

**Envisioning The Multi-Ethnic Church:
A Biblical Mandate From The Book Of Ephesians**

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Introduction

Increasingly, the next generation of church planters and reformers throughout America are envisioning local churches where men and women of diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds can, indeed, worship God together as one. Yet for dreams to become reality, it is essential that growing interest in the multi-ethnic church¹ be informed by sound theological, ecclesiological and soteriological reflection. In other words, the emerging movement must be based on “biblical prescription” rather than “cultural description” if it is to succeed in bringing the 1st century church to 21st century America; a church envisioned by Jesus Christ (John 17:20-23) and established at Antioch by men of diverse backgrounds² (c. Acts 11:19-26; 13:1) united in spirit, intent on one purpose (Philippians 2:4).

Purpose of This Article

The purpose of this article is to provide biblical justification and personal motivation for the growing number of innovators devoted to the establishment of multi-ethnic local churches throughout America and beyond. In addition, a fresh look at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians may challenge common notions regarding church growth and, specifically, the future effectiveness of the homogeneous unit principle in an increasingly diverse society.

A Presupposition

This article is based upon my belief that the local church in

Ephesus was comprised of both Jewish and Gentile converts and, thus, multi-ethnic. Indeed, biblical evidence does not support the notion of a homogeneous (i.e., wholly Gentile) church at Ephesus.

Paul's experience in Ephesus—at the time of his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 19:1ff.)—begins with an encounter of 12 (presumably Jewish) disciples of John the Baptist who, after hearing a more complete explanation of the gospel, are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Sometime after this, Paul enters a synagogue (Acts 19:8ff.) and throughout the next three months, reasons with the Jewish congregation concerning the Kingdom of God. According to Luke, there were some who believed and some who did not (Acts 19:9), the former being taught by Paul over the next two years in the school of Tyrannus. Adding further weight to the notion of a diverse church at Ephesus, Luke writes the following concerning Paul's ministry at that time: "So ... all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, *both Jews and Greeks*,"³ (emphasis mine, Acts 19:10).

By verse 17 of this same passage, Luke states implicitly that the name of the Lord (through the witness of Paul) had expanded beyond the Jewish community, and was being magnified among "both Jews and Greeks who lived at Ephesus." In Acts 19:20, he adds, "... the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing ..." among them (i.e., both Jew and Gentile alike). Even Paul, himself, speaks to the multi-ethnic nature of the emerging church in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:21).

Together with the tone and tenor of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, then, such passages argue strongly for a community of inclusion at Ephesus. Once understood in that light, the mandate for the multi-ethnic church expressed through this book becomes all the more clear.

Theme

While few question the fact that a major focus of Ephesians is the church, far fewer recognize the more consistent theme of unity that flows through the letter, as well. In addition, the overly simplistic division of the book into two halves—with chapters 1-3 devoted to doctrine and chapters 4-6 devoted to practical Christian duty—does little to validate the context and/or to enhance our understanding of Paul's expectation that the local church (both at Ephesus and beyond) is to be inclusive without distinction, "in order that the manifold wisdom of God might ... be made known through the church," (Ephesians 3:10).

A Love for All the Saints

In chapter one, Paul describes the blessed state of believers made one with God through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3-12) and then calls attention to the Holy Spirit, "... given to us as a pledge of our inheritance," (Ephesians 1:13-14). In so doing, he establishes the fact that all who have believed are now part of God's (one) family, i.e., predestined to adoption as sons, (Ephesians 1:5) and joint heirs of the kingdom (Ephesians 1:11, 14; c. James 2:5). But where, we might ask, is Paul going with such thoughts?

"For this reason, I, too, having heard of your faith ... and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you ...," (15-16). Notice that Paul's thankful remembrance of the Ephesians is rooted not only in the fact of their faith, but also in the fact of their love for *all* the saints. Use of the word *all* here is, in fact, a significant point of interest; for to whom is Paul referring and why, we might ask, does he employ such an inclusive notation?

In his commendation, Paul most certainly has in his mind the multi-ethnic nature of this church, through which both Jewish and Gentile converts worship God together as one. This assertion is even more interesting when observed in retrospect from the book of Revelation. Could the "first love" abandoned by the church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:4) be the very love for all the saints Paul mentions here in Ephesians 1:15, the love that the Ephesians had in the beginning for both Jewish and Gentile believers alike? Could it be that some 35+ years later, this once diverse church is condemned for becoming homogeneous?

