

THEOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL CHURCH PLANT

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In this article, I wish to propose a set of theological convictions for anyone interested in planting a multiethnic or multicultural church. In the absence of these basic theological convictions, the church planter will likely default to the familiar cultural methodologies which are foreign to the biblical Christian witness.

Introduction

One of the challenges inherent in every culture is the idea of “others,” the ingrained sense of “we” versus “them.” Geert Hofstede in *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, defined culture as “the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a human group’s response to its environment. Culture determines the identity of a human group in the same way as personality determines the identity of an individual.”² At the center of each culture is a system of societal norms, consisting of the shared values by the majority group of that population.

With the passage of time, societal norms usually result in the development of unique cultures and separate views of life and understanding of others. Hence “we,” referring to our particular culture, traditions, understanding, mindset, and worldview; and “others” referring to outsiders, not included in our culture, traditions, and ways of life distinct to us. To create continuity, every culture develops patterns of maintenance in the form of institutions. “These

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²Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1980), 21.

include the family, education systems, politics, and legislation. These institutions, once they have become facts, reinforce the societal norms and the ecological conditions that led to them.”³

The unintended consequence of this cultural development is ethnocentrism, which Enoch Wan defined as “the belief that one’s own people group or cultural ways are superior to others.”⁴ This belief generally breeds attitudes that lead to unfair treatment “manifested in individual action or institutionalized policy toward others as in the case of anti-Semitism, apartheid, bigotry, fascism, and racism.”⁵ There is no culture, or an individual, that is not affected because “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). David said in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Sin is not only inherited, it is also culturally acquired. We acquire beliefs, practices, traditions, and learn how to relate and treat others, and pass those practices along to other people through the processes of acculturation.

Therefore, to correct the distorted cultural understanding of the “other,” and plant a church envisaged by the Lord, “a house of prayer for all nations,” we need to have a proper understanding, appreciation, and value of the “others” by remembering that God created all people in his own image. A genuine conviction that all people regardless of their sociocultural differences, their stations in life, educational or economic classifications, or circumstances of birth have been created by God and have equal value before God. The following are, therefore, a set of fundamental theological convictions for anyone interested in planting a multiethnic or multicultural church.

1. Creation and the Value of Life and People

In Genesis 1:26-27, we have the biblical account of human creation in these words, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the

³Ibid., 22.

⁴Enoch Wan, “Ethnocentrism,” in A. Scott Moreau, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 324.

⁵Ibid.

earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

Reflecting on this account, we need to remember that whatever meaning we may assign to the words, ‘image,’ and ‘likeness’ reflect the value of human life. ‘Image’ and ‘likeness’ of God meant much more than lookalike. Rather, they included “likeness to [God] in spiritual powers—the power of thought, the power of communication, the power of self-transcendence.”⁶ Humans are clearly distinguished from other creatures and placed in the similarity to their Creator. This resemblance places humanity beyond sheer existence in this life to eternal life.

Millard J. Erickson observed, “Humanity is to be understood as having originated not through a chance process of evolution, but through a conscious, purposeful act of God. The reason for human existence lies in the intention of the Supreme Being.”⁷ Furthermore, Erickson noted, “We cannot discover our real meaning by regarding ourselves and our own happiness as the highest of all values, nor find happiness, fulfillment, or satisfaction by seeking it directly. Our value has been conferred on us by a higher source, and we are fulfilled only when serving and loving that higher being.”⁸ In this respect, although sin marred the nature and often the manifestation of God in humans, it has not nullified the truth of the value God placed in humanity. Hence, the New Testament restates the value of every human being by “highlighting the restoration in Christ of aspects thereof that were marred by humanity’s fall into sin. Such features include knowledge of God, reasoning powers, righteousness and holiness, and pious devotion (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23-14; Col. 3:10).”⁹

Consequently, “Being made in the image of God is simultaneously that which sets us apart from the rest of the animals and that which we humans all have in common.”¹⁰

⁶*The Interpreter’s Bible* Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 485.

⁷Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 493.

⁸*Ibid.*, 494.

⁹*Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie General Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 73.

¹⁰Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 423.

Furthermore, Christopher Wright argued, “*No other animal* is created in the image of God, so this forms the basis of the unique dignity and sanctity of human life. *All other humans* are created in the image of God, so this forms the basis of the radical equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or any form of social, economic, or political status.”¹¹

In view of the value God placed on humans, and “since God created humans to resemble himself in important respects, defamation of persons (James 3:9) and acts of murder (Gen. 9:6) are forbidden.”¹² Therefore, in relationship and treatment of “others,” irrespective of their cultural background, socio-educational attainment in the society, ethnolinguistic background, or religious affiliation, Christians should have a biblical perspective of human value, which led Jesus to the cross. A Christian relationship to “others” should be informed by God and not based on what our distorted culture says about other people.

Because humans are made in the image and likeness of God, “they have an essential value and possess the potential to contribute to society through their presence, work, and ideas.”¹³ Moreover, as non-Christians come to faith in Christ Jesus, they become family members, and share the same bloodline through Christ Jesus. Paul underscored this truth when he said:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Ephesians 2:11-16).

Therefore, we cannot dispose our ethnocentric attitudes and plant a true multicultural church if we do not see, value, and appreciate others of different backgrounds the way God does.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²*Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 73.

¹³M. Daniel Carroll R. *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2008), 67.

