

Роберт Вайнгартнер

THE BIBLE'S VISION FOR A GLORIOUSLY DIVERSE PEOPLE OF GOD

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As a pastor and the director of a Presbyterian mission agency, I am grateful for the privilege of addressing you today. As I begin, let me say that I am aware that my understanding of the Church may be divergent from that held by many of you. As I speak about the Church and its oneness, I do not have in mind a unity that is doctrinal or juridical in an Orthodox sense. Even as I express my genuine respect for those theological commitments, I must acknowledge that I understand the Church to include all those in every time and place and culture who confess their faith in Jesus Christ as the one Lord and Savior. With this qualification, I wish to speak briefly about Gospel and culture, and I pray that my remarks will be both of interest and use to you.

In God's covenant with Abraham, described in Genesis 12, God promises to Abraham that in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Such breadth in God's redemptive purpose is reflected throughout the Scriptures.

In Psalm 67, for example, the nations are called upon to praise God, and God's blessing of Israel is clearly understood as the means by which God's way may be known upon the earth and God's saving power among all nations. This instrumental understanding of Israel is further reflected in such prophetic texts as Isaiah 49:6 in which the Lord says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Of course, this saving plan comes to its full disclosure and fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The One who comes proclaiming the Kingdom of God becomes the proclaimed One. It is Jesus, the Word become flesh, who is the only Savior and who is Lord of all.

The four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, each in their own way, emphasize that Jesus sends the disciples out into the world; they are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And in the Pauline texts we find such summaries of God's mission as this statement from Ephesians: "With all wisdom and insight he has made know to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:8b-10).

God is gathering, working out his saving plan, in wonderful ways before our very eyes. Today, more than ever before in history, the Church is more like that "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9). Not only is the Christian faith being articulated in more languages, the Gospel is being expressed through the forms of more varied cultures.

Professor Philip Jenkins explains in his recent book, "The Next Christendom," that the largest populations of Christians on the planet are in Africa and Latin America, and they continue to grow at breathtaking rates. Jenkins writes about Christianity's variety and vitality, its global reach, and its association with the world's fastest-growing societies.

In 1900, Africa had 10 million Christians, or about 9% of its population. Today, Africa is home to 360 million Christians, nearly half of its population. Latin America has 480 million Christians, and Asia another 313 million. By 2025 a full one-half of the world's Christians will be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17% will be in Asia. The Church is growing faster today in China than it has ever grown at any time in any place. At the same time, the traditional Christian centers of Europe and North America have seen a decline in the number of those professing Christian faith. The demographic center of Christianity has shifted markedly to the south, and to the east.

How do we think about this new diversity? Can we allow the faith and faithfulness of believers who are different from us to inform our work and witness, to shape the life of our own churches, and to inspire our witness to the Gospel?

Too often in the past, those who sought to evangelize promoted their own culture along with the Gospel. It even was the experience here following *Perestroika* when many evangelicals from the West came to Russia committing grievous mistakes – ignoring the historic churches in this place and mixing American culture, with all of its faults, with the Gospel they preached.

But this is not a new problem. Even in the Acts of the Apostles we read how early believers wrestled with the question of whether or not Gentile converts should be required to follow all of the Jewish law. Through the ministry of Peter and Paul and Barnabas, Gentiles heard the Gospel and received the Holy Spirit. At Jerusalem the Council laid down some basic requirements for Gentile believers but decreed that one must not follow Moses in order to follow Jesus. This was an early exercise, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in discerning the proper relationship of Gospel and culture.

The cultural issues are not easy, but they are issues that we can help one another with. The great missiologist D.T. Niles from Ceylon wrote that the Gospel is not safe in any culture without a witness from outside of the culture. This is because it is so easy for us all to confuse the Gospel with our own cultural expressions of it. After all, the only forms that we have by which we express and live out the Gospel are cultural forms – language, liturgy, music, architecture, dress, the things we make, roles and relationships. Behind these observable elements of culture are shared cognitive, affective and valuative commitments that shape a culture's world view.

It is my conviction and, I believe, a biblical view, that every culture can be a fit vehicle by which the Gospel may be expressed. At the same time, however, it must be said that the Gospel stands in critique of every culture. We must strive to preserve those things in each culture that are consistent with the Gospel and be ready to change those things that are not.

In this age of great expansion and increasing cultural diversity within the Church, Jesus' prayer in John 17 for the oneness of his disciples and Paul's metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 of the Church as the body of Christ can lead us into a richer experience of the blessing that God intends.