Reconciling Two Groups Into One Body

In Ephesians 2:11, Paul specifically turns his attention to the Gentile community within the church. The very plain and passionate language of this text (Ephesians 2:11-22) makes it clear that the Gentiles are no longer to think of themselves (or to be thought of by the Jews) as "excluded from ... (or) strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world," (Ephesians 2:12). Through the blood of Christ, Paul's point is that Gentiles have not only been reconciled to God through faith (c. Ephesians 1:3-11ff.), but that they also have been reconciled to the "commonwealth of Israel."

To Paul, this reconciliation is not just theoretical or an otherwise mystical notion: It is to be lived out (demonstrated) practically through the local church whereby "... you (Gentiles) are fellow citizens with the saints" (Jewish converts, Ephesians 2:19), a "whole building being fitted together ... (and) growing into a holy temple (Ephesians 2:21), "... being built together (both Jew

and Gentile) into a dwelling (place) of God in the Spirit," (Ephesians 2:22). This, then, is Paul's vision and mandate for the local church.

On Earth As It Is In Heaven

Those attempting to cast the church at Ephesus in a purely homogenous light cannot have their cake and eat it, too. If Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2 (and, as will be again encountered in Ephesians 4:4-6, for example) is purely theoretical or, more mystical in nature, (i.e., to be viewed only in light of the universal or heavenly church), then why would he then include such practical instructions for the local church on earth, as well (c. Ephesians 4:1-3, 11-13, etc.)? In other words, would Paul intend in one moment to speak of the church in heaven (universal) and in another to speak of the church on earth (local) without clearly stating so? Surely he did not intend for readers somehow to understand intuitively which church (universal or local) at any given moment he had in mind; surely, he did not intend for us to be confused in this regard!

If we agree that Paul's teaching concerning spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:11-13) is intended for practical application within the context of a local church, we must also, for consistency's sake, be willing to apply his teaching concerning the truth and blessedness of unity to the same context, as well. While some may argue the point as an "either/or," it is more correct, in my view, to see it as a "both/and."

The Mystery of Christ

Following his comments concerning the divine establishment of all believers as one in Christ and in His church, Paul intends ("For this reason," Ephesians 3:1 and 3:14) to share with the Ephesians his prayerful hope concerning them (Ephesians 3:15-19). Yet, as many have rightly pointed out, he breaks from this momentarily to specifically address his own calling by way of parenthetical statement (Ephesians 3:2-13).

Specifically in these twelve verses, Paul defines his calling as a "stewardship of grace," (Ephesians 3:2). A "mystery" was revealed to him and it is "the mystery of Christ," (Ephesians 3:3). According to Paul, understanding of the mystery had not been granted to past generations, but only now (in his day) had been revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

A common error is to assume that the mystery Paul is referring to here is, simply, the gospel of Christ, i.e., the life, death, burial and resurrection of the revealed Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, this is clearly not the case. For in the following verse,

Paul states emphatically that revealed mystery is the fact “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body (on earth as it is in heaven) and (therefore) fellow partakers of the promise (eternal life) in Christ Jesus,” (Ephesians 3:6). This verse, in my opinion, represents the apex of the book, from which all else written derives its context and meaning.

The Administration of the Mystery

In Ephesians 3:7-10, we learn that Paul was made a minister of the gospel and called not only to proclaim it among the Gentiles but also called “to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery ... in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known *through the church ...*,” (emphasis mine). In other words, Paul had been given insight not only into the mystery of Christ but also insight into just how this unity is to be lived out through the local church, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Editorial Opinion

At this juncture, it is important to recall that the text in Ephesians 3:10 has not been left for us in its entirety. Therefore it is legitimate to ask, for what reason has the church been called to unity and for what reason has Paul been given the task of bringing it about? Where, why, how and to whom is the manifold wisdom of God to be made known?

We do know the passage (Ephesians 3:10) states that through the church, the manifold (or, multi-faceted and incomprehensible) wisdom of God will be made known *to rulers and authorities*. The question is just where do these rulers and authorities reside?

Clