If You Belong to Christ: Ethnicity and the Global Church

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Ethnicity is family writ large. And family is the most powerful form of association that exists between human beings. Hence, ethnic associations carry with them all the strength of both real and metaphorical blood ties. For the world-wide Christian church, this simple fact is both a rich treasure and a dangerous trap. Ethnicities bring to the church all of the linguistic and cultural benefits of incarnated Christian living. The gospel translated into the "heart-language" of the mother tongue, for instance, can move the soul beyond what any attempt to communicate in a second language can do. And, appreciation for the different culture of a fellow Christian can deepen our own understanding of the nature of the truth and of the Kingdom. Yet, even in the best of circumstances, like a slow moving but inexorable glacier, ethnicities can supplant the gospel, replace Jesus himself, as the object of our ultimate allegiance. And in the worst of circumstances, they can cause us to turn upon one another in hatred and violence. The blessing of ethnicity, like the blessing of family, is indeed a mixed one!

Still, we have no choice but to deal with this tension. It is neither possible nor valuable to eradicate ethnicity from our lives or from our churches. Attempts to do so merely end up privileging one ethnicity over the others. "Our church welcomes everyone!"…so long as they look like we do, speak our language, and like our music! Furthermore, were we to succeed in eliminating ethnicity the loss of multiple perspectives on Christian experience and on the Bible would be inestimable. The treasure of ethnicity permits us to unlock the full riches of Christian understanding that are only available through the entire Body of Christ. We must discern God's truth together, not apart. Ethnic differences remind us of our own limitations, and of our need for others, of other times and other places, to help us move beyond those limitations. We simply cannot afford to deny the reality of ethnicity. Two things are needed then: 1) an understanding of the nature of ethnicity, its purposes and functions, how it has arisen and how it has changed to fit external circumstances; and 2) a model for the church that incorporates ethnicity without allowing it to dictate terms

that might threaten our connection to one another or our primary allegiance to Christ. I will begin by tracing the history of the study of ethnicity in the social sciences, especially anthropology, and then present a model for the church, drawing upon biblical images and the experiences of contemporary Christian multicultural churches.

Ethnicity

Anthropology has studied ethnicity for almost half a century. In a classic article, written in 1969, Fredrik Barth (1998) suggested that ethnicity is created by the establishment of social boundaries. That is to say, ethnic identity is as much an identification of who we are *not,* as it is of who we *are*. "Ethnic groups," says Barth, "are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people" (10). Furthermore, "people's categories are for acting," he said, "and are significantly affected by interaction rather than contemplation" (29). Ethnic groups, then, are socially constructed entities, that form a larger taxonomy of people which informs actors within a particular social environment. Thus, in America, without Blacks there would be no Whites; in South Africa, without English there would be no Afrikaaners; and in Rwanda, without Tutsi there would be no Hutus. And in each of these cases, the differences that have been constructed are the result of a history of interaction. Barth roots the construction of ethnic groups ultimately in economic circumstances.[1] Taking an "ecological perspective," he suggests that ethnic groups typically organize themselves with respect to one another by taking on different, but complementary, environmental niches, territories, or sectors (19). Competition for resources results in the formation of interest groups that are cemented together by a purported history of common culture, place, and biological inheritance. The strength of these groups comes from the fact that ethnic identity is experienced as both superordinate and imperative (17). "I *am* a Kikuyu…or a Tamil…or a Serb." This strong association of a people's essential nature with an ecological niche works to form groups with internal solidarity despite the fact that the vast majority of people within the group do not know one another. The larger society will be stable, and will even benefit from the arrangement, so long as the groups can agree upon the allocation of niches. To the degree that they cannot, there will be competition for scarce resources, potential violence, and even fragmentation.

