



CHRIST AND MULTICULTURALISM

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In the light of the community tensions exposed by the Cronulla experience there is one simple reason for re-affirming multiculturalism: *it is an essential part of the gospel.*

It is important to note that Christians do not support multiculturalism for just the same reasons as others. Some people support multiculturalism for *pragmatic* reasons, because it produces benefits for Australia and is a great source of social wealth and dynamism. Others support multiculturalism in Australia on *the basis of history*, because over the past 200 years Australia has continually added to the indigenous community successive waves of migrants from many ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds. Some support multiculturalism for *philosophical* reasons arguing for the principle of tolerance as an essential dimension of community life.

Christians may well wish to engage in the debate about the pragmatic, historical and philosophical issues associated with multiculturalism but if these are the only grounds considered it would be possible for a society to decide that multiculturalism is more trouble than it is worth. But ultimately the real reason for supporting multiculturalism is simply *because it is right* and they will continue to support multiculturalism *despite* all pragmatic difficulties and circumstances that would lead to other outcomes even when they appear to be simpler or more attractive.

It is right because multiculturalism is –

- a calling for the church and the world
- an affirmation of the creative nature of God the Father
- an implication of being united in the cross of Jesus Christ, symbolised in baptism
- a part of the on-going work of the Holy Spirit, and
- a sign, a foretaste of the heavenly kingdom of God.

There are various implications of these theological principles which are further developed below.

What can we learn from the recent disturbances?

If there is a lesson for Christians it is not so much that certain members of the community need rebuke for their racism, but rather that the church should look to its own life and ask whether it has sufficiently modelled the life that is the calling of God. Clearly, it is of vital importance for churches to re-affirm the place of people of different cultures in God's kingdom and for those responsible for the teaching ministry of the church to relate these fundamental theological principles concerning culture to the life of the church and wider society.

The call is for more than tolerance, it is for active love for others. The practical difficulties involved in this are real and significant. Cultures are complex mixes of ethnicity, culture and religion and Christians face a particular challenge when they declare that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. No culture is beyond criticism, but any attempt at critique, whether of one's own culture or another, is likely to lead to tensions. The Christian vision of multiculturalism, however, cannot be for the wholesale toleration of anything and everything for all cultures stand under the judgment of God.

Can there be such a thing as 'a mono-cultural church'?

Fundamentally, the answer is 'no', for there is only one church of Jesus Christ which is made up of people from all cultures. In practice the answer is that 'yes, many local expressions of the church exist which have only one culture and which have little or no connection with other cultures at all.' Sometimes this is because of the geographic separation of the church from people of other cultures. At other times local congregations have been deliberately stratified in different ways to relate to specific age groups, certain sub-cultural groups, vocational groups, language groups and particular cultures.

While some temporary justifications for this may exist, the reality of the present situation is that globalisation – including communication, travel and migration - is producing a new and different situation in our world. The church must be a sign and a vision for the community and in the present Australian context it would now be as inappropriate to maintain completely separate developing cultures as it was to maintain completely separate racial development under apartheid.

The danger of persistently mono-cultural situations which are not open to other cultures is that this leads people to believe that a particular culture is superior and perhaps closer to God's heart than others. Christians are responsible for critiquing their own culture before doing that to others. The claim that Jesus Christ is Lord is likely to be seen as particularly difficult, challenging and even offensive in some contexts. No coercion, however, is appropriate in this regard. Religious freedom is an important feature of multiculturalism, one that is defended by the gospel itself.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ remains the central fact of Christian faith. The greatest thing the church can do to change the world is to change the church, and adopting a multicultural mind-set is an important step in achieving this.

Defining and critiquing multiculturalism

The term 'culture' can be defined in a variety of ways. Broadly speaking it refers to the social relationships, institutions, arts, habits, beliefs and other human endeavours which are, together, considered to be characteristic of a particular community, people, or nation. 'Multiculturalism' is likewise used here in a general manner to refer to a positive and open attitude towards different peoples and cultures and a willingness to share in a society which works towards enhancing life for all people. It is primarily a statement about an attitude, a state of mind, which rejects the notion of the inherent superiority of one culture over another and which celebrates the value to be found in all cultures.

