

Mixed-Up Churches: Aiming for Multi-Cultural Glory

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Is it better to have Caucasian churches, Black churches, Korean churches, Farmer churches and Rock-driven churches, or to mix them up?

Recently I read an unambiguous advertisement for a church in our city. It read, “We sing the old hymns.” That was it. Contrary to what this group might imagine, it epitomized the most radically popular view of church growth—the homogenous principle.

Is it right to have an Old Hymns church?

I also read in our newspaper about the new Mustang Church. Two ordained ministers have constructed a building for the launch of this innovative church. Mustang automobiles are diagonally positioned down each side of the auditorium, with pews in the middle. A huge picture of Jesus driving a Mustang Ford fills up the front wall. Any question about the kind of people they wish to reach?

The homogenous principle of church growth has been around for some years now, but it is still caressed as if it is the newest baby in the church growth nursery. It says, simply, that churches are to aim at a cultural subgroup of society in their appeal, advertising and organizing in such a way as to draw people from that cultural subset as their target. The other people, well, they can just find another place that fits them.

But is this a correct view?

The New Testament screams, “NO!” In fact, I would say that very few growth strategies have been as far from the biblical mark as this one that has dominated the minds of most seminaries, pastors, missionaries and church growth specialists for the last twenty years. It has nearly killed evangelicalism and it has made the church ugly and deformed.

The biggest challenge for the early church was bringing Jewish background people and Gentile background people together in Christ. Read Romans and Ephesians to see this, for instance. Once converted to the Savior, there was never any question that new believers were to live together in a new *Christian* culture, whatever the cost. That took tolerance, diligence to preserve unity, and vigilance. It took the Spirit.

When Paul started churches in various locations, he did not start a Jewish church on one side of town, a Gentile one on the other, a Barbarian one on the other side of the tracks, and a Scythian one on the hill. This well-bred Jew, who once believed that Gentiles were dogs, had a renewed mind and a clear view of God’s plan. In fact, it was the “mystery” long hidden and now revealed, that Gentiles and Jews are included in Christ, which comprised his main message. He wasn’t

about to preach another message through his church planting methods than he proclaimed through his mouth. No, these were going to be “mixed-up” churches.

I recently sat with a Korean pastor, enjoying some real fellowship in Christ. He explained that in his church “we are like the Jews,” by being an exclusively Korean church. He is right, and it isn’t pretty. His people speak English, but in order to enjoy their own culture, they are refusing to gather with the believers who are English-speaking. I realize that language sometimes makes being together impossible. But his case was different. As much as I can feel for cultures that wish to stay together because it is comfortable, the choice to be exclusive is religious snobbery. I believe this pastor is seeing this error.

When Peter began to remove himself from his Gentile brothers upon the arrival of some professing Jewish followers, Paul rebuked him before everyone. He accused him of acting like an unconverted Jew through his exclusivity. The gospel preaches that believers are all one, and our association with each other preaches it in living color (see Gal. 2:11-14). Remember, as well, that Peter was the one who received the vision of the unclean animals in the sheet, which was intended to reveal that the Gentiles are welcomed by God into His family when converted! Because the gospel was at stake, Paul could not afford to let this hypocrisy go unaddressed, even if it was Peter who sinned.

I understand that people in town may not understand your insistence on bringing your white brothers into your church, or your Hispanic friends into your fellowship. I also know it might be hard to make it happen. But it is glorious to do so and must be the aim of each church. Paul labored through the obvious differences and constantly worked on the hearts of the people to accept one another. It’s a whole lot easier to be “with your own kind,” but it does not demonstrate the real power of the gospel.

When an 80 year old hymn-singing grandmother kneels beside a newly converted rock-oriented street-wise kid, it is glorious beyond imagination. Only God could do that, and everyone in town will know it. “This is God showing off” says one professor friend of mine. Indeed it is! It’s the mixed-up church that looks like heaven.

“There is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11).

Read Jim’s expanded article on this subject, “Multi-cultural Glory in the Church: Should We Have Black Churches and White Churches? Or Cowboy Churches?” at www.CCWtoday.org

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