According to Barth, the most critical factor in the creation of ethnic groups is boundary construction and maintenance. This is done through the establishment of tabus on social interaction, especially intermarriage, and by the selection of markers of ethnic identity to distinguish the group from others in the arena. So, for instance, in the United States, there were plenty of "mixed" children under slavery due to the sexual abuse of black slaves by white slave owners. But the unions were illicit, and the children allocated, both socially and legally, exclusively to the black group. Skin color was the marker chosen by Whites to identify the boundary, with any hint of African ancestry denying membership in the White community. This illustration makes the point that interaction across ethnic boundaries, including sexual interaction and even intermarriage, commonly does take place. But it must be denied legitimacy. And, markers of ethnicity, which may be cultural as well as physical, are chosen to help enforce the difference. "Categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information," says Barth, "but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" (9-10) [emphasis in the original].

The notion of the social construction of ethnicity runs counter to the usual belief that ethnicity arises out of a primordial connection to common ancestry, to culture, and to the land. In another classic work, published in 1973, Clifford Geertz (2000) identified the centrality of a belief in primordialism to the construction of ethnicity in post-colonial nationalist movements. The formation of the "new states" after World War II, says Geertz, revealed a tension between the need to construct modern governments (usually democracies) that would be capable of maintaining their own in the global community, and the need to hold the country together by drawing upon the symbols of a common past:

To deduce what the nation is from a conception of the world-historical situation in which it is thought to be enclosed – "epochalism" – produces one sort of moral-political universe; to diagnose the situation with which the nation is faced from a prior conception of what it is intrinsically – "essentialism" – produces quite another; and to combine the two (the most common approach) produces a confused assortment of mixed cases. (251)

Part of the problem was that national identities had been arbitrarily constructed during independence movements from disparate peoples, languages, and cultures in order to distinguish them from colonial powers. Post-independence, these earlier ethnic identities threatened to reassert themselves. Punjabis, Bengalis, Maratis, and others who had come to recognize themselves as "Indians" in order to protest British rule, now had trouble retaining that sense of a common identity with the British no longer present. Indeed it would appear that since the collapse of the colonial empires, the world has continued to fragment into smaller and smaller units as more tightly defined ethnicities have declared their independence from more local forms of "foreign" rule. What began as India's freedom from England moved quickly to Pakistan's freedom from India, and then to Bangladesh's freedom from Pakistan. Elsewhere, East Timor has thrown off the yoke of oppression from Indonesia, Eritrea from Ethiopia, and the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have splintered completely, all largely along "ethnic" lines.

What can be seen most clearly in these examples is the tremendous political power of ethnicity as an organizing principle. It seems that a call to rally around as a common people, *a family*, in opposition to other peoples, or other families, is exceedingly effective. The argument made by ethnic leaders is not that an interest group must be formed to achieve carefully considered and achievable ends. It is that there is a primordial tie that binds a group together apart from any immediate needs or objectives, and that this tie is rooted in common ancestry, blood ties, and a common history situated in a geographical birthplace. The primordial argument is strong, convincing people that they come in different types, different genres, different species even, and that the differences penetrate to the very essences of who they are. It is in fact a "natural" difference that is postulated, both in the sense of identifying different interiors to the person, and in the sense of comparing relations between groups to the inevitabilities of nature. As one woman said to me with regard to intermarriage, people of different ethnicities should not mix with one another any more than should cattle and horses.

Even social scientists have been somewhat divided over the relative emphasis to be placed on ecological as against primordial concerns in the construction of ethnicity. Some have held out for the primacy of "essentialism", but the bulk of the work since Barth's seminal article has emphasized the highly constructed nature of ethnicity, demonstrating

that boundaries are constantly being drawn and redrawn to suit circumstances, cultural customs resurrected or even invented to provide solidarity, and internal differences steadfastly ignored.[2] These studies have revealed the ability of ethnicity either to organize groups to compete with one another within the state, or to be instrumental in the construction of the state itself in competition with other states. Benedict Anderson's study of "imagined communities", for instance, has demonstrated that the conflation of ethnicity with the state implied in the notion of nationalism is a contemporary one, and is largely the result of standardized languages and modern print technologies (2006: 44). Ethnic nationalism is "a *new* way for linking fraternity, power, and time meaningfully together" (36) [emphasis added]. Cornell and Hartmann (2007) have identified some of the various factors that give rise to ethnicity, such as labor markets, government classification systems, residential spaces, group demographics, and preexisting cultural diversity (2007). Ethnic groups, in this view, are a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging from the need to lobby for and protect people as groups in a complex social and political world (see Stack 1981).