A genuine conviction that all people are created in the image and likeness of God is the first theological conviction that will help us love, relate, and seek to understand others who may not look, act, or behave like us. If they are believers in Christ, we become family, members of the household of God, made new in Christ.

2. The Conviction that all Cultures have been Corrupted

The second theological conviction that is fundamental in planting a multicultural church is the conviction that the ‘Fall’ (Genesis 3), has the implication that all cultures regardless of their level of development, sophistication, or primitiveness have been corrupted because of sin. The consequence of sin not only affects the individual but also influences the society formed by humans. Human actions, activities, and institutions often spread sin horizontally within society. “Sin propagates itself vertically between generations. It thus generates contexts and connections that are laden with collective sin. Sin becomes endemic, structural and embedded in history. Thus the Old Testament historians observe how whole societies become addicted to chaotic evil (as the book of Judges portrays with its slow crescendo of vile behavior). Isaiah attacks those who legalize injustice by passing laws that give structural legitimacy to oppression.”¹⁴ Isaiah declared, “Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!” (Isaiah 10:1-2)

In Romans chapters 1-3, Paul demonstrated the universality of the Gospel by arguing that all humanity regardless of their religious experiences, both Jews and non-Jews, have sinned and come short of the glory of God. John Stott, in *The Message of the Romans*, noted that “the apostle thus divides the human race into three sections—depraved pagan society (1:18-32), critical moralizers whether Jews or Gentiles (2:1-16), and well-instructed, self-confident Jews

¹⁴Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, 431.

(2:17-3:8). He then concludes by accusing the whole human race (3:9-20). In each case his argument is the same, nobody lives up to the knowledge which he or she has.”¹⁵

In reference to Ephesians 2:1-3, Stott insisted, “Paul is not giving us a portrait of some particularly decadent tribe or degraded segment of society, or even of the extremely corrupt paganism of his day. No, this is the biblical diagnosis of fallen man [humanity] in fallen society everywhere.”¹⁶ Concerning the choice of words by Paul, “trespasses” [*paraptoma*] and “sins” [*hamartia*] in Ephesians 2:1, Stott concluded, “These two words seem to have been carefully chosen to give comprehensive account of human evil... Together the two words cover positive and negative, or active and passive, aspects of human wrong doing, that is to say, our sins of commission and of omission. Before God we are both rebels and failures.”¹⁷ In light of this biblical verdict, ethnocentrism must be eliminated. No church planter should consider their culture more superior to those he or she is trying to reach. Both saved and unsaved are products of fallen cultures. Even if one culture seems to be better, it is only an illusion because at the core of every culture is a tangling web that holds humanity captive to disobedience.

For instance, those in capitalist societies often condemn communism because of its godlessness, but often forget that in a capitalist world, materialism is the reigning king. One denies the Creator, and the other displaces him in pursuit of worldly gain. Sherwood Lingenfelter, in *Transforming Culture*, stated, “Members of every society hold a collective worldview and participate in structured social environments. Learning from parents and peers to accept and live in accord with certain values, beliefs, and procedures for action, they create a collective this-worldliness, which becomes a prison of disobedience.”¹⁸ This cultural prison is so transformative that the people become “so entangled, they live a life of conformity to social images that are in conflict with God’s purpose for humanity.”¹⁹ This is the reason for grace; we

¹⁵John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 37.

¹⁶John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 71.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 15-16.

¹⁹Ibid., 16.

all need deliverance from cultural captivity and ethnocentrism. In Christ, God offered freedom and a new humanity. Multicultural churches represent that new humanity in our world.

3. Conviction That All Cultures are Under the Control of the Devil

It is much easier to believe that we are created in the image of God and generally agree that we live in a fallen culture than to believe that all cultures (the whole world) are under the control of the Evil One. (1John 5:19) The reason, among other things, is the development of the scientific worldview. Paul G. Hiebert, in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, discusses what he called the “Flaw of the Excluded Middle.” The concept pertains to the Western worldview, which excludes the unseen world of the spirits, ghosts, ancestors, demons, and the like. Most non-Westerners have a three-tiered worldview: (1) High religion, based on cosmic beings, the home of the cosmic gods, the angels, demons, and spirits of other worlds; (2) Folk or Low Religion, which concerns local gods, goddesses, ancestors, dead saints, demons, and evil spirits; or (3) the Folk Social Scene, which is the home of humans, in which the interaction of the living and the spiritual forces take place.

The relationship among these forces, both human and spirit, is conceived in an organic manner. The organic analogy, according to Hiebert, considers things as living beings in relationship to one another in contrast to a mechanical analogy, which perceives things as inanimate objects that act upon one another like parts in a machine. On the other hand, in the West from the beginning of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the belief in the supernatural (middle zone) began to die with the growing industrialization and consequent secularization that is commonly called ‘scientific worldview.’²⁰

One of the implications of this shift in worldview among evangelical Christians is that although they acknowledge the person of Satan, demonic forces, and fallen angels, these sinister beings are never taken seriously in spiritual warfare in respect to evangelism, church planting,

²⁰Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 189-201.

and Christian living. Paul said in II Corinthians 10:3-4, “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” Again, in Ephesians 6:12 Paul said, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

