

Culture Bible Studies: **Introduction**

Historically, God's creation of various races and ethnicities and his call to Israel to be "separate" from other peoples have been misconstrued by Christians as justification for continued racial segregation. Such twisting of biblical teaching supported slavery in the United States. The same reasoning has justified both the appalling racism of apartheid in South Africa and the reluctance of some Christians to date and marry outside their race and culture.

The church has tolerated, and in some cases actively supported, programs and structures with racist and ethnocentric biases. We have built separate kingdoms: kingdoms of Jew with Jew, Gentile with Gentile, white with white, Latino with Latino, educated with educated. In doing so we have left the world to flounder in conflict and tension, without God's transforming vision. We have alienated entire groups of people from his body. And we have denied ourselves the great blessings of a community of faith that embraces ethnic and cultural diversity.

Clearly, God is drawing the world together for a purpose. As his body, those who seek to bring in his kingdom, we must consider how our Lord desires to use this worldwide trend, so that we can get in line with his salvation purposes.

God's Intentions for the Peoples

Throughout the Old Testament, God's relationship with one particular group, Israel, sheds light on both his purposes and our prideful tendency to reject those purposes. God's strategy was a relatively simple one. He chose a particular ancient people group, the Hebrews, and drew them out from among other ethnic groups who worshiped pagan gods.

In the ancient world, every aspect of everyday life—including basics such as food and clothing—carried with it spiritual significance. Therefore, the Hebrews were to maintain strict rituals, such as dietary restrictions, to distinguish them from their neighbors who worshiped idols and whose customs reflected their idolatry. Besides keeping these rules, the Hebrews were to govern their lives by fundamental laws concerning the love of God and neighbor. As this separate identity was established, God gained their trust by providing for them as they obeyed him in all these ways. Through their identification as the "people of Yahweh" (the Hebrew term for God), God clearly revealed his character to all the world.

Through Isaiah, God proclaims: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles" (Is 42:6). "And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, ...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer...for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Is 56:6-7).

As these verses indicate, Israel—while remaining in many ways separate from idolatrous peoples—was given a missionary task to the world. In what might be called a "theology of welcome" that continues in the New Testament, Yahweh insisted that the Israelites accept foreigners: "For the LORD your God is God of gods...who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (Deut 10:17-19).

The Israelites were to bring these aliens into their covenant—to win them over through hospitality and through God's revelation of his goodness and trustworthiness. If they rejected their old pagan customs and replaced them with Hebrew cultural and religious practices, these proselytes were welcomed and accepted into the people of God. Anticipating this process, as well as his Son's work on the cross, Yahweh could promise to Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3).

Yahweh repeatedly told the Israelites that the reason they had been chosen for this task of reflecting God to the surrounding nations had to do with God's mercy, not with their superiority over other groups. As he says

in Deuteronomy 9:6, "Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people."

Though God made it clear that their privileged position was granted, not earned, the Israelites began to feel smug about their place. Disregarding the overarching commandments for love and justice (see, for example, Mic 6:8 and Lev 19:18), they became proud of their ability to keep God's law. Forgetting the reason Yahweh had set them apart in the first place, they lost their missionary mandate of being a light to the nations. The Israelites replaced God's vision with the ethnocentrism and nationalism, justifying their self-elevation with reference to their history and their strict religious practices.

The Restorer of the Kingdom

In contrast to his fellow Israelites' arrogance, Jesus—God fully revealed as a man—powerfully lived out the Old Testament's radical theology of welcome. Often controversial, even shocking, in his actions and statements, he received mixed reviews from the most respected Jews of his day—those who belonged to the separatist religious establishment of the Pharisees.

With his Father's plan of salvation for all peoples in mind, Jesus set aside the laws that had already served the purpose of forging a monotheistic nation from among pagan ones. In a dramatic move, he declared all foods "clean" (Mk 7:19). He ate with "tax collectors and sinners," as well as with the religious and respected. Thus he opened himself to accusations of gluttony, drunkenness and an unclean lifestyle (Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34).

Jesus embraced the "dogs"—as Gentiles were called by the Jews—welcoming them into his kingdom of healing and intimacy with God (see Mk 7:24-30 and Jn 5 for examples). In a statement that was shocking to his contemporaries, Jesus claimed to do only what he saw the Father doing (Jn 8:28). His welcoming of Gentiles and sinners, then, was a part of his fulfillment of the law and the prophets (see Mt 5:17-20).

Shattering the ethnocentrism that had replaced holiness among the Jews, Jesus proclaimed and lived the kingdom of God. The kingdom could be described as God's universe working together for one all-encompassing, overarching purpose for all times and peoples. God gave Israel a global mandate; that is, his intention was that while he had revealed himself fully to only one people group, all peoples and cultures were to be affected by the Israelites' relationship to him.