Such theorists ultimately ground ethnicity in a kind of backlash against modernity (see Robbins 2007). Modernity had entailed an expectation that ethnicity would be eradicated, as modern secular institutions replaced traditional culture-based ones. Marxist theorists in particular anticipated the elimination of ethnic and cultural provincialism by a global class structure. In the Soviet Union, the theory was coerced into practice as the government attempted to systematically squelch all ethnic difference. But, as we know, that attempt failed, not only in central Asia, but around the world, as ethnicity reasserted itself dramatically from Africa to Indonesia. Thus social constructionist theorists are now postulating that it is the modernist (capitalist) project, with its cold deconstruction of culture and community, that has spawned *resistance* in the form of ethnicity. Deepa Reddy (2006), for instance, has made a powerful argument that the Hindutva movement in India, which amalgamates religion (Hinduism), race (Aryan), language (Sanskrit), culture (caste system), and place (India), and has frequently turned violent in defense of its motto "Hindustan is for the Hindus", is a form of protest against the restrictions placed on the public arena by secular democratic modernity. "The point", she says, "is…that Hindu ethnicism needs to be seen among other things as an elaborate (though not always

eloquent or coherent) response to classic Marxist and Nehruvian socialist positions on a range of issues, the more important of which is religion" (46-47). "The blessings of modernity are many," comment Cornell and Hartmann (2007:101-2), "but the preservation of intimate meaningful communities has not be one of them." Ethnicity represents the value of local culture and community in the face of globalization.

Yet, ethnicities cross national boundaries as well as construct them. In anthropology, a whole new field of ethnography has opened up for the study of ethnic transnationalism (see Appadurai 1996; Khagram and Levitt 2008). Ethnographers who used to travel to Tibet and live in villages for upwards of two years to be immersed in Tibetan language and culture, now study the Tibetan community in London or New York or Phoenix, Arizona. They visit villages in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico to meet the relatives of their informants in central Iowa. And they gather data on migrations, remittances, and engagement with the law in more than one country in order to understand a single group. They also document the promotion of public symbols of ethnic identity, such as language, religion or cultural customs, that tie together people who no longer share a common place, yet if anything feel a stronger tie to one another than they did when they could take such things for granted (Khagram and Levitt 2008). To be "Indian" in Philadelphia or Vancouver produces far more powerful emotions than it does in India. So, perhaps the primordial nature of ethnic identity has as much to do with having to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land" as with living in the land per se.

Viewing ethnic identity as in part a response to the *absence* of an immediate, natural, and innocent connection to origins helps us to understand the way in which it seems to nest itself in concentric circles of identification. Victor Uchendu illustrates the situational nature of ethnicity:

A Nigerian student in London or New York is more likely to identify himself as an African than as a Nigerian unless the situation clearly indicates that identification of his country is expected or required. To a fellow Nigerian, he is most likely to identify himself with his state or region; if he is speaking to his co-ethnic, he is likely to name the provincial or administrative headquarters to which he belongs. Thus identity is likely to change as the frame of reference changes. (De Vos 1975:270-71)

Furthermore, the construction of ethnicity is partly a matter of self-identification and partly of ascription by other groups and the larger society. In general, to the degree that a group is constructed at the initiative of its own members, the group is empowered; to the degree that it is constructed by others, the group is under oppression. In the contemporary post-colonial circumstance, it is generally a little of both.