It is obvious that Paul was not simply referring to civil Roman authorities, although some were definitely agents in the hand of the unseen forces. He was referring to demonic princes, spiritual custodians of cultures, and powers that influence people and their behaviors. To be able to push back darkness and free the spiritual captives, we have to recover the kingdom perspectives of Jesus and the early church. Gregory A. Boyd observed that “the assumption that undergirds Jesus’ entire ministry is the view that Satan has illegitimately seized the world and thus now exercises a controlling influence over it.”²¹ In the gospel of John, Jesus called Satan, “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The word used for ruler in Greek is, ‘*archon*,’ ‘prince,’ “which was customarily used to denote the highest official in a city or a region in the Greco-Roman world. Hence Jesus is saying that, concerning ruling powers over cosmos, this evil ruler is highest.”²²

It is also instructive to note that when Satan in the temptation of Jesus claimed he could give all the authority and glory of the kingdoms of the world, Jesus did not dispute his claim. “And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.” (Luke 4:5-6) Suffice it, therefore, to state that socio-cultural practices, economic and political ideologies, are often subject to satanic manipulations, and consequently part of the strongholds the devil uses in keeping nonbelievers in bondage. Christ

²¹Gregory A. Boyd, *God At War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997, 181..

²²Ibid.

followers should no longer take delight in defending fallen cultures which are under the control of the evil one. Some could argue that our culture is founded on Christian principles and is not as evil as other cultures. However, the testimony of the Bible is that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1John 5:19). There is no geopolitical entity that is exempted. In reality, while in traditional societies, the working of the evil one may be more obvious, and sometimes crude, in sophisticated societies, the working of the devil is more subtle, more ideological, more Christless alternative lifestyles, substance abuse, and materialism.

Instead of defending our cultures, a multicultural church planter should see his church plant as a rescue mission, because the gospel liberates from worldliness, and fallen cultures inherited from our forefathers. Peter said, “knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (I Peter 1:18-19). Believers in Christ are more than citizens of a particular country or countries. Our allegiance is to the resurrected Christ. We are here as an invading army for the kingdom of God. Therefore, “every culture and every person must change in the light of a new perspective—Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and exalted. Jesus came to save not cultures but people, and he came to transform them into his likeness. But the whole cultures will not be transformed,”²³ because culture, as Lingenfelter insisted is “inextricably infected by sin.”²⁴

4. Conviction that Salvation is Possible for Anyone Regardless of Cultural Backgrounds

Paul, writing to the church in Rome about his desire to visit the imperial city stated, “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.” (Roman 1:13-15)

²³Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission*, 18.

²⁴Ibid.

He used phrases that categorized humanity in his time, “Greeks and barbarians,” the “wise” and the “foolish.” “Greeks” were in reference to the educated class who spoke Greek and followed Hellenistic culture, and the “Barbarians” were those outside the Greco-Roman cultural influence whose languages and cultures were unintelligible to the sophisticated urbanites. In our modern context, it could be equivalent to the media use of the words, “develop” and “developing” or “underdeveloped” nations. The phrases cover all human cultures regardless of their level of civilization or development. Yet Paul said he was under obligation to preach the gospel to all of them in Rome.

The imperial city itself was a melting pot, drawing people from all over the Mediterranean world. It expanded citizenship to freed slaves, absorb alien populations more readily, borrowed other cultures and remodeled them in the image of Rome.²⁵ It was the center of commerce, industry, finance, government, variety of religions, and all kinds of people, Greeks and barbarians, both wise and foolish. As Ferguson observed, “several features of the social organization contributed to the debasing of morality. Slavery gave occasion for cruelty and sexual license. The punishment of criminals, notably through sentencing to the mines and execution by crucifixion showed the brutality of the times.”²⁶ “Homosexuality was extremely common in Greek world and by New Testament times had become widespread in the Roman world as well. ...The Roman emperor Hadrian was so overcome with passionate love for a young man named Antinous that when the object of his affection drowned, the grief-stricken emperor decreed that he be worshipped as a god.”²⁷ Yet, Paul was willing, and “eager to preach the gospel” to those in Rome (Romans 1:15). He referred to himself in these words:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full

²⁵Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 21.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 69.

²⁷“Homosexuality in the Ancient World” in *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1836.

acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (I Timothy 1:12-15).

Furthermore, Paul reminded Timothy that “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” (I Timothy 1:2; 3-6) Peter also admonished believers in the diaspora who were waiting for the coming of the Lord that “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Jesus (responding to the faith of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who probably made fortunes through accounting fraud, bribery, and embezzlement) said, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:9-10). Therefore, it will be necessary to recognize that the love of God and his salvation goes beyond any and all ethnolinguistic lines to the deepest and most violent offender. All that God is requiring from people everywhere is for them to repent and accept Christ Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Again Paul stated,

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-19).

As much as some of us may not like it, “God is everyone’s God, and that what I wish God to be for me, God Himself wishes to be for all. Without respect of persons. So I ought to rejoice in every human being who pays Him adoration, and I ought to be grateful to anyone who says to me, come, let us worship.”²⁸

²⁸*The Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 11, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 398.

5. Conviction that the Church is a New Race, a New Humanity

The idea that Christians of all cultures and races are part of the Kingdom of God and subsequently members of the new Israel was deeply rooted in the teaching of the New Testament. John the Baptist warned the Jews, “do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). Jesus, in contentious argument with the Jews on their claim that Abraham was their father (John 8:39) said, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did” (John 8:39-40). Jesus even called the unbelieving Jews, children of the devil. “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

Speaking on the Politics of the Passion with the title, “The King without a Country” based on John 19:13-24, David Crosby observed that Jesus “was breaking the genealogical link between Abraham and his children. He was pointing to the heart, as he always did. He was introducing the notion that a Jew was not simply a physical descendant of Abraham.”²⁹ Peter’s understanding of the church beyond racial and ethnic lines was first revealed during his unwilling encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10. He later admitted that “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:44-35).

