

Cross-cultural ministry: some New Testament reflections

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Some of the most important passages in the New Testament are the least obvious. For example, we can easily skip over the long list of names and greetings in Romans 16; or treat Paul's travel plans and his comments about the collection for the church at Jerusalem in Romans 15 as closing appendices to his more important doctrinal material; or sentimentalise his description of Epaphroditus (the representative of the Christian community at Philippi) as 'my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need' (Phil 2:25 ESV).

In reality, references such as these testify to the vital backstory against which we need to read the more explicit theological passages. The theology explicates the lived reality.

For example, Paul does not proffer what we Lutherans regard as the central doctrine of the bible—justification by grace alone through faith alone—as a theological statement in a vacuum. Paul emphasises the doctrine to protect the lived experience of the New Testament congregations.

All over the ancient world, Christian communities emerged in which old barriers had been broken down, having been transcended by the Spirit creating new communities. Through the gospel, the Spirit brought about a new creation: communities of believers in union with Christ, the adopted children of Abba, Father.

These communities, with all their imperfections and amid all their sufferings, were foretastes of heaven. They were eschatological colonies of the coming kingdom, set up in the present mess of history but sourced and supplied from beyond it. Their first flush of life was expressed in the community at Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all the believers were together and had all things in common; and they would sell their property and possessions and share them with all, to the extent that anyone had need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47 NASB)

So unprecedented was this movement, that the New Testament writers needed either to invent new words (such as Paul's 'fellow-body', *sussoma* in Ephesians 3:6, translated as 'members together of one body'); or take old words such as 'love' (*agape*) and 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) and pack them with a new, richer, deeper meanings. They compelled the emergence of new doctrine, worship and modes of community life, summed up as: 'the

apostles' teaching and the fellowship...the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42 ESV).

In this light it is no wonder that Paul should wield the theological cudgel with such force in Galatians. There the Christian communities had been marked by the love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness of true 'fellow-body' unity, across racial and social divisions. That was all being destroyed by legalists who came down from Jerusalem, whose zeal was destroying the community the Spirit had created. Where 'principles' (in this case, kosher food and other Old Testament distinctives) become more important than Spirit-forged relationships, it's people who suffer and the Spirit who is grieved.

The Greco-Roman world of New Testament was heavily stratified. Socio-cultural divisions existed on multiple levels: citizen or non-citizen; slave or free; male and female; Jew or gentile; Greek-speaking or barbarian; landowners or day labourers; rich or poor; patrician or plebian; and so on.

Until the New Testament congregations emerged there had been nothing like them. Nor could there have been. Such communities cannot be legislated into being, only God can create them. The emergence of Christian communities of multi-ethnic, diversified-background believers flowed from God's Old Testament promises to bless the nations and establish a spiritual temple as a house of prayer for all peoples. He fulfilled that through His incarnate Son. And Paul saw the existence of such communities as the revelation in history of God's mystery, hidden through the ages, but now revealed for all to see.

That is why the backstory was not just culturally significant, but theologically vital. Such communities were nothing less than God's promises being fulfilled in the lived experience of their members. They were the evidence of Jesus' resurrected life among them. Their existence was an incontrovertible, counter-cultural reality which only the Spirit could create. Only God could have brought them about. Only through union with Christ could they be sustained. And Paul's doctrine only made sense in that context.

The New Testament communities were marked by several factors:

- *They were truly multi-ethnic, but not multicultural. The dominant culture was 'from above', not from any of the ethnic cultures 'below'. They shared in the culture of the Trinity.*

One of the wonderful words used to describe the relationship of the Persons of the Triune God is *perichoreisis*. That means the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, are always other-person-centred. Each Person rejoices in the others, exalts the others, gives to the others, honours the others, and receives from the others. And as a unitary community, the Trinity is other-person-centred towards the creation: creating, sustaining, redeeming, refining, and so on. Being conformed the culture of the Trinity does not eliminate ethnic distinctives but elevates the positive elements of each ethnic background while at the same time countering the negative elements inherent in each.

- *The members of the communities were deeply united at a relational level.*
These were not silos of different ethnicities who happened to share, for example, the same worship space. They were deeply engaged with one another, beyond their own social fabric. Words like 'love', and 'fellowship' took on radically enhanced meanings, even more so when belief in Jesus as the Messiah meant ostracism from one's

existing social fabric, or other forms of persecution. When Paul (the ex-Pharisee) used a word like ‘brother’ for uncircumcised gentiles such as Titus or Epaphroditus, he was rolling back centuries of socio-cultural isolation, suspicion, and fear from both sides. But the bonds of familyhood (as Abba’s adopted children) were truly the fulfilment of Jesus’ prophecy: ‘In truth I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land—and persecutions too—now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life.’ (Mk 10:29–30 NJB)

- *They experienced the vulnerability of receiving hospitality.*
It was no accident that the crisis among the Galatian Christians was typified by an argument over food. In retreating to only eating kosher food (see Gal 2:11–13), Peter exchanged law for gospel. He destroyed fellowship and in effect said to the gentile believers by his actions: my relationship with you is only one way, you must join me in being Jewish. And if even Peter and Barnabas could be pressured into retreating from the freedom of the gospel to the prison of the law, how much more may we be prone to the same thing? The vulnerability of receiving hospitality is truly incarnational. As we open ourselves to receive the hospitality of another—on their terms not ours—we open ourselves to them. In this vulnerability, our weakness becomes the occasion for the Spirit’s power. The differential of cultural experience, language, and power, becomes the setting for the infilling of love for the ‘other’. In being taken outside of ourselves, we are placed into a perichoretic relationship with a different ethnicity, and in so doing we find the kingdom of God is not limited to our own culture.
- *They upended normal notions of power and status.*
Can you imagine a slave-owner washing the feet of his slave, who was, in Christ, a brother and fellow heir of the kingdom of God? Or a Roman citizen regarding her citizenship as less important than the citizenship of heaven, and thereby numbering herself with the body of Christ—a negligible, marginalised and often misrepresented cohort of non-citizens? Or the Roman patrician sitting at the feet of the plebian who may be the Spirit-empowered preacher for the community?
- *The joy of their new life was entirely dependent upon them hearing, receiving, and living out the gospel.*
Where that gospel was exchanged for legalism, for example, the communities descended into factionalism, rivalry, and old patterns of selfishness. Where the gospel was revived among them (for example, in Galatians), they experienced afresh the fruit of the Spirit and the awesome reality that in Christ, ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28 ESV). Or, as we are told elsewhere, ‘Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all’ (Col 3:11 ESV).

Much more could be said about all this, but if these things form some of the basic outlines of the New Testament’s theology of mission and ecclesiology, they mean that Christ is taking us on a journey. As our churches increasingly shift from being mono-ethnic, mainly

Eurocentric, bounded communities, Christ will be leading us to experience more that is akin to the essence of New Testament church life. He will use this journey to stretch us.

And it is a *journey*. It is not an invitation 'to come and see' but to 'go and be'.

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