In any case, it is international mobility that has heightened the salience of ethnicity for us all. Migrations of people are occurring over the globe like never before. Political conflicts are creating refugees. Global economic disparities are producing labor migration. And world-wide business opportunities are creating an environment in which "money, commodities, and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world" (Appadurai 1997:38). With people of multiple and complex backgrounds interacting with one another in cities everywhere, classification systems are needed to facilitate those interactions and to help people to anticipate outcomes. Merry (1996) has demonstrated that a stranger is always assumed to be dangerous. And the problem with cities is the pure number of strangers with whom we must interact on a daily basis. Lee comments:

Another way in which…[contemporary] social imaginaries differ from previous ones is that they are primarily relations among strangers who nevertheless see themselves as sharing direct access to a larger social totality, whether it be the nation or a market; the sense of belonging must include people who in principle may never know or meet one another. (Hedetoft and Hjort 2002:236)

The solution is to identify those who are like us, and those who are different, anticipating trust and mutual interest with those who are of our "type", and competition, alienation, or even violence from those who are different. So we watch carefully for identifying markers that would help us to anticipate the way in which the interaction will go. Gender, class, and ethnicity all give us clues. And, placing these clues within a larger taxonomy of people provides us with a comforting depiction of the social world that helps us to feel that we are competent to function within it.

In a kaleidoscope of shifting and transient interactions, we all long for a more stable form of community, one that would provide us with a secure sense of who we are, not just

individually, but collectively. The West to the contrary, human identity is first and foremost associated with groups, not individuals. We all need to *belong* to a group. And ethnicity in its primordial experience provides people with "a spiritual communion, an extreme 'we-consciousness' with [our] fellows, even if [we] do not know them directly" (Allahar 2001:201). Thus I am suggesting that, in a complex, changing, and potentially dangerous world, ethnicity is family, the strongest possible metaphor for protection and belonging.

The Church

If ethnicity is family writ large, then what is the church? Is it too a "family"? There is a popular hymn in America entitled, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God." It is probably not insignificant that the music to this hymn is of the Country and Western genre. There is tremendous advantage to family and ethnic group, and to what I have called elsewhere "social conservatism" (Meneses 2007), to simply incorporate, co-opt even, religion into "family values." And the Country and Western subculture of the United States is characterized by this kind of co-option, as is evidenced by its association with racism. Christianity can be made to serve existent social interests by the use of the metaphor, "family", for the church.

The co-opting of religion into ethnicity is not unique to Christianity. In general, religion can be a serious threat to ethnic loyalties. Thus, in the construction of ethnic groups, either the trivialization of religion, or its co-option to ethnic purposes is nearly necessary. Within Christianity, we have Greek Orthodox, Irish Catholics, German Lutherans, and Mennonites (the term is used to simultaneously indicate ethnic and religious affiliation). Outside of Christianity, various accommodations are made depending on the theological stance of the religion. Hinduism, with its long emphasis on purity of blood lines, is being fully co-opted in service of a manufactured "Indian" identity. Islam, which claims a radical first priority in the lives of its adherents, solves the problem of multiple ethnicities by privileging Arabic identity and culture (Walls 2002; Sanneh 2001). Zionist Judaism demonstrates not only a total merger of religion and ethnicity, but of both of these with the state, in the rules for citizenship in Israel.[3] And tribal peoples around the globe pick up and use elements of their own traditional religions that they have previous taken for

granted as markers of ethnic identity upon recognizing their disadvantaged circumstance in broader societies. Hence, religions do well to emphasize their quasi-family characteristics, and to affirm their commitment to the protection of real biological families. In so doing, they avoid a potential conflict of loyalties with ethnicity, *of ultimate belonging*, that they might well lose.