Furthermore, in his Epistle to the Christians in diaspora, he called them, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

²⁹David Crosby, “The King without a Country” available from <http://www.fbno.org/mediafiles/120401-sermon-notes.pdf>.

But it was the Apostle Paul in his letters to the Romans and Galatians who would later take this teaching to its logical end. In Romans 2:28-29, he insisted, “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.” In Galatians, Paul stated, “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:26-29). And in chapter 6 verse 16, Paul called the church, “the Israel of God.”

In other words, as Jesus' kingship has no ethnic, geographical, continental, or nationalistic jurisdiction but in according to Mark 3:31-35, is constituted of people everywhere regardless of their ethnolinguistic background, whosoever believed in Jesus Christ and enthrones him in their heart as Lord and King; so is the church. Paul emphasized the inclusiveness of all peoples and nations by declaring that actually God is creating a new humanity, a new race in Christ Jesus.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:12-19)

In reference to the church, it is not primarily a reference to the church universal, or invisible, but the local church, the visible church in the community. Charles Van Engen insisted that the Church is both visible and invisible, and that “The visible-invisible distinction, though not explicitly found in the New Testament, was proposed in the early centuries of the church

life.”³⁰ While the distinction may be important for clarification and understanding, “it must be remembered that there is one church, not two;”³¹ therefore, every local church must reflect the essence of the universal one church by incorporating deliberately all who come to faith within its context of ministry. The local church represents the new humanity redeemed and redefined in Christ.

However, it needs to be noted that although the idea of creating a new humanity is dominant in the New Testament, it is rooted in the salvation history and imbedded in the Old Testament. The promise of God can be seen following the Fall: God declared, “I will put enmity between you [Serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” A promise fulfilled in Christ Jesus. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” (1 John 3:8) After the deluge, the rainbow covenant was for “all flesh that is on the earth” (Gen. 9:16)

The call of Abraham was to be a blessing to all nations. “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Israel was called and chosen, but not because God loves them more than other nations, but through them to fulfill his salvation for all the nations. Bryant Hicks observed, “To be sure, Israel was and is his chosen people, but not because he loves them and no others. Rather, he chose them for the sake of the other peoples.”³²

Christopher J.H. Wright also made the following observations: (1) The election of Israel is set in the context of God’s universality. (2) The election of Israel does not imply the rejection of other nations. (3) The election of Israel is not warranted by any special feature of Israel by itself. (4) The election of Israel is founded only in God’s inexplicable love. (5) The election of Israel is instrumental, not an end in itself. (6) The election of Israel is part of the logic of God’s

³⁰Charles Van Engen, “Church” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* A. Scott Moreau editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 193.

³¹Ibid.

³²Bryant Hicks, “The Missionary Intent in the Old Testament” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Mission* John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith and Justice Anderson editors (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 54.

commitment to history. (7) The election of Israel is fundamentally missional, not just soteriological.³³

The same can be said of the church. No local church is to be an exclusive for a particular ethnic or socio-economic, or educational class of people. We must have that conviction that to be a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,” is to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9-10). And it involves dying to our former cultural bondages and embracing the new humanity in Christ. The only ones excluded are those who are yet to accept the lordship of Jesus Christ.

6. That People of Diverse Cultures Can Worship Together

Worship for many Christians today is synonymous with singing and music in the church. Consciously or unconsciously, we may like or dislike a church worship service because our taste of music. However, music, like other human activities, is culturally determined and varies from context to context. For examples, unlike Western music that specializes in polytonality, African music tends to be polyrhythmic according to Mendonsa,

African musical traditions also greatly emphasize dance, for movement is regarded as an important mode of communication. The dance utilizes symbolic gestures, mime, props, masks, costumes, body painting and other visual devices. The basic movements may be simple, emphasizing the upper body, torso, or feet; or they may be complex, involving coordination of different body parts and intricate actions such as fast rotation, ripples of the body, and contraction and release, as well as variation in dynamics and use of space.³⁴

Because of the differences in style of music, it sometimes becomes extremely difficult for people of diverse cultural backgrounds to worship together. Nevertheless, it will be instructive to be reminded of what Rick Warren said in *The Purpose Driven Life*. “Worship has nothing to do with the style or volume or speed of a song. God loves all kinds of music because he invented it all-fast and slow, loud and soft, old and new. You probably don’t like it all, but God does! If it is

³³Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 263.

³⁴Eugene L. Mendonsa, *West Africa: An Introduction to Its History, Civilization, and Contemporary Situation* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 196.

offered to God in spirit and truth, it is an act of worship.”³⁵ Our preoccupation with style speaks more of our background, culture, and self-indulgencies rather than God. Again, Warren stated, “Frankly, the music style you like best says more about you –your background and personality – than it does about God. One ethnic group’s music can sound like noise to another. But God likes variety and enjoys it all.”³⁶

However, what is worship? Specifically, what is Christian worship? Jesus, in speaking with the Samaritan woman in John 4:23-24, talked about worship. “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” He reminded the woman that first, God is spirit, second, worship can take place anywhere, and location is not a problem. Third, God is searching for those who would worship him regardless of their background, culture, and location. And fourth, for a human being to worship God, only two things are necessary, “Truth and Spirit.”

There are two possible ways of interpreting “truth and spirit.” The first possible way is to refer Truth to sincerity, unadulterated, unpretentious devotion to God. The second is to look at truth as a person, Jesus himself (John 14:6), being the conduit; the way, through which authentic relationship with the Father can be developed and worshipped. It will appear that both interpretations are implied. Jesus is the way, revealer of the Father, and through him only can we offer a true worship. The same can be said of the “Spirit.” It involves manner, attitude, and heart condition, as well as the aid of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul said, “For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26).

Therefore, Christian worship is total devotion, a sacrificial offering of self to God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In Romans 12:1, Paul said, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,

³⁵Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002), 65.

³⁶Ibid.

which is your spiritual worship.” Worship is all inclusive; it is not just an event, because it is a lifestyle, a commitment and devotion to the Lord of life. That is why Jesus demanded reconciliation with your brother before offering a gift. If your lifestyle is unacceptable to God, your gift is unacceptable to him. Your gift represents you. “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt. 5:23-24) Consequently, worship can be corporate or individualistic. But our concern here is about corporate worship. Can people of diverse cultures and traditions worship together? The answer is in the affirmative. Yes, it is not only possible, it is a requirement, it is a testimony of our faith and sinful if we neglect it (Heb. 10:25). At the end of time, worship will be the primary duty of the redeemed in heaven, see Revelation 7:9-12.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.

At the inauguration of the church on the Day of Pentecost, Luke noted the diverse population that joined and became part of the church. There were people from the entire Mediterranean world. “Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.” (Acts 2:5) Many of the people were ethnically Jews but were born and raised in dispersion. Here is the list: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians. (Acts 2: 9-11) Others were proselytes, meaning that they were not ethnically Jews, but Gentiles that converted to Judaism. Luke mentioned also “visitors” and “devout men,” which may refer to “God-fearers,” a term used in referring to non-Jewish believers and worshippers of

the God of Israel but who would not adopt Jewish customs and traditions. “This was the international, multi-lingual crowd which gathered around the 120 believers.”³⁷

After the preaching of Peter and the conversion of the three thousand, the Bible said, they were “together and had all things in common.” (Acts 2:44) They worshipped together, had fellowship, studied the word of God, and ate together.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

All the converts received the truth, Christ himself, and were filled with the Holy Spirit, the two necessary elements in worship of God. Paul said, “There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4-6). Therefore, the idea of believers in Christ not worshipping together because of cultural diversity is a deception of the devil to keep the church fragmented. A united, diverse population redeemed in Christ, and worshipping together and proclaiming the gospel will be a great push back to the kingdom of the darkness. The conviction that people of diverse cultures can and should worship together must be a fundamental belief of a church planter who desires to plant a multicultural church. It was the practice of the Jerusalem church (Acts 2), Antioch church (Acts 13), and all the New Testament churches. There was no homogenous worship and there will be none in heaven. Our worship experience in this world should prepare us for the ultimate worship experience for the world to come.

³⁷John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 65.

7. Conviction to Fulfill the Prayer of Jesus

In the gospel of John chapter 17, Jesus prayed what has been called, “The High Priestly Prayer.” It was a consummate prayer after the long discourse of chapters 14-16. He prayed for himself (17:1-5), prayed for the immediate disciples (17:6-19), and lastly prayed for the future believers (17:20-26). In his prayer for himself, Jesus prayed for the Father to be glorified through his death and exaltation. Carson pointed out that “in some respects the prayer is a summary of the entire Fourth Gospel to this point. Its principal themes include Jesus’ obedience to the Father, the glorification of his Father through his death/exaltation, the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, the choosing of the disciples out of the world, their unity modeled on the unity of the Father and Son, and their final destiny in the presence of the Father and the Son.”³⁸

In the second part of the prayer, he prayed for the protection and unity of the disciples. “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:11). Through this prayer, Jesus reiterated that the disciples would be protected by the Father’s name, symbolizing his power and character. Moreover there is a strong emphasis on the unity as demonstrated by the oneness between the Father and the Son. Jesus prayed for the visible manifestation of this unity because it would affect the disciples’ ministry of the gospel. The same emphasis can be seen in the prayer for the future disciples (John 17:20-23).

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

This primary purpose for the emphasis on Christian unity is to “convince the world that Jesus was indeed commissioned by God. The incarnate life was a revelation of the nature of God

³⁸D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 551.

(John 1:14), ‘full of grace and truth,’ the shining forth of the filial love of the Logos. This the disciples had received from their Lord, and had shared in the unity of the divine fellowship, in the gift of eternal life.”³⁹ Carson was right when he said, although the unity envisaged in John 17 is not institutional, this purpose clause at the end of v. 21

...shows beyond possibility of doubt that the unity is meant to be observable. It is not achieved by hunting enthusiastically for the lowest common theological denominator, but by common adherence to the apostolic gospel, by love that is joyfully self-sacrificing, by undaunted commitment to the shared goals of the mission with which Jesus’ followers have been charged, by self-conscious dependence on God himself and fruitfulness.⁴⁰

Therefore, the unity of the believers in Christ is deeper than the socio-cultural bond and human bloodlines, because it is rooted in the heart of who God is and his plan and purpose in Christ Jesus. “The unity of the Godhead demands the unity of the entire Christian communion.”⁴¹ Therefore, creating artificial barriers or excluding people whom Christ died for, on basis of culture, tradition or any other non-biblical reason is tantamount to working against the Gospel and what God is doing in creating a new humanity. Jesus said in John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” How else can this love be demonstrated to the skeptical watching world except in a true multicultural, multiracial, multi-socio-economic and educational worship experience? Fulfilling the prayer of Jesus should be our number one priority.

8. Commitment to Holistic Ministry: Great Commission and the Great Commandment

In the evangelical circles, there is often a debate on obeying the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Missiologically, it concerns the controversy of holistic mission. It polarized believers of different persuasions, from liberals to conservatives. Conversation became more heated after the end of colonialism and the rise of non-Western churches. However, most

³⁹*The Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 8, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 751.

⁴⁰Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 568.

⁴¹*The Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 8, 751.

evangelicals have reached a measure of consensus through conferences and consultations, like the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. Nevertheless, some still doubt the place of holistic mission in evangelization because of the challenges and the potential risks involved.⁴²

My position is that we have no choice of either obeying the Great Commission or Great Commandment. We are under obligation to obey the two, especially in planting a new church. God himself is love, and I John 4:8 said, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is Love.” Loving God and loving our neighbors will actively involve serving our community and being compassionate, as Jesus was in his earthly ministry. Our love and service to the lost world authenticate our witness as truly representing Christ. Proclamation of the word without living it out justifies the claim that Christians are hypocritical, and it hinders and dishonors our Savior.

Holistic, as it pertains to ministry, is derived from the term “holism,” according to John Stott, which is a “philosophical notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”⁴³ Stott regrets that this notion “is perhaps not a very satisfactory epithet to apply to the Christian mission. Yet, it is intended to emphasize that authentic mission is a comprehensive activity which embraces evangelism and social action, and refuses to let them be divorced.”⁴⁴ John Steward agrees, but insists that etymologically the Greek word *holos*, meaning “whole,” “wholly,” or “complete,” is used in the Scriptures (Matt 5:29-30; Acts 3:16; John 9:34); but “the English ‘wholly’ and ‘holy’ (Greek *hagios*), frequently confused, are not the same, although the latter is impossible without the former. The Hebrew word closest to *holos* is possibly *shalom*.”⁴⁵

Steward argues that holism is based on the lordship of Christ in every part of life. Furthermore, sin affects life holistically in broken relationships and stewardship. In addition, as part of the consequences of sin, the ownership of God is ignored or usurped. Therefore,

⁴²This section has been published as part of my book, *West African Worldviews: New Immigrants in the USA and Their Missiological Implications* (Köln, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009).

⁴³John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1992), 337.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵John Steward, “Holism, Biblical,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 448.

“Redemption is about reversing the effect of the fall; it is multidimensional.”⁴⁶ Mission from this perspective “is no longer seen in terms of priorities, but as parts of the whole. The scope of the gospel is the same as the scope of sin and its effects. Because sin is holistic, it is imperative that the gospel be holistic.”⁴⁷ Holistic mission, in essence, is concerned with the presentation and application of the gospel to the whole person, and the transformation of not only the spiritual life, but also the socio-cultural, economic, political, and environmental systems that influence the person. Douglas McConnell writes, “While holistic mission affirms the functional uniqueness of evangelism and social responsibility, it views them as inseparable from the ministry of the kingdom of God.

Therefore, holistic mission is the intentional integration of building the church and transforming society.”⁴⁸ John Cheyne, in an article in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions* titled, “Strategies for Humanitarian Ministries,” argued that the word “holistic, which could refer to the sum total of the parts, as in whole . . . is not actually found in the dictionary. However, holistic is a symbiotic term from the field of biology.”⁴⁹ The term ‘symbiotic’, Cheyne insisted, is “made up of the Greek prefix sym, meaning interdependence, and a Greek morpheme bios, meaning life. Together they depict the harmonious living together of two functionally dissimilar organisms in a way beneficial to each other.”⁵⁰

When this symbiotic term is applied to evangelism and social ministry, “It is best described as a relationship which is obligatory in some sense—one partner being unable to live without the other, or each depending heavily on the other.”⁵¹ Consequently, in applying this symbiotic concept to ministry context, Cheyne insisted, “We must recognize that humanity’s

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Douglas McConnell, “Holistic Mission,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 448.

⁴⁹John Cheyne, “Strategies for Humanitarian Ministries,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed., John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 517.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid

spiritual nature cannot be dealt with in isolation from human circumstance, whether that be social, political, physical, psychological, or otherwise.”⁵²

John Stott, arguing in the same vein, understands the relationship between social activity and evangelism to be like a partner. According to Stott, it is like the “two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird, as they were in the public ministry of Jesus. The partnership is, in reality, a marriage.”⁵³ Therefore, in contemporary missiological works, holistic mission is now defined as “mission that takes into account the whole of human needs; spiritual, social, and personal. Holistic mission includes evangelism and church planting as well as development and social transformation.”⁵⁴ Padilla insisted,

There is no place for an ‘otherworldliness’ that does not result in a Christian’s commitment to his neighbor, rooted in the gospel. There is no room for eschatological paralysis nor for a social strike. There is no place for statistics on how many souls die without Christ every minute if they do not take into account how many of those who die are dying of hunger.⁵⁵

In other words, Padilla is arguing that the mission of the church involves both proclamation and social action. He takes seriously the spiritual needs of the world without overlooking the physical felt need. As for those who doubt his commitment to spiritual needs and proclamation, he writes that the gospel “cannot be reduced to social, economic, and political categories, nor the church to an agency for human improvement. Even less can the gospel be confused with political ideology or the church a political party.”⁵⁶

Padilla recognized the fact that the church is called out to witness and proclaim the transcendental message to all people in Christ. He noted that nothing can substitute for the spiritual regeneration, and salvation cannot be tantamount to the satisfaction of felt needs, socio-economic amelioration, and political freedom. However, a genuine gospel, while proclaiming repentance and faith in Christ, will also be concerned with human suffering, poverty, and justice,

⁵²Ibid., 518.

⁵³Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 340.

⁵⁴Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 15.

⁵⁵C. Padilla, *Mission between the Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 24-25.

⁵⁶Ibid., 41.

as negligence in these areas will betray the gospel that is preached. The book of James chapter 2:14-17 reads:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Consequently, Padilla declares,

I refuse, therefore, to drive a wedge between a primary task--namely, the proclamation of the gospel—and secondary (at best) or even optional (at worst) task of the church. In order to be obedient to its Lord, the church should never do anything that is not essential; therefore, nothing that the church does in obedience to its Lord is unessential. Why? Because love for God is inseparable from love for our neighbor; because faith without works is dead; because hope includes restoration of all things to the kingdom of God.⁵⁷

Benigno Beltran blamed differences in holistic ministry to worldview differences.

According to him, Western thinking in general has been influenced by the dualistic nature of platonic philosophy. He observed, "Plato taught that the soul existed before one is born into the world. The body is the prison of the soul, and matter is considered evil. To find the true self, a person has to be guided by values of the spirit so he or she may return to the pure contemplation of ideas."⁵⁸ It is this platonic world of the senses and intelligible world of ideas that sowed the seeds for "Descartes' dichotomy between the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, between thinking and extended substances, Leibnitz's separation of actual and possible worlds, Kant's serving the noumena from the phenomena."⁵⁹ Beltran concluded that Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud are all "descendants of this kind of thinking, resulting in a dichotomy that opens up between an inert God, who cannot be known in himself, and the world of phenomena, conceived as a closed continuum of cause and effect."⁶⁰

⁵⁷Ibid., 42.

⁵⁸Benigno Beltran, "Toward a Theology of Holistic Ministry," in *Serving with the Urban Poor*, ed. Tetsunao Yamamori, Bryant L. Myers, and Kenneth L. Luscombe (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1988), 179.

⁵⁹Ibid., 59.

⁶⁰Ibid.

But what does the Bible say? In his book, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, J. H. Bavinck stated that the scriptures are “never concerned with preaching alone, but are concerned with all other elements constituting the environment in which preaching takes place.”⁶¹ He observed that it is evident from the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus that His entry, works, and the manner in which He conducted himself among diverse groups of people were all included within the greater context of His official work. In Acts 1:1, Luke refers to what Jesus “began both to do and to teach.” Bavinck argued, “Luke even mentions what Jesus did before mentioning what he taught. And Jesus himself pointed with emphasis to the fact that he had a greater witness than that of John.”⁶²

An example of Jesus’ pointing to His work is in John 5:36, “I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.” In this regard, Bavinck concluded, “The wonders of Jesus are closely connected with the kingship of God. As convincing ‘signs’ of the kingdom of heaven, they belong to the new world order, in which God will disclose his kingly power in this world.”⁶³ Arthur F. Glasser, in the same manner, affirmed that “when Jesus stated that the kingdom is dynamically moving into human history and sweeping over people violently (Matt. 11:22), he was referring to a new world, a new state of affairs, a new community.”⁶⁴

Furthermore, this new world is “the good realm where the realities of redemption are granted and received, where the conditions of fulfillment are realized and evil is no more at work. It is political (as) its path toward realization lies on a collision course with all human rule or authority.”⁶⁵ Glasser observed that while Satan is determined to thwart the progress of the kingdom of God, Jesus calmly asserts His authority and will exercise this rule until “the

⁶¹H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 90.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., 91.

⁶⁴Arthur F. Glasser et al., *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 189.

⁶⁵Ibid.

dominion of Satan, sin, and death are not only challenged but also brought to a complete end (cf. Mark 9:1, 13:26, 14:62 with Luke 11:20-22).”⁶⁶

God is both the creator and redeemer. He cares about the total wellbeing (spiritual and material) of all people he has made. On the one hand, he yearns after his creatures in their lostness for he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and is not willing that any should perish. So he pleads with them to listen, to return to him in penitence, and to receive his forgiveness. On the other hand, “God cares for the poor and the hungry, the alien, the widow and the orphan. He denounces oppression and tyranny, and calls for justice. He tells his people to be the voice of the voiceless and defender of the powerless, and so to express their love for them. It is neither an accident nor a surprise, therefore, that God’s two great commandments are that we love him with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves.”⁶⁷ Jesus not only announced the kingdom of God, but also demonstrated its arrival by deeds of compassion and power. “There was in his ministry an indissoluble bond between evangelism and compassionate service. He exhibited in action the love of God he was proclaiming.”⁶⁸

The greatest problem in holistic ministry is not theological rightness or wrongness; even the severest critic recognizes the need for meeting felt needs (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, freeing the oppressed and social justice). However, there is a tendency for social involvement to overshadow the gospel’s proclamation. The possibility of this can be seen in the sixth chapter of book of Acts, in which social ministry almost derailed the progress of the ministry of the early church had it not been for the wise and timely intervention of the apostles. The church should be mindful of the lessons of colonialism and the medieval church, which became so attached to the state that working for the church became synonymous with working for the state.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 343.

