

THE MODEL OF THE EARLY CHURCH FOR UNITY IN DIVERSITY

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by

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## THE MODEL OF THE EARLY CHURCH FOR UNITY IN DIVERSITY

### **Introduction**

A theology of race relations is developed through a study of the Old and New Testament, along with the model of the early church. God as Trinity, displaying unity and diversity, defines perfect harmony and peace for God's creation and for the church.<sup>1</sup> From the very beginning of the Old Testament, God intends His blessing to extend to all ethnicities.<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, Jesus declares the gospel is not just for the Jews, but for all nations (Luke 24:47). Not only is the Gospel for all people, but it is the unifier of diverse people. In this paper I will suggest that a theology of race relations is informed by the early church's example of proclaiming the gospel to all peoples, embracing diverse cultures, and displaying diversity in gospel expansion.

### **Proclaiming the Gospel to all People**

God loves the world and gave His Son for all people.<sup>3</sup> The Gospel *is for all people*, therefore it is God's plan for it to be proclaimed to all ethnicities. Jesus declared this commission before He ascended, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The early church quickly understood Jesus' commission and began to preach the

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Horrell, "Humanity in Unity and Diversity: Gender, Sexuality, Race," unpublished class notes for ST510 (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall Semester, 2020). This is foundational. Having a Trinitarian perspective allows for unity in diversity. It brings peace and harmony.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1-3; 17:3.

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16. God's love demonstrated through the giving of His Son and through the life and ministry of Jesus moves the gospel for all people groups.

Gospel in spite of social, cultural, and geographical barriers. Acts records the church (with her initial Jewish followers), expanding and extending the Gospel beyond those barriers. Soon the church became multicultural as the gospel was preached to Samaritans, Gentiles and neighboring nations.

From the birth of the church there was diversity among its members. When the Spirit descended in Acts 2, Jews representing many cultural corners and languages of the Roman Empire turned to Christ and were baptized. Philip later preached the gospel in many villages of Samaria (Acts 8:4-5, 25), even though there was a social barrier between Jews and the Samaritans.<sup>4</sup> Following this, Philip “preaches Jesus” to an Ethiopian Eunuch and baptizes him (Acts 8:26-38). Africans were among some of the first Christ followers.

There were also barriers between Jews and Gentiles. Peter created quite a stir when he entered a Roman household. As Peter stated, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean” (Acts 10: 28). Yet, Peter entered the home of a Roman Centurion and preached the gospel. The Holy Spirit fell on the Gentile household and they were baptized (Acts 10:30-48). Peter affirmed God’s plan of the gospel being for all people when he exclaimed, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ ... And He ordered us to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:34-36, 42-43). God does not show partiality, therefore Peter understands the church should not either.

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<sup>4</sup> It was common for Jews and Samaritans not to mix as seen in the statement of John 4:9.

God's eschatological vision includes all people groups brought into and represented in the people of God. Revelation says, "For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God's saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9-10). Worshipers in heaven will include a great multitude from "Every nation, from all tribes, and peoples and languages" (Rev 7:9). This is God's plan -- brought about through the blood of Jesus Christ. The early church in Acts demonstrated obedience to Jesus' words, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).

Not only was the Gospel to be preached to all peoples it was a barrier breaker between people --actually unifying people. As previously discussed, there were many barriers constructed between the Jews and other people. There were also barriers in worship at the temple. The Holy of Holies in the center of the temple could only be entered by the High Priest. Next, the holy place was only for the priests and Levites. Then there was a section for Jewish men and a barrier between them and women. After that, there was the court of Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> Jesus created a new "structure," bringing reconciliation between God and humans and between Jews and Gentiles. He broke down these barriers and introduced "one new humanity" in place of the two (Jew and Gentile), proclaimed peace through His death on the cross (Ephesians 2:14-17). "Where formerly there was disunity, now there is unity between Jews and Gentiles in the person of Christ."<sup>6</sup> It was

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<sup>5</sup> Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 15.11.5.; Paul DeYoung Curtiss, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation As an Answer to the Problem of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11-37.

<sup>6</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 363-379.

not the Gentiles becoming Jews or the Jews becoming Gentiles, but a new humanity in Christ united by the Spirit.<sup>7</sup> The gospel brought *unity* among diversity.

### **Embracing Diverse Cultures**

The New Testament Church was formed in a time of much ethnic and cultural diversity. The Roman empire was a “melting pot” of sorts, due to things such as the dispersion of the Jews, integration of slaves, the Roman roads, Pax Romana, soldier outposts and trade.<sup>8</sup>

Across the ancient Mediterranean world, there was an incredible array of local ethnic communities, subcultures, and language groups within the aegis of the Roman Empire. That is, there were many “nations” within Northern Africa and the south; Palestine and the east; Asia Minor, Greece, and the north; Italy and the west; and on the islands in the Mediterranean Sea. The region around the Mediterranean Sea was multilingual, multiracial, and multiethnic, with many different religions and philosophies. These Jewish groups and Gentile nations comprised the multiplicity of cultures that Christianity sought to address and to embrace. In this multicultural arena, the diversity of early Christianity took shape.<sup>9</sup>

The Roman Empire was characterized by diversity and a complexity of cultures.