But "family" is neither the first nor the original meaning of the term "church." The Koine Greek term used in the New Testament, *ekklesia*, refers to an assembly of citizens summoned to consider matters of common interest (Songer 2003). In the context of the Roman Empire, such an assembly would have incorporated members of different families, different ethnicities, and different cultures. It was constructed by a wider political system, an *authority* in fact, which designated to it the power of making decisions for all. Political assemblies did not require the relinquishment of external identities, such as language, culture, or family, but they did subordinate such identities to the common interests of the group and to the Roman government. The church, then, was initially imaged as a multi-ethnic assembly that had a common purpose and an external authority.

The English word "church," is a descendent term of the Greek *kyriake*, or "Lord's house." (I Tim. 3:15; I Pet. 4:17). It is true that a house is the residence of a family. But it is also a place of hospitality to non-family members. And, in fact, those guests who visit often are likely to be incorporated into the family through the use of what anthropologists call fictive kinship – Brother Andrew, Sister Carmen, or Auntie Elly (as I like to go by with the children in our church). A house, then, has open entrance of a type that is not possible with strictly biological kinship. It is significant that Christians even today meet in "houses" of worship. The Apostle Paul preached in synagogues. But, due to persecution, those who responded were displaced from the public square to the private one, where their allegiance to a Lord other than the state facilitated their development of relationships of fictive kinship with one another. Such "house churches" are found around the world to this day.

David Pao (2007) reminds us that houses are places of "table fellowship." The most common social event in a house is the eating of meals together. In the stories and parables of the New Testament, the table fellowship of the church is depicted as welcoming outsiders, providing for the hungry, inverting the usual social hierarchies, and

even excluding those who will not humble themselves to the head of the household (188-190). "The ecclesial concern for the inclusiveness of the community of God's people lies at the very center of the gospel message" says Pao:

[Yet] in the ancient mentality, for an individual to be "saved" (or "born-again") was to challenge the web of relationships in which he or she was defined. To claim to be a Christian is, therefore, unavoidably a polemic claim in which one has to relativize the primary field of reference through which one's identity is derived. (190)

A house must have structural integrity. And it is the Head of the household who provides the center and defines the boundaries for the members. All guests who enter must set aside other commitments and must submit to the gracious hospitality of the Head (Matt 22:2-14).

In perhaps the most powerful metaphor of the Christian faith, the Head of *this* household provides nourishment for his guests in the form of his own body. The metaphor is more significant than most Westerners realize. All over the world, food is a symbol of reciprocity in relationships, marking out the food giver's willingness to lose his or her own life in order to provide life for the other. Christ's own body and blood, then, are the meal that is provided in the household of the church. Around the table, which is the feast of Christ's body, feet are washed, reflecting mutual servanthood, food is eaten, nourishing the participants for another day or week, and conversation takes place, enriching the life of the disciples by the give and take of life-sustaining relationships. Finally, a house is associated with particular place. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth and in Ephesus, and the Apostle John prophesies to the church in Smyrna and in Laodicea. Neither refer to the Jewish church or the Greek church. I am fond of the English custom of naming houses, and wish that we Americans had kept it. Naming a house provides it with a kind of identity that is associated with its physical geography independently of the particular inhabitants of the moment. Likewise, the local church can have an identity that outlasts its parishioners of the time. It is the church in Shamshabad, Andhra Pradesh (India), or the church in Zowe, Mzusu (Malawi), or the church in Tennoji, Osaka (Japan) or the church in Skippack, Pennsylvania (USA). One might be tempted to think that these are ethnic associations. But they are not. Places in the modern

world are ethnically diverse, as they were in the Roman Empire. And let us not forget that ethnicity is always partially a social construction of difference for the purpose of self-protection and competition *in a common place*. It is a stake to a claim for identity within a political arena. So, the church's identification with a place, rather than a family, causes it to cross social boundaries, incorporating members of different ethnicities, and claiming an authority higher than any of them.