⁶⁸Ibid., 345.

While it is true that the kingdom of God is partly “already,” the church must not equate the temporary world with it. There is still the “not yet” of the kingdom and, since it is through repentance and faith that one can enter the kingdom, it becomes imperative that proclamation must not be neglected and social needs should not be abandoned. In conclusion, the challenge of holistic ministry is not merely a biblical or a theological issue. One is confronted with practical issues of life like poverty, justice, equality, and oppression. Hence, there is a need to strike a balance. The ministry of Jesus remains the perfect model of holistic mission. He ministered to the physical needs of the people, but He also challenged the multitude (John 6) to look beyond physical food to spiritual food that will last. Therefore, every church or church planter must obey both the Great Commission as well as the Great Commandment in their community.

9. Sees the World through the Diversity of God’s Creation

Our God is a God of diversity. It can be seen in his creation and all the different species he created. Understanding the diverse species of plants, animals, birds, and sea creatures brings us into the subject of biodiversity. Since June 1992, at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, when over 150 governments signed ‘The Biodiversity Convention’, the word, “biodiversity” has become familiar apart from the exclusive use of wildlife scientist and conservationist. According to the conveners, “The major objectives of the convention are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits.”⁶⁹

Generally, different disciplines study biodiversity differently. For example, “(1) Natural history perceives biodiversity as biotic elements of nature that can be described and classified. (2) Science considers biodiversity as a measurable parameter that is relevant for ecosystem processes and functions. (3) In environmentalism, biodiversity is used in the context of concerns

⁶⁹Prof. L. Kannan, “Understanding Biodiversity” <http://ocw.unu.edu/international-network-on-water-environment-and-health/unu-inweh-course-1-mangroves/Understanding-Biodiversity.pdf>

about species extinctions and habitat destructions.”⁷⁰ But for our purpose, Kannan’s understanding of biodiversity will be sufficient. He defined it as “the variability among living organisms from all sources including, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems. This includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.”⁷¹

In the Scripture (Genesis 1), God created all things, including diversity within species. Science and environmentalists are helping us to understand and appreciate the diversity and beauty of God’s creation. For example, “The number of species currently described on earth is between 1.4 and 1.7 million, but the *Global Diversity Assessment* suggests a conservative estimate of 1.75 million.

However, this figure does not include microbial species. Little is known about microbial diversity in general.”⁷² Furthermore, on land, there are more species known than in the sea. This is largely due to the extraordinary diversity of beetles (Coleoptera); 400,000 species are described. A recent paper suggested the existence of as many as 500,000 undescribed deep sea species. This figure would be a substantial increase in the approximate figure of 390,000 known marine species.⁷³ In the United States and Canada alone, there are known 747 bird species that are native to North America.⁷⁴ Protecting and appreciating these unique creatures has been championed by birdwatchers, nature enthusiasts, and ornithological experts rather than Christians. In fact, much of the environmental activists believe that Christians are against protecting the environment.

Much of the problem with some Christians and conservationists stem out of the interpretation of Genesis 1:28-30, which said,

⁷⁰“Biodiversity—The Appreciation of Different Thought Styles and Values Helps to Clarify the Term” in *Restoration Ecology* Vol. 14, No. 1, MARCH 2006 pp. 105–111 http://flash.lakeheadu.ca/~rrempel/ecology/Biodiversity_Papers/PDF0250-Mayer.pdf

⁷¹Kannan, “Understanding Biodiversity.”

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Les Beletsky, *Bird Songs Bible: The Complete, Illustrated Reference For North America* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 12.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ And God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so.

Many Christians have interpreted “dominion” to mean exploitation. However, it “implies caretaking, to act as stewards of God’s own purposes. It does not, in its biblical sense, imply the establishment of a competing reign, which is what the fall has led to. Dominion is not domination without justice, but rather responsible rule that does not exploit its charges. God gave instructions to share the Earth’s vegetation with other creatures (Gen. 1:29–30).”⁷⁵

God spoke, and out of the ground came every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. Whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field (Gen. 2:19–20). Adam’s task did not end with naming the fungi and micro-organisms but implies concern for the creatures. This concern for all life is taken up in many other places throughout the Bible. The story of Noah is not just about the salvation of the family of Noah, but preservation of biodiversity. More importantly was the covenant between God, Noah, and all living creatures.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth (Gen,9:8-13).

⁷⁵<http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis/prance/lecture3.html>

The plan of God is that through nature, people will see his glory and return back to him. Psalm 19:1-3, declared, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.”

One of the purposes of God’s revelation through creation is declared so that we may see, know, consider and understand that He has created all these magnificent and useful trees. The purpose of the trees is far more than for human use, reflecting back to Genesis 2 verse 9, where we are told to enjoy the trees⁷⁶.

The Prophet Jeremiah links the sin of humankind with environmental degradation. He said, “How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither? For the evil of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away, because they said, “He will not see our latter end” (Jer. 12:4). Jesus’ teaching about the value of life also reflected the care of God to his creation.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! *Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God.* Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows (Luke 12:4-7).

Seeing the beauty and the splendor of God’s ecological garden (earth) will remind us that the God we serve is not only majestic, but the rainbow God who loves diversity, and we will be encouraged to embrace all his diverse people in Christ.

⁷⁶Ibid.