Multi-Ethnicity in the Local Church

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Introduction: Barack Obama has aptly said that “the most segregated hour of American life occurs on Sunday morning.”\(^1\) Even in regions of the country that are extremely diverse, most evangelical churches tend to be homogenous. For example:

- Gwinnett County (NE Atlanta) is one of the most diverse counties in the United States.
- Killian Hill Christian School mirrors the community: 1/3 of our students are Caucasian, 1/3 are African American, and 1/3 are Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern, etc.
- Yet, Killian Hill Baptist Church has traditionally been almost entirely Caucasian.\(^2\)

My prayer is that KHBC—and other gospel-preaching churches—would reach our multi-ethnic community, and eventually reflect our multi-ethnic community. It’s a goal we are praying and laboring toward. The motivation for pursuing multi-ethnicity in the local church is not a desire to be “open minded” or “politically correct.” Rather, it’s a desire to be intentionally biblical. The Bible presents the church as a “Multi-Ethnic Melting Pot” that brings glory to God through its observable, supernatural, gospel-based unity. We have “a biblical mandate for having racially inclusive churches,”\(^3\) especially in Ephesians 2:11-16.

Ephesians 2 tells the story of the Gentiles, and their progress from spiritual alienation to spiritual acceptance, both with God and with the local church.

I. Gentile Alienation

A. Before Christ, Gentiles were alienated from God (Ephesians 2:1-3, 11-12)

B. Before Christ, Gentiles were alienated from Jews (Ephesians 2:11-12)

1. Separated from Christ

2. Alienated from the commonwealth of Israel

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\(^1\) This accurate assessment didn’t originate with President Obama. Religious scholar Martin Marty describes the end of the nineteenth century as follows: “White Protestants, however, did little to build bonds with [Black Protestant] churches, and racially there were at least two Americas or Christianities. Doctrinal and practical similarity counted for little….Critics noted that the Sunday Protestant worship hour was the most segregated time of the week” (John McManners, ed. *The Oxford History of Christianity*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990], 423; cited by Mark DeYmaz, *Building Healthy Multi-Ethnic Churches*, [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007], Kindle location 4049).

\(^2\) By God’s grace, KHBC is maturing in diversity; including several Hispanic and African American families who have become members in the last two years.

\(^3\) Mark DeYmaz, *Building Healthy Multi-Ethnic Churches*, Kindle location 203.
3. Strangers to the Covenants of promise

4. Having no hope

5. Without God in the world

William Hendriksen summarizes the Gentiles’ plight as “Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, and Godless.”

The Gentiles’ spiritual and cultural alienation was represented by their geographical alienation.

1. They had to approach God through Judaism, and essentially through Jerusalem.

2. Even in Jerusalem, they were prohibited from entering into the Temple, but were limited to “the Court of the Gentiles.” (See the image below.)

Archeologists have discovered a sign which warned Gentiles not to pass beyond their assigned location on the Temple Mount:

> “Foreigners must not enter inside the balustrade or into the forecourt around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”

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Several passages in Acts reveal how deeply-rooted the prejudice of Jews against Gentiles was:

- Acts 10:28, where Peter told the Gentiles he was about to evangelize that it was considered “unlawful” for him to associate with Gentiles prior to his direct revelation from God. (How’s that for an ice breaker!)
- Acts 11:3, where Hebrew Christians criticized Peter for eating with Gentiles—and only “fell silent” after a blow-by-blow explanation from Peter (Acts 11:18).  
- Acts 11:19, where the gospel was still being preached to none but Jews, with the notable exception of the Antioch church plant.
- Acts 21:27-36, where a riot erupted over the false notion that Paul had taken a Gentile beyond the Court of the Gentiles.
- Acts 22:21-24, where the riot resumed when the Jewish mob heard Paul’s explanation that God had specifically sent him “to the Gentiles.”

How could—how can—such animosity be overcome? The answer lies neither in “political correctness” or social pressure, but in the power of the gospel.

John Piper: “Religious tradition and human opinion are powerless to create and sustain a life of Christ-exalting ethnic diversity and harmony. Only a deeply rooted grasp of what God has achieved through the gospel of Jesus can do this.”

II. Gentile Acceptance

A. In Christ, Gentiles* have been united to God (Ephesians 2:13-18)
   (* believing Gentiles)

B. In Christ, Gentiles* have been united to Jews* (Ephesians 2:13-18; Galatians 3:27-29)
   (* believing Gentiles and believing Jews)

   1. Christ brought us near by His blood (Ephesians 2:13)
   2. Christ is, has made, and has preached “peace” (Ephesians 2:14, 15, 17)
   3. Christ has created “one new man” out of two (Ephesians 2:14-15)
      See also Ephesians 4:1-6 and John 10:16.
   4. Christ has demolished/killed hostility (Ephesians 2:14, 16)
      a. Christ is an iconoclast:
         - He tore the veil which kept sinners from God (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:19-22).
         - He demolished the wall which kept sinners from each other (Ephesians 2:14).

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5 The early church finally understood that God has “granted repentance…to the Gentiles”—and we’re almost halfway through the book of Acts!

6 John Piper, *Bloodlines*, 211.
b. The broken wall means unity and equality for Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 3:6).
   - Gentiles are “fellow heirs…through the gospel”
   - Gentiles are “fellow members of the body…through the gospel”
   - Gentiles are “fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel”

5. Christ has reconciled us and given us “access” to the Father (v. 16, 18)
   See also Ephesians 3:12; Romans 5:2

III. Practical Ramifications of Multi-Ethnicity for the Local Church

A. Local churches must reject anything that perpetuates the segregation Christ overcame “by His blood” and “through the cross” (Ephesians 2:13, 16).
   1. Anything we do to perpetuate the sinful division of saved people is antagonistic to the cross-work of Christ.
   2. Racism and unbiblical separation/segregation cloud the gospel (Galatians 2:11-14)

B. Local churches must embrace the “horizontal” reconciliation which the gospel achieved.
   1. The same gospel that reconciled us to God reconciled us to fellow Christians.
   2. In the local church, believers of varying ethnicities and cultures are united around the gospel.