In the use of these metaphors: assembly, house, table, and place; we can see that the notion of family is present for the conception of the church, but *subordinated* to a broader interest. It is worth remembering that in much of the "nonChristian" world, biological families provide the most serious threat to conversion to Christianity or to joining churches. Likewise, those who convert away from co-opted ethnic religions (Christian or otherwise) are accused of being traitors to their own "kind". Protestants are not good Hispanics, Catholics are not good Americans (except for John Kennedy), and Christians are not good Indians. So, when the church fails to subordinate ethnicity, it creates segregated congregations, as it has done so well in the United States. It becomes a part of the social problem by virtue of having been "domesticated" to the culture (Newbigin 1989:3). In the worst case scenario, it can even be an accomplice to exclusion and violence, forgetting the words of Jesus,

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-26, 34)[4]

The passage is clear. We are not Christians at all unless we relinquish the total hold that family and ethnicity would have upon us. We must belong in the first instance to Christ. Still, the fears of our families and our ethnic groups that the loss of our allegiance will cause us to do them harm are not realized. The *challenge* of Christianity to social structures is real enough, but the *love* of Christianity for people, who are everywhere in deep need of reconciliation with God and with one another, is every bit as real. And people cannot be loved in the abstract. They can only be loved in the concrete realities of who they are as members of families, cultures, and ethnicities. Thus, while the church must subordinate ethnicity to its own oneness in Christ, it must not destroy ethnicity in

favor of what would surely be a totalitarian single culture. Nor must it merely "celebrate diversity" and then retreat into separate camps. In a far more powerful move of reconciliation, the church welcomes the diversity of perspectives brought to the table by people of different circumstances, and uses that diversity as the very *means* by which oneness in Christ is achieved. When the Apostle Paul says that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), he does not mean to obliterate these different identities. Rather, he means to indicate that by the reconciliation with God and with one another provided in baptism, and by the establishment of our new status as "children of God through faith" (v. 26), we are made one in Christ in and through the very things that have formerly separated us.

It is my observation that Christ is most central in multi-ethnic churches. In segregated churches, other agendas can predominate. Culture takes over, as the church becomes an increasingly useful association for ulterior purposes. But multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural, churches have nothing but Jesus to hold them together. The very struggle associated with crossing cultural boundaries necessitates a strong commonality, causing Christians to remember the center of their faith. And best of all, the diversity of backgrounds and experiences contributes to a richer view of who Christ is, as songs, sermons, and Bible studies provide the variety of perspectives that are lacking in mono-cultural churches. Tensions and even conflicts are there, of course. They are there in any church. And they were there in the New Testament. But never once did any of the apostles recommend resolving conflict by segregating at the level of the local church. That we should be doing so now is surely a matter of taking the easy way out.[5]

Having said this, however, I would like to suggest that attempts to integrate churches for the sake of a progressive or liberal social agenda are less successful than those which are the result of an emphasis on the gospel. In the comprehensive study of ethnicity in the American church done by DeYoung et. al. (2003), there are a number of indicators that this is the case. The authors point out, for instance, that revival movements, which stress the gospel, conversion, and a radical change of lifestyle, are often initially inter-racial and inter-ethnic. As Christ is proclaimed, sin is renounced, lives are changed, and barriers between people are brought down. It is only when these movements have become

institutionalized into churches, and then denominations, that they slowly begin to segregate out (59).

There is also a discernable difference in the character of multi-ethnic churches that emphasize the gospel over a social agenda. Riverside Church of New York City was founded on both theological and social liberalism. It had a long history of being at the cutting edge of progressive movements. Yet when, after 62 years of White leadership, an African American pastor was first hired in 1989, White membership slid into decline. White members' complaints were cultural; the services were too long, they didn't like the new music, and they asked the pastor to discourage African Americans in the congregation from clapping and saying "amen". Eventually, the Whites were successful in their bid to keep their own culture in place, though many of them left anyway. Today the church is predominantly African American in membership, but worships in the White style (DeYoung 2003:77-83).