Jesus fully reveals his kingdom culture. He becomes the measure for what is true and good, the "non-negotiables" of the faith. Just as Jesus' call is for all people, so too the culture—the values, beliefs and characteristics—of those who place themselves under this new Servant-King includes the whole of creation. By its very nature, it encompasses and transforms every other culture. Acknowledging that no one worldly culture embodies the whole truth, and knowing the gospel to be offensive to all cultures on some points and affirming on other points, Christians can enjoy the creativity of God manifested in societies other than their own. We can learn from other peoples' unique encounter with the Lord of the universe.

God, by his very nature, is always universal in his scope, moving outward and expanding in his work of salvation, touching all with his gift of redemption. He starts with one people group and moves to all peoples. He proclaims the gospel fully in one city (Jerusalem) and sends his hearers from there to the ends of the earth.

With this understanding, we can affirm all cultures as a display of God's creativity and handiwork. We can seek out those elements that reflect the kingdom of Jesus, praise them, and even emulate them. For example, from Asian culture Westerners can gain a picture of community and of the dignity of older people. Other countries offer a profound hospitality that puts to shame the Western mistrust of strangers.

One of God's intentions in creating a variety of cultures is to keep us humble, lest we fall into the same trap that Israel did—believing that somehow we have the definitive say in terms of life-style, values or customs and do not need other cultures and their insights. He provides a multitude of cultures and ethnicities as a system of checks and balances on our sinfulness. Yet this system fulfills its purpose only when we consider how we can live and work together as God commands.

Just as the Old Testament reveals the universality of God's plan, the book of Revelation provides us with a picture of the consummation of that vision at the end of time:

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...And they cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

What an awesome and beautiful kingdom it shall be! We must participate with Jesus in building that kingdom *now*.

Resisting Yahweh's Plan

Though we have Christ's model and his words, and though we know the clear intention of God in the Old and New Testaments, we continue to reject God's theology of welcome. In our sin and insecurity, we often build our own kingdom—one that affirms us and our values—rather than the one the Lord proclaimed in Israel, established in Jesus, and will complete at the end of time. Clinging to those who are like us, we seldom have the opportunity to be reconciled with members of other races, cultures and subcultures. We cannot, then, learn from them, and we forfeit our opportunity to participate in God's reign.

Few evangelicals are aware of the tremendous power of racism—fueled as it is by the deceptions of the prince of lies. We do not recognize racism in our mechanisms for insulating ourselves. For instance, many Christians urge, in the name of church growth, that people of the same ethnic and cultural background should worship and build community together.

Obviously, it was hard for the first followers of Jesus to hang around with the losers of their culture—the economically, morally and socially outcast. This battle continued as Jesus broke not only social but also ethnic barriers, welcoming both Jew and Gentile to his table, an action that the orthodox Jew of his day found reprehensible.

I just don't feel like I fit in; I simply don't feel comfortable; Such a teaching or service doesn't minister to me—all these contemporary self-justifications can reflect a deep resistance to the fullness of Jesus' kingdom culture. Rather than battling stereotypes and risking discomfort, we often complacently encourage segregation.

At the same time, we live in a society whose racial hatreds feed on economic injustice and trample on the dignity of individuals. Various media images, such as Latino gang members, blacks selling crack and insensitive white yuppies pursuing their desires at all costs, reinforce our fears and stereotypes. Christians and non-Christians alike flee with their businesses and families from the "invasion" of members of another race into their neighborhood. Often this leaves certain areas vulnerable to the oppression of poverty and violence, stripped of Christian resources and relationships. Like our nonbelieving friends, we believe it is sufficient to feel regretful of these conditions and protect ourselves from discomfort in the process.

We look around our congregations and remember God's intentions that all races, tongues and types worship in his house as family. We tell our unbelieving friends that the kingdom of God is like a great feast—a party that Jesus throws for us—but what sort of image of that party are we providing? More often than not it is a party with Asians in one room, blacks in another, whites in another, Latinos elsewhere. Even our non-Christian friends saw through the folly of that thinking long ago.

The root of our resistance to God's kingdom is our own inability to accept the unconditional love God has for us, as individuals and as peoples. To the degree our sense of worth and value is maintained through religious and cultural distinctives—from our work ethic to our worship styles to the neighborhood we live in—to that degree we remain independent from God, relying on ourselves. Ever skeptical of the offensive message of the gospel that salvation is only by active trust in Jesus and his work on the cross, we build a church that isolates us from others rather than welcoming and embracing everyone because of Christ.

When we refuse to actively love people of other cultures and races, we work against God. Churches in the ethnically mixed cities—and this now includes the vast majority—that are not seeking to be racially and culturally mixed are actually pockets of resistance in a war already won by Christ for true reconciliation. To continue in segregation is to grieve the Spirit of God, who desires unity.

To be in the midst of people who are different is difficult. We must first recognize the racism and classism in our hearts, their roots in self-justification and their sustenance on fear. As God strips us of our trust in our distinctives, we need to change and compromise in concrete ways in order to transfer our hope to the rule of Jesus.

How do we respond when our values clash?

