then, as Luis Pedraja tells us, that we shall be freed from the sin that dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>M. Shawn Copeland, “Self Identity in a Multicultural Church in a Multicultural Context,” in *The Multicultural Church* (ed. William Cenkner: New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>41</sup>Luis Pedraja, “Building Bridges Between Communities of Struggle: Similarities, Differences, Objectives, and Goals,” in *The Ties That Bind*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York: Continuum, 2001), 218–219.