Mosaic Church of Los Angeles, on the other hand, began with a passion for evangelism (83-86). It reached out to convert people to Christianity in its own multi-cultural neighborhood, and heavily supported international missions. Although it too initially had White leadership, the shift to a Central American born Hispanic pastor in 1996 was accomplished without difficulty. Throughout its history, the worship service has always been not just multi-cultural, but "avant garde" (84), due to the church's location in the arts and entertainment section of the city. Worshippers seem to have relatively little trouble adjusting to a constantly changing style of service, as long as it "does not contradict the evangelical message they promote" (84). Members of the church easily create friendships with one another, and interracial marriages are "common" (86). The reason for this success? DeYoung et. al. suggest that,

Evangelism offers a core commitment to a Christian reality and reinforces the institutional loyalty of the church members – which may help attendees to overlook any racial contentions that develop within the church…While Mosaic's efforts to alter its delivery of the evangelistic message and its worship style are not done specifically to develop a multiracial ministry, the population reached by these ministries is multiracial. Handling racial and cultural diversity is not an afterthought for the leadership of Mosaic but rather is perceived as an opportunity for further ministry. (84-5)

So, when the gospel is central, ethnicity *naturally* takes second place, and inter-ethnic relations are facilitated.[6]

The same difference can be discerned in two other cases. In the first case, an attempted merger between an African American church and a White American church, consciously intended to demonstrate Christian unity, failed because Whites could not adjust their worship style or give up their grasp on power positions (Priest and Priest 2007). In the second case, a multi-cultural American church was successful in thriving and creatively innovating in its services due to an emphasis in preaching on the common status of all humanity as lost and in need of Christ (Howell 2007). It seems that direct attempts to cross cultural barriers are less successful than indirect ones. Why should this be so? I would suggest that failures to effectively integrate are nearly always due to an inability to relinquish power. In the case of the failed merger, White church members welcomed African Americans in the pews, and shared the pulpit, but held on tightly to the choir, the Sunday school program, the organization of the ushers, and the management of the sound system (281ff). They were caught by surprise when after a two month trial period, the African American congregation voted overwhelmingly not to merge. Attempts to integrate based on an ideal of multi-ethnicity for its own sake founder on a mistaken view of humanity as able to give up power and solve its own problems apart from the radical intervention of God's redeeming grace.

Miroslav Volf (1996) has fleshed out a Christian theology of reconciliation that upholds the ideal for trusting and harmonious inter-ethnic relations, while at the same time taking seriously the problems, from exclusion to ethnic cleansing, that make it nearly impossible in human terms. He too reflects on the tendency of ethnicity (and culture) to demand our ultimate loyalties "like some jealous goddess" (16) and to promise protection through alienation of the other. While not denying the value of understanding the social and political circumstances that create enmity, and of working directly to institute justice (29), Volf suggests that an *internal* change is needed. This internal change is the result of a switch in allegiances. "At the very core of Christian identity," he says, "lies an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the God of all cultures" (40). Elsewhere he expands upon the point:

There is a reality that is more important than the culture to which we belong. It is God and the new world that God is creating, a world in which people from every nation and every tribe, with their cultural goods, will gather around the triune God, a world in which every tear will be wiped away and "pain will be no more" (Revelation 21:3). Christians take a distance from their own culture because they give the ultimate allegiance to God and God's promised future. (50-1)

Thus, it is Christian conversion that miraculously makes it possible for people to relinquish power, to change, and to be reconciled to one another.