Galilee reflected the demographics of the nations around them. From the Gentile influence of invading nations and from being on a trade route, there were Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, and many others.<sup>10</sup> Jesus would have been exposed to a diversity of cultures in Galilee and from his early years in Africa. Being under Roman control, Jesus would have been familiar with the cultural differences between the Romans and the Jews.

The church was birthed in this Roman empire, which often reflected Hellenistic values. The Greeks saw their culture as superior to others.<sup>11</sup> They viewed themselves as a pure,

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<sup>7</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 366. “Peace ... is personified in Christ.”

<sup>8</sup> Daniel. J. Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race. New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 141-156.

<sup>9</sup> David M. Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 2-8.

<sup>10</sup> Curtiss, *United by Faith*, 7-20.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 233.

“un-mixed” people. Because of their “pure” lineage they were superior to all other people.<sup>12</sup> They were the Greeks and all others were Barbarians. They were the supreme race. Similar ideas were embraced by the Romans, who also considered intermarriage as “diluting” the Roman people. Often negative views and stereotypes were held of other peoples as well. The Phoenicians were considered treacherous. The Syrians were born for slavery.<sup>13</sup> The Jews were superstitious and anti-social. The Scythians were savages and effeminate.<sup>14</sup>

There was diversity in the Roman Empire, but not everyone had equal value. In Greek and Roman society the freeborn male had the highest standing with the greatest value. A high standing male was on top of the social hierarchy and the value of others came in relation to that. Women had little worth. Children were at the bottom with no value or rights.<sup>15</sup> And half of the Roman empire were slaves. Because of the freeborn male’s standing he could treat his wives, slaves and children however he wanted -- whether that be taking many mistresses, disposing of female babies, abusing slaves or hiring out child slaves for brothels.<sup>16</sup>

Every person being created in the image of God was a foreign concept in this culture. Foundational to Christianity was the idea that to be human was to bear God’s image.<sup>17</sup> This was reflected in the revolutionary way Jesus cared for people. His ministry was one of inclusion. The twelve disciples did not include the most learned, religious or successful men. They were

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 37-40. <https://search-ebscohost-com.dts.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=647165&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>13</sup> Cicero, *de provinciis consularibus* 2.10.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*, 305. H. Porter, “Scythians,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2706.

<sup>15</sup> Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, “How Christianity Invented Children,” accessed October 20, 2020, <https://theweek.com/articles/551027/how-christianity-invented-children>.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 104.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 1:27. “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

fisherman, a tax collector and a zealot. Jesus had women followers who also financially supported Him. He ministered among the Samaritans and the Gentiles. He touched the sick and spent time with the outcast. Jesus broke the “Jewish Rules” of the ruling religious when he sat at the table and shared a meal with these people. Jesus demonstrated embracing those who are different than ourselves and who the ruling culture may not esteem.<sup>18</sup>

The early church embraced people the “majority” culture typically despised. Worth and value was given to the “worthless.” This was reflected in the way they treated others, and in the inclusivity and diversity among its members. According to Rodney Stark, women benefited greatly from Christianity. The numbers of women was impacted as care for women and for female babies was practiced. Women were given a higher status in Christianity, and even leadership positions. Overall, the lives of women improved through the early church.<sup>19</sup> This value of all people was also observed in the early church’s care of others during plagues and disasters.

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christians offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.<sup>20</sup>

The early Christian church brought incredible value to the world-- the value of every person as God declared in the beginning.<sup>21</sup> The Gospel valued diversity.

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<sup>18</sup> Curtis, *United by Faith*, 7-20.

<sup>19</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 160-161.

<sup>20</sup> Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.

### Displaying Diversity in Gospel Expansion

As the gospel expanded, the early church displayed diversity in its congregations and leadership. The early church's treatment of the Gentile question was central to the expansion of the gospel. As was noted earlier, the gospel was not about the Gentiles becoming Jews or the Jews becoming Gentiles, but a "new humanity" was being established through Christ. There was no longer a dividing wall, for the church was one, the household of God -- a very diverse family, unified by Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Though diverse, this new structure created by Christ is to be maintained in unity.<sup>23</sup> Paul exhorts this foundational value in his urging of the early church to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit" (Eph 4:3). He urges them to be active in this, to make haste, or be busy in unity.<sup>24</sup> Paul points to the unity of the Trinity as the model of unity and diversity for the church when he states, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6). The seven time repetition of the word "one" makes clear the emphasis of unity. The believers first are unified as one new body, in the Holy Spirit and in their same calling. There is unity because of Jesus (one Lord) in whom believers place their faith and identify together through baptism. God the Father is over *all*. Oneness in the body of Christ reflects God Himself.<sup>25</sup>

As the Gospel expanded to ethnically diverse cities like Antioch, the church represented that diversity. The city of Antioch was very populated, and an economic center in the Roman

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<sup>22</sup> Ephesians 2:11-22. Paul talks about this new humanity with different words and phrases such as: made both groups one, one new humanity, one body, fellow citizens and saints in the household of God, building, dwelling of God.