This understanding of multiculturalism comes with four provisos. The first is that it must be understood as being consistent with respect for the basic structures and principles underwriting our democratic society including, as indicated by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, the Constitution, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language, the rule of law, acceptance and equality.

The second is that multiculturalism as discussed in this paper is not a detailed social or political formula of what is involved, and although the DIMIA definition adds a second dimension to its definition when it says that multiculturalism ‘also refers specifically to the strategies, policies and programs’ that are used to encourage it, support for multiculturalism in the sense used in this article does not imply the automatic acceptance of all strategies and programs.

Thirdly, multiculturalism does not preclude fair criticism of cultures, or of various aspects of cultures, including religious beliefs or the way that religious beliefs and culture are, or should be, related. It is necessary to indicate this to ensure that an endorsement of multiculturalism is not taken as an indication that these aspects of cultures are exempt from vigorous criticism.

Fourthly, a broad definition of multiculturalism which allows for robust criticism of aspects of culture at the same time as affirming that which is good, also prevents those who define multiculturalism in very tight, ideological, political or religious terms, from using such definitions to reject the concept by insisting that multiculturalism will necessarily involve such things as enforcing the acceptance of what is considered unacceptable behaviour or social pressure on people to behave in particular ways.

Theological development

A calling for church and world

Multiculturalism is not merely a calling for the church or a statement about what is appropriate for Christians - it is a calling for the whole of society. This is because the calling of the Christian community and the calling of the wider community are exactly the same. The Lordship of Christ is a Lordship of the Cosmos and not merely of the hearts and lives of believers. The church community is to be a sign, an illustration and a promise of what the world can be under Christ.

The mere fact that the rest of the world does not acknowledge this is no reason to assume that it is not called by Christ or that we should accommodate this positive vision of a society which lives in peace and harmony to something which people find easier to handle or which panders to sectarian interests.

Christians will join with others who support multiculturalism for pragmatic, historic and philosophical reasons but the church bases its life on the calling of God, particularly as expressed in the life of Jesus Christ.

God the creator

God is the creator of all that is good (Gen. 1:31) and, as the psalmist says, ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it’ (Ps. 24:1). All nations and peoples live under God’s care, and he looks forward to the time when all will know that, ‘The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance”’ (Isaiah 19:25).

Christ the saviour

Paul wrote to the Galatians, 'in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (3:26-28). Here Paul is dealing with the implications of being in Christ. This should not only be interpreted in personal, experiential terms. In fact, his reason for talking about being 'in Christ' is to point out to the Galatians that there is a practical, social dimension to life together in Christ that will affect the way they live and relate to one another and the wider community. Christ came to redeem the whole world, not merely individuals from within it. He came to inaugurate a new kingdom and to transform relationships as well as enter into union with each believer.

This transformation began when the church resisted living by the Jew – Greek distinction that was such a deep-seated cultural division of the first century. Earlier in Galatians Paul had made the point that one is justified only by faith in Jesus Christ, and now he draws the implication that Jew and Gentile are united in Christ and any distinction is irrelevant in matters relating to salvation. One immediate effect of this was that any actual separation of Jew and Gentile in the church had to end. Christian Jews could not regard themselves as superior in any way or require Gentiles to become Jewish. Jewish and Gentile believers could, and should worship together, and because they shared equally in the gift of salvation there could be no distinction in ministry which would suggest that one was more competent, or that one was more restricted in what they could do, or that one was in any way superior to the other. Previously the priesthood had been for Jews alone, but now, in a transformed state, it was open to all believers, and leadership within the church was based on gifting and not race or cultural background. To believe that all are one in Christ Jesus meant that for Paul it was impossible to try and restrict the grace of God to one ethnic group. This inevitably transformed the nature of the church and it should continue to transform the way Christians live today.

But what began with a change in the life of the church was to work its way out in wider society as well. The principle that in Christ there is 'neither slave nor free' immediately undercut any possibility of maintaining such social distinctions within the life of the church, and eventually removed any justification for the practice of slavery anywhere at all. Similarly, the principle that in Christ there is 'neither Jew nor Greek' undercuts any justification for mono-culturalism within the church and this then has wider, social ramifications as well. What is expected of the church is also a model for the world – a society where different cultures are able to live together in harmony.