Yet, Volf also understands that our differences are not obliterated by our entrance into the Body of Christ. By joining with one another in faith across these differences, we Christians take a stance that is both internal and external to our cultures:

Christians are not the insiders who have taken flight to a new "Christian culture" and become outsiders to their own culture; rather when they have responded to the call of the Gospel they have stepped, as it were, with one foot outside their own culture while with the other remaining firmly planted in it. They are distant, and yet they belong. *Their difference is internal to the culture.* Because of their internality – their immanence, their belonging – the particularities, inscribed in the body, are not erased; because of their difference – their transcendence, their distance – the universality can be affirmed. (49)

The distance we feel from our cultures as a result of having given our allegiance to Christ, says Volf, "*creates space in us to receive the other*" (51) [emphasis in the original]. Thus, it is *because* we belong to Christ that we are *able* to be reconciled to one another.

"If You Belong to Christ"
In the end, the church is not completely alike to any other human institution. The most powerful analogy for it in the Bible is to the human body, which was created not by us but by God. The biological metaphor of the body stresses its subordination to the head, the integration of its various parts, and its service to the external world. As Christ's body, (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18), the church is to be in mystical union with Jesus, its head, because it is flesh and blood to him. And, it is to be his hands and feet in the world, providing direct

service to alleviate the world's suffering and to reconcile it to God. But neither of these is possible if the body is divided. A body that is segregated out by its parts dies. Hence, Jesus himself warned us that a failure to remain integrated would cause our service to lack credibility. He said, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34).

Concretely, our love for one another and for Christ must be made evident to the world by our ability to form common churches, in fact, to worship together. It is no accident that the worship service is one of the most common sources of tension in churches. Everyone, it seems, would like to worship on their own terms. But that, of course, denies the very essence of what it means to worship, which is to *give up* power to Another. When we do make the sacrifice of truly worshipping, that is, of giving up our own selfish power, an entirely new kind of power descends upon us that makes us able to love one another, causing outsiders to proclaim, "God is really among you" (I Cor 14:25). "The presence of the kingdom in the Church," Newbigin reminds us, "is the presence of power veiled in weakness" (1989, 119). And that power is made manifest by our unity in Christ.

In summary, there is no question that we as Christians *must* be one in Christ. Yet, our agreement in principle can belie the difficulty of the practice. We are incarnated beings, and as such, our cultures are necessary to our very existence, causing us to defend them strongly. Furthermore, there is value in the different perspectives we have as a result of our particular histories. So, the theology of ethnicity in the church must neither deny ethnic differences, nor allow them to dictate terms that might threaten our connection to one another. I am suggesting that it is *only* "if you belong to Christ" that a unity that does not destroy difference is possible. The transfer of our primary allegiance from family, culture, and ethnicity to Jesus as Lord *makes possible* a reconciliation with people of other families, cultures, and ethnicities. It does so by relativizing these particular commitments in favor of a common ultimate commitment (Newbigin 1978:160). Christ himself is our peace. When that Peace is revealed in the unified church, the world sees, is convicted of its own failings, and is invited to participate in an alternative community of God's redemption.

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End Notes

1
 There is an earlier reference to the social construction of ethnicity in the writings of Max Weber, who defines ethnic groups as, "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists….it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity (Weber 1978:389).

2 In order of publication, see Cohen 1969; Despres 1975; De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1975; Nash 1989; Sollors 1996; and Fenton 1999. For the social construction of "race" see Gould 1996; Unander 2000; and Sharp 2002.

3 Israeli law grants rights to citizenship by biological descent, rather than by birthplace, as with most modern nations. Yet this example may demonstrate less the ability of ethnicity to co-opt religion than the reverse. In either case, the combination creates a powerful and potentially deadly force.

4 All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

5 A friend of mine in the Church Growth movement defended the principle of "homogeneous units" by suggesting that people would come to Christ more easily in segregated churches because they would be more "comfortable". I do not doubt that they would be more comfortable. The question is whether or not they would be Christians!
6 Perhaps the most difficult practical barrier to overcome is language. Yet, I have been in churches where, with great freedom, multiple languages are used. A combination of using translators, and simply being willing to listen when you don't understand, facilitates a central focus on Christ and our common faith.