<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 2:20-22 speaks about this in terms of a building or dwelling.

<sup>24</sup> NET Bible, note on Eph 4:1-6, accessed October 20, 2020, nettbible.org.

<sup>25</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 559-579.



Empire. Within this city there were all types of people: Syrians, Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Persians, Parthians, Jews, etc. To live in a multicultural city like Antioch though, was to face continual tensions, and even riots. There also were a lot of people living densely in a small area. This created poor living conditions, problems with sanitation, and increased ethnic tension.<sup>26</sup> It was also a place of many catastrophes. The natural disasters, such as earth quakes, and poor living conditions would often leave people homeless. The Antioch Church was formed in this kind of place.<sup>27</sup>

The Antioch church set an example of diversity in early gospel expansion. Barnabus brought Paul to Antioch, to teach the church which had already been formed. Acts 11:26 notes they taught considerable numbers. The church was not just Jews, but it was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. It was a multicultural church. Not only were the numbers growing, but from the “outside” they were observed to be distinct from others.<sup>28</sup> The name they were given was “Christian.” They were not set apart as another ethnic group, but as a distinct social type of group made up of different kinds of people. “The idea that Gentiles and Jews could or should worship and socialize together in the same congregation was foreign to the worldviews of most people.”<sup>29</sup> The name pointed to what united them. The church of Antioch displayed diversity, but were united by who they followed -- Jesus Christ.

Those leading the church were also from diverse backgrounds. Their names tell a little about their ethnic background. “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with

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<sup>26</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 147-162.

<sup>27</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 147-162.

<sup>28</sup> F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 265-278.

<sup>29</sup> Curtis, *United by Faith*, 33-36.

Herod the tetrarch) and Saul” (Acts 13:1). Barnabus was from Cyprus, an island in the middle of the Mediterranean. Simeon probably had black skin, since he was called Niger. It would not be unusual to have Black Africans in Antioch. Lucius was from Cyrene in Africa, (modern day Libya). Manaen had a very different background, having been “adopted” into the household of Herod. And Paul had been a zealous Jew. “Thus, from the beginning, the leadership in the sending church of Paul reflected a wide diversity of ethnicity and social standing.”<sup>30</sup>

As the gospel expanded, the churches established reflected the diversity of the people. The church at Philippi fits this example. The first people Paul preached the gospel to in this city were a group of women, not men. The first believer was a Jewish woman and a woman of means named Lydia. She provided for Paul and his mission team during his stay. Also, Luke notes a Roman jailer and his household are among the first Christians in this city. The church included Jews and Gentiles alike.

Paul’s closing remarks in Romans also gives a hint at the type of diversity that was common in the early church. Paul sends greetings to women, men, wealthy, freeborn and slaves. Paul begins with Phoebe, a woman deaconess, who he entrusted to carry the letter. The gospel probably spread from Corinth to her city of Cenchrea. There are other women he greets who are married, single and sisters. One woman is referred to as the Persian Lady. He greets Hermes and Hermas, which were probably slave names. The Christians listed have Jewish, Latin and Greek names. The apostle Paul shows value for all types of people in the early church.

Clearly ringing out in the early church were the words Paul wrote to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeman, male nor female; for you are

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<sup>30</sup> Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 177-178.

all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Displaying and valuing diversity did not negate their oneness and unity in Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Though there is not a specific teaching on race relations, the New Testament strongly values unity in diversity among its people. The gospel is for all nations and all nations will be represented at the throne in heaven. The early church models a multicultural and diverse church from the very beginning in its members and leadership. There are Jews and Gentiles worshipping together. Unity and Diversity is God’s design. As we have seen, this does not come naturally in the world. But the gospel brings something very unique -- reconciliation.

The church today has an important role to play in the world. People are valuable and should be treated with dignity because God gives them value. *He created them in His image.* This is something the church uniquely has to offer the world -- the reason to value people. The church must work diligently to value human life in word and practice, and celebrate God’s diverse design. The church also has the unique opportunity to display true unity that can only be found through reconciliation in Christ. The church must work to maintain the unity already found in Christ. The early church is a model for approaching a theology of race relations by its example of proclaiming the gospel to all peoples, embracing diverse cultures, and displaying diversity in gospel expansion.

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