For example, attitudes toward time are different in the cultures of many people of color from attitudes among whites whose culture originated in northern Europe. Some Afro-Americans and Hispanics move from event to event with a casual ease that minute-managing Anglos label "laziness." Then there are widely divergent teaching and preaching styles—some placing high value on technique or subjective experience, others insisting on rational, expository presentations.

As we begin this journey into the fullness of Jesus' kingdom, our own arrogance becomes more and more apparent, as does our need for our hearts to be regenerated. For example, we realize that it really distresses us that these other people worship so much more enthusiastically than we do. Could we be lacking something? Or we realize how uneasy we feel with their style of speaking, of joking, and we see our insecurity as we long to retreat to the familiar.

Servants of the Kingdom

As we struggle through these issues, the church's distinguishing feature can become our determination to live life together as our Lord intended in a world whose solutions include segregation, violence and polite toleration. We can freely affirm our variety (a key characteristic of our Creator's work), enjoy one another's cultures and learn from the interplay of our strengths and weaknesses. Jesus' family has no single language, ritual or way of expressing itself. Meeting, working and living together as partners keeps us in a position of submission before God and one another. In this way, we truly become light in the darkness, a living proclamation of Yahweh as Creator and Lover of all peoples and cultures.

Standing before a righteous God, we gain a sober understanding of our own—and our society's—sinfulness. If we are to cooperate in building God's kingdom in our midst, all of our actions must be performed in a spirit of humility. This humility allows us to recognize that, left to ourselves, we will inevitably follow in the footsteps of Israel and the Pharisees, rejecting God's plan as revealed in Scripture.

Yet God's presence, his revelation of himself, does more than burn away our shield of self-justification. There is another aspect to godly humility: receiving God's love for us. This love motivates us and encourages us, assuring us that we are free to fail and expressing God's pleasure as we seek his kingdom above all else.

The kingdom is a realm of delight. I cannot express to you the abundance of joy I have experienced in my life among various races, cultures and subcultures. The richness of our congregations' celebration in worship, for example, is beyond description, as are the blessings Jesus brings me as he honors my love and commitment to the people of my church and neighborhood, from gang members to homemakers to businesspeople of all colors and backgrounds.

Perhaps this is the source of our greatest motivation to enter into the multi-ethnic reality of God's family. Just as God's splendor and creativity are displayed in a field blanketed with hundreds of varieties of shrubs and tiny flowers with thousands of color combinations and shades, so the family of God is best expressed by the coming together of the ultimate expression of his magnificently creative mind. The diversity of colors, personalities and peoples constitute the portrait of humankind. Those of us who have been drawn into Christ will naturally want to enrich our lives with this creative expression of God, just as we naturally enjoy picking and arranging a diversity of flowers to bring life and beauty to our homes.

But because our minds have been polluted by the system of this world, we fear God's creation and seek to protect ourselves from his gift. And so it is that we require faith and courage to exercise a godly mind toward people of other ethnicities. As we exercise that faith, God's Holy Spirit is able to transform our minds, until eventually our embracing of diversity is no longer a spiritual battle but one of the greatest pleasures of belonging to the family of God.

As is true of any move toward faithfulness, our steps into the kingdom require a losing of our lives and a commitment to humble service. We must be willing to take some risks, breaking open the circles of homogeneity where we have been comfortable.

What steps should we take?

To gain sensitivity and to understand God's revelation in cultures, read books on and by members of other people groups. Eat their food, learning their language and go to their parties and celebrations. Rather than making annoyed comments about how "they always sit together," adopt Jesus' model of both extending invitations and inviting yourself over. Avoid racial jokes or slang names for other ethnicities that merely point up differences or reinforce stereotypes. If you and your friends speak another language fluently, let others into your conversation by telling them what you are saying and teaching them phrases and idioms. Recognizing that other cultures worship God differently and understand his character in differing ways because of their history and spiritual experience, attend worship services of other people groups.

Displacing ourselves as we serve and welcome people after Jesus' pattern, we will in our ignorance sometimes do foolish or insensitive things. Ask forgiveness if you offend; offer forgiveness if you are offended. Christ's act of reconciliation calls the church to extend this mercy one to another as we learn to live as his family forever.

The cost of ignoring the biblical mandate to participate in God's varied creation has been high. While even nonbelievers spend a great deal of time researching the implications of multiculturalism and seeking solutions to increasing racial tensions in our cities, the church continues to meet in homogeneous groups and to minister to people of its own sort. Proverbs states that "without a vision, the people perish." The church of Jesus must look to the Scriptures for God's future, shaking off the shackles of racism, individualism and arrogance. As the author of Hebrews says, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (12:1-2).

The way marked for us is one in which all ethnicities live together at his people. Begin to act and speak in accordance with God's will, praying that one day you might participate with joy in the scene described in Revelation. Seek to bring yourself and the body of Christ to repentance, so that we might proclaim by our life together the reality of the reconciliation that God desired from the beginning and that Jesus secured by his death and resurrection.

This introduction is available online at: www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/8208