The unity of the Spirit

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13) was marked by a miracle of tongues which overcame the existing divisions of language and culture. All those who spoke different languages were able to hear the one message: 'we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues'. In this way the scattering which took place at Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) is symbolically ended and the divisions between the nations are overcome by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The various nations are listed to make the point that unity comes through the gift of the Spirit, and it is noted that the community grows rapidly. The Holy Spirit is the one who overcomes divisions, creates the community and brings about growth.

Luke lists the nations present in roughly geographic order, from the Parthians, Medes and Elamites who came from beyond the Roman empire, then those who came from Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and North Africa, and finishing with reference to 'visitors from Rome' which was, of course, the heart of the empire, and Cretans and Arabs. The symbolism of this is clear: they are representatives of the whole world and are forerunners of a global community of Christians. This points to God's intention to build his church in every place and is an affirmation of the value God attributes to

people of all nations, races, cultures and language groups. The church must be a community for all which models God's intentions for the whole world.

The fact that the various languages are not all replaced by a single language (which would be a more exact reversal of the scattering of Babel) is an implicit affirmation of the value of the various languages and cultures that were represented there and is a clear declaration that one does not have to cease being a Mede or Parthian (or Anglo, Lebanese, Chinese or Italian) in order to be filled with the Spirit and become a Christian.

Unfortunately, it was not long before some Christians were arguing that people ought to become Jews first before they became Christians. This was, rightly, resisted. Christians today must likewise avoid suggesting directly or implicitly by word or by action that 'to be a Christian you must become like us and take on our customs and habits and ways of life.' Only those things which are contrary to God's laws are to be rejected or changed, not those things which are simply culturally different. God's community is diverse and includes people and cultures from around the world.

A vision of God's future

John's vision of God's ultimate future includes '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' (Rev. 7:9 also 14:6 and 22:2). This is a picture of what God desires and what will be achieved. The church is called to work towards this. While it would be a false hope to expect this present world to achieve the shalom of the ultimate kingdom of God it would be a lack of faith not to call this present world towards the life together for which Christ died.

The Australian Evangelical Alliance Inc is a fellowship of individuals, churches and organisations. Our aim is to be a catalyst for Christian unity, cooperation and mission, and we have been operating in Australia since 1959. AEA is affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance, an international fellowship embracing more than 150 million Christians in 110 countries.



Christian Management Australia (CMA)

CMA is a national, interdenominational membership association providing resources, training and encouragement for Christian churches and ministries in areas of management, governance, finances, staffing etc. www.cma.net.au



Missions Interlink

Missions Interlink is the Missions Commission of AEA, and exists to link mission agencies and related organisations enabling them to act nationally in promoting cross-cultural mission, in sharing resources, and in planning joint initiatives.



TEAR Australia

TEAR commenced life as AEA's commission for social justice, and has since grown enormously, separately incorporated, and now plays a very significant role in providing support and relief in developing countries. TEAR supports some one hundred projects, through sixty-five partner organisations in twenty-six countries. www.tear.org.au

Religious Liberty Commission (RLC)

The Religious Liberty Commission is the Australian arm of the World Evangelical Alliance's RLC, which serves as a co-ordinating and networking team within the international advocacy community, on behalf of Christians persecuted for

Indigenous Ministries Commission

All Christians need to develop an awareness of, and interest in those issues which concern Australia's indigenous people. Jean Phillips, of Brisbane, is a well-known and experienced person and able to EA in this area

Women's Concerns

The vision of the Women's Commission is to multiply the influence of Christian women on our nation. The Women's Commission hold functions throughout Australia, and have produced a number of helpful publications.

Youth Commission

The Youth Commission is the newest of the commissions, and is right in the thick of its establishment process. More information will be added to this site as the development proceeds

EA Insurance

EA has developed, in cooperation with EIG-Ansvar, a range of insurance products at competitive prices. Of particular interest is the specialised Mission Insurance, which recently saved one client \$10,000 per year in premiums compared to their previous policy.