The gospel is the rallying point for a diverse church.

3. In the local church, believers of varying ethnicities and cultures are united by the gospel.

The gospel is the uniting force for a diverse church—not as a goal, but as a fact.

William Hendriksen: “The reason why there is so much strife in this world, between individuals, families, social or political groups, whether small or large, is that the contending parties, through the fault of either or both, have not found each other at Calvary. Only then when sinners have been reconciled to God

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7 While our focus has been on the book of Ephesians, Scripture is filled with other examples of multi-ethnicity in the New Testament church. Consider Jesus’ prayer for unity as a testimony to the world (John 17:23); the planting of the multi-ethnic church at Antioch, whose unified diversity probably contributed both to their being called “Christians” (Acts 11:26) and to their replacing Jerusalem as the church-planting headquarters of the early church (Acts 13:1-3; etc.); the multi-ethnic leadership team in Antioch, which included two men from Africa, one from the Mediterranean, one from the Middle East (Manaen, who was also a noble), and one from Asia Minor (Acts 13:1); the damage to the gospel when fellowship is withheld from brothers on the basis of ethnicity and fear (Galatians 2:11-14); the multi-ethnic nature of worship in heaven as a model for worship on earth (Revelation 5); etc.
through the cross will they be truly reconciled to each other...For a world torn by unrest and friction, the gospel is the only answer.”

C. Local churches must pursue multi-ethnicity as a matter of obedience and an outworking of the gospel—without having racial reconciliation displace the Great Commission.

Mark DeYmaz explains this well:

“At Mosaic, therefore, we believe that when men and women of diverse backgrounds are one with God individually, they can and should walk together as one in and through the local church, all for the sake of the Gospel! Indeed, this is the vision of Christ for the local church. It’s about evangelism and discipleship—simple as that.”

D. Local churches must re-think the entire concept of “race.”

The term is inaccurate and unhelpful. There is but one race—the human race. Rather than speaking of differing “races,” we should speak of differing “ethnicities.”

1. All ethnicities are united in our Source (Acts 17:26; Genesis 11:9).
2. All ethnicities are united in our Sin (Romans 3:9).
3. All ethnicities* are united in our Savior (Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:27-29) (* believers)

Thabiti Anyabwile has spoken to the topic as insightfully as anyone I’ve heard.

“Strictly speaking, the Scripture knows nothing of our contemporary notion of ‘races.’ People may have different skin color (or hair color), but they do not therefore belong to different ‘races.’ The idea of ‘races’ is, therefore, a fiction. There is but one human race descended from one parentage, all of whom are created in the image of God spiritually, rationally, morally, and bodily.”

Gladly, one of the results of correcting our thinking on the very concept of “races” is the dismantling of misguided opposition to “inter-racial marriage” (which is a nonsensical phrase, unless we’re discussing marriage to a moose).

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9 Mark DeYmaz, *Building Healthy Multi-Ethnic Churches*, Kindle location 481.

10 Thabiti Anyabwile’s article “Many Ethnicities, One Race.” (“Suggested Resources” on the last page has the link.)

11 I’ve written on the topic of “mixed marriages” here: http://mytwocents.wordpress.com/2009/06/30/sound-words-only-in-the-lord-on-inter-racial-marriage/
E. Local churches must be willing to adjust their church culture to reflect their constituency. This will certainly be a challenging process. But we must resist the attitude that says people from other cultures will be welcomed by us—so long as they become like us.

F. Local churches must reconsider our attitudes toward differing ethnicities—and repent.

The church of Jesus Christ should be the leading voice for ethnic diversity. The fact that we have been “in step” with secular society (if not many steps behind) isn’t an excuse for our prejudice—it’s an indictment.

**Conclusion:** Will every church will be a multi-ethnic church? Probably not. But every church should strive to be as multi-ethnic as the community in which it ministers, especially where there are no language barriers. If we reach the community, we will reflect the community. Let us strive for Spirit-created, gospel-focused, multi-ethnic churches—as an outworking of New Testament ecclesiology, as a testimony to an observing world, and as a trophy of the grace and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Suggested Resources:**

- Ken Ham and Charles Ware’s book *One Race One Blood* (Master Books, 2010).
- Thabiti Anyabwile’s article “Many Ethnicities, One Race.” It can be found here: [http://www.9marks.org/journal/many-ethnicities-one-race](http://www.9marks.org/journal/many-ethnicities-one-race)
- Matt Chandler’s sermon “Racial Reconciliation.” It can be found here: [http://www.thevillagechurch.net/sermon/racial-reconciliation/](http://www.thevillagechurch.net/sermon/racial-reconciliation/)
- David Casas’ message “Supposed Races” from a Spanish “Answers in Genesis” conference. (David is a member of KHBC, a Ph.D. student in Old Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a professor at Luther Rice University, and a Georgia State Representative.) The highlights can be found here: [http://youtu.be/SOWI4qm8fM0](http://youtu.be/SOWI4qm8fM0)

12 See Corey Widmer’s article “Want to Be Multiethnic? Get Ready for Discomfort” in *Christianity Today*. (“Suggested Resources” on the last page has the link.)