In John 17 we find the longest recorded prayer of our Lord. The prayer comes during Passion Week. Jesus has again told the disciples that he must suffer. He has told them that it is better for them that he goes, and that the Father will send the Holy Spirit in his name. He has told them of the world's hatred and of how the disciples' sorrow will turn to joy. He offers them his peace. In his prayer Jesus not only prays for the disciples; he prays for those who will believe in him through their word. He prays for the Church in all times and places. He prays for us.

At the heart of Jesus' great prayer he prays that the disciples may all be one. He prays "that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them

even as you have loved me” (John 17:23b). By his prayer Jesus makes it clear that the oneness of his followers is not only important to him, it is also something that will be difficult for them.

The significance of this oneness for God’s mission is expressed in the prayer itself. First, Jesus makes a connection between the oneness of his disciples and the world’s belief that Jesus has been sent by the Father (vv. 21, 23). Next, Jesus declares that it is the oneness of his followers that will let the world know that the Father loves the Church even as He loves the Son (vv. 23).

This prayer of Jesus, his petition for the oneness of his followers who will bear witness to him as the One sent by the Father, helps us to understand the first dimension of the Church’s witness, its shared life. The believers’ life together should demonstrate a character and quality of life that is, in the language of my own Presbyterian tradition, an “exhibition of the Kingdom of God to the world.” Earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus taught the disciples, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). This missional concern about the Christian community’s life is reflected in the letters of the Apostle Paul, all of which are written to missionary congregations in a missionary context, when he exhorts the believers to live together in ways that will commend their proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed.

Paul uses a very helpful metaphor for the Church in 1 Corinthians 12 where he writes of the Church as the body of Christ. In his application of this metaphor to the Corinthian church, Paul encourages them to understand that each person is gifted by the Spirit and is an essential part of the body. He calls upon them to recognize their own significance and the significance of others who are also part of the body. Can we not extend Paul’s metaphor to an understanding of the global Church? Can we say that the rich expressions of the faith through the Church in different cultures are all part of the one body and that the churches in each place need the churches in other places in order to be whole? Is it not a part of Paul’s vision for the Church to affirm that we need one another – need the faith of one another, need the gifts of one another?

I believe that our theology will not be faithful to the Gospel unless we discern Christ’s body in each place and affirm our need for one another, that our theology must be shaped and lived out in the context of God’s mission to the entire world that God loves, every tribe and people and language. An experienced missionary and colleague of mine is so bold as to put it this way: “There can be no true theology produced in one culture, one race, one sex, one nation.” We need the gifts and faithful witness of believers in other cultures.

The problems of syncretism are very real. We can help one another to discern where we have distorted or compromised the Gospel by confusing our own cultural context and cultural expressions of the faith with God’s revelation. In order to see Jesus clearly, to understand God’s mission properly, we must see him in the context of the whole world for which he gave his life. We are called to serve him in this world. We are sent into this world as ambassadors for Christ. No longer is the faith of a people determined by the religion of their leader, and mission is clearly no longer – it never rightly was – a matter of evangelizing “from the West to the rest.” Rather, the God of mission is sending his people from everywhere to everyone.

In my work it is my joy to visit with Christians in many places around the world. India, Cuba, Peru, Palestine, Brazil, Kenya, Zambia, Russia – these are but some of the countries I have visited recently. And in each place I marvel at the creative ways in which God is at work through the culture to bless the people with the Gospel. The cultural expressions of faith vary, but at the heart of it all is the same conviction -- “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Permit me to close with a personal story. The congregation that I pastored for many years in the United States developed a rich and rewarding partnership with a Russian Orthodox community in St. Petersburg. It is a partnership that is more about relationships than about projects, more about encouraging and praying for one another than about funds.

During one of my several visits to St. Petersburg, I visited with a babushka named Marya Emilyanovna, a member of that community. She told of living through the siege of Leningrad and of the persecution of believers under Stalin and during the Soviet era. And we spoke about our churches, the similarities and the differences. I am not sure that she had heard of Presbyterians before. In exploring the differences in our worship, she was astonished to hear that Presbyterians sit during our worship services. When the idea had settled into her mind a bit, she exclaimed, "How can you sit down during the reading of the Gospel?!"

Since we met, Marya Emilyanovna has died. But each time I hear the Gospels read in worship, I think of her with a grateful heart and pay special attention to the reading. I am a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ because of her.

I am thankful for Marya's gift to me, and I thank you for the privilege of sharing these thoughts with you today.