



GRACE

CELEBRATING AND DEMONSTRATING THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Why a Multi-Ethnic Church?

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Why are we at Grace seeking to become a multi-ethnic church? Why are we seeking to make disciples from every ethnic background and class in our surrounding community? Why are we seeking to gather as one body? Why are we seeking to move out of our comfort zone in order to bring the gospel, the message of salvation, to those who are different from us?

Well, first of all, it is important to know why we are *not* seeking this! We are not seeking this because it's politically correct. We are not seeking this because it's the latest thing to do. We are not seeking this because whites will constitute less than fifty percent of the population in another forty years or so. In other words, we are not seeking this because we're somehow being influenced by the world around us. No, we are seeking to be a multi-ethnic church because it is biblical! We confess, with deep sorrow, that like so many churches across our land, we have been shaped by the culture around us. We have conformed to the world in this area of our communal life as believers. We are repentant and seek to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

As we have turned to the Scriptures our minds and hearts have been (and continue to be) transformed. We are motivated by the *prayer* of Jesus in John 17. We are inspired by the *example* of the church at Antioch in Acts 11. We are directed by the *teaching* of the Apostle Paul. And we are compelled by the *vision* of the Apostle John.

The Prayer of Jesus

In chapter 17 of his gospel, John records the prayer of Jesus on the eve of His death. In this prayer, Jesus prays for Himself, His immediate disciples and for us. In verse twenty Jesus prays, "My prayer is not for them alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message ..." Jesus looks down through the centuries and prays for those who will believe in Him through the message of those disciples whom he had chosen. That is to say, He prays for us here at Grace!

Now, for what did Jesus pray? He prayed that we would be united! Listen to him pray: "... that all of them may be one ... may they be one as we are one ... may they be brought to complete unity ...".

But now ... *why* does Jesus pray for unity? He prays for unity (verse 21), "... so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Then again (verse 23), "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me ..." Notice that as important as unity may be, it is not the end but rather the means to an end. Furthermore, this unity is not spiritual unity but visible unity for the simple reason that the world cannot see spiritual unity. The goal of this unity is that the world may believe that Jesus

is the Messiah, the Savior of all people. The message is that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” However, the *way* we will convince the world that this is true, is through our unity. Now, there are many ways to display unity before a watching world but none is as vital and as visible as unity across racial lines! Thus, the multi-ethnic church proclaims in living colors that Jesus alone can bring people together across the profound and often bitter divisions of race. He alone can unite them as one body in the church. This is why the multi-ethnic church is so particularly vital to the cause of the gospel!

The Example at Antioch

Now, the multi-ethnic church cuts against our natural, sinful predisposition. We prefer to flock together with people like ourselves and to exclude those unlike us. This is seen at the very beginning of the church. The very first church, the church in Jerusalem, failed to follow the instructions of Jesus in Acts 1.8 to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Instead, it stayed in the cultural comfort of Jerusalem. Only persecution dispersed the believers from Jerusalem but even then, by and large, they went only to their own ethnic group. In Acts 11.19 we read, “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Steven traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message *only to the Jews*.” God nudged these believers out of Jerusalem, out of Judea, beyond Samaria and out toward “the ends of the earth” but even there, they only shared Jesus with their own people.

However, thankfully, there were some who courageously obeyed Jesus. Acts 11.20 says, “Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak *to Greeks also*, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.” Here are believers who *intentionally* cross the racial lines of their day. Thus the first multi-ethnic church in the New Testament was birthed. And here, not coincidentally, believers were first called “Christians!” Here we find the first multi-ethnic pastoral staff (see Acts 13.1-2). And here we find the first missionary-sending church. This multi-ethnic church at Antioch sent missionaries, most notably the Apostle Paul, to Europe, to Asia, “to the ends of the earth.” It was the multi-ethnic church in Antioch that finally embraced the prayer of Jesus to bring all people into the unity of his body, the church.

Though there is much in the church of Jerusalem to emulate, it is *not* our model. We intentionally reject the homogenous unit principle of church growth. Our model, our example, is the church in Antioch! Without question, it is the church in Antioch where what Jesus prayed for in John 17 is most clearly seen and thus, this is the church we embrace as our example for what Christ desires in a church.

The Teaching of Paul

Now, the apostle Paul, the great missionary from Antioch (still referred to as “Saul” in the early part of the book of Acts), is the one who teaches us most clearly and forcefully, that the church is to demonstrate the reconciling love of Jesus across the

dividing lines of race. Paul, one of the first pastors of the church in Antioch, launches out into the nations to proclaim the great news that in Christ men and women from every nation can be reconciled to God and to one another. He goes from city to city, crossing the dividing lines of race, preaching the good news to all people and gathering them together in local churches where they can live out the profound realities of this unity in Christ.

But Paul is not content to plant these multi-ethnic congregations. Even after spending extensive time teaching in these new churches, he writes letters to them and one of the dominant notes in these letters is the vital importance of unity. In particular, Paul is concerned about racial unity! And no where is this more clearly seen than in his letter to the Ephesians. It is in this letter that Paul writes extensively about what he calls, “the mystery of the gospel.”

Now, the most profound human divide that has ever existed is the divide between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). This divide is, on many different levels, the archetype of *all* racial division and it is this division that Paul has in mind as he writes about “the mystery of the gospel.” Lest there be any mystery about what Paul means, he writes in Ephesians 3.6, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

In Paul’s day, these were stunning words! We can hardly grasp the breathtaking implications of what Paul was writing. One of the reasons Paul says this is a “mystery” is because God had intentionally separated the Jewish nation from all others. For two thousand years the nation of Israel had been God’s Chosen People. But rather than being humble & grateful to God, they became proud and full of disdain toward others. And the Gentiles responded in kind! But the Jews were in error. God’s love was not limited to them. He loved the world and gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. To *all* who received him, no matter their race, he gave the right to become children of God, to become one of God’s Chosen People.

Now, this was not something the Jews took lightly. They were completely opposed to the idea that Gentiles were included among the people of God and Paul suffered at their hands for preaching this message. Their violent reaction to Paul’s message is recorded in Acts 22 and following, and only the fact that Paul was a Roman citizen saves his life. He is, however, stuck in prison and from there he writes to the Ephesians. At the end of his letter Paul asks for prayer. He writes (6.19, 20), “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should.” It is of *vital importance* to note that Paul was *not* in prison because he was preaching the gospel! Rather, he was in prison because he was preaching “the mystery of the gospel.” He preached that the dividing wall of race had been torn down in Christ and for this he suffered..

As it was in the day of Paul, so it is in our day. There is deep resistance to this message. It may not be displayed in the violent way Paul experienced it but all we need do is look at the church today and we can see how deeply the church is divided along the lines of race. In Paul's day, the primary divide was that between Jew and Gentile. In our day, the line is drawn differently but the mystery of the gospel is the same: Through the gospel we are all members *together* of one body, and sharers *together* in the promise in Christ Jesus.

The Vision of the Apostle John

Nowhere is the picture of the church more colorfully drawn than in the vision of the Apostle John in the book of Revelation. In chapter 7 (vv 9, 10) John writes, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" This is the vision of the church which God gives to the Apostle John. It is a compelling vision of the church! It is a captivating picture of a preferable future, one to which the church will always be drawn if it will but fix its eyes upon it.

So here's a simple but profound and disturbing question for us: "***If the Kingdom of God is not segregated, why on earth is the church?***" That is to say, if by intent and design, the Kingdom of God is to be united across the lines of race, how can we be content with the segregated state of the church in our day? Many excuses are offered to answer this question but here at Grace we are dissatisfied with the status quo. We can only answer this question by lamenting this pervasive sin in the church and, for our part, repenting and praying, "*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*"

And so we've begun a journey. No doubt we will make many mistakes along the way but we know our destination and we know Jesus prays for our success! We are confident that as we display this unity, those around us will see it and, as Jesus promised, they will put their faith in Him. We desire to be like the church of Antioch. By God's grace, we will live out the mystery of the gospel and, even if imperfectly, we will pursue the goal of reflecting the glorious vision of the church given to John, the beloved apostle of Christ.

Thus, with the confidence that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, and with the desire that he receive glory in the church, we pray most earnestly ...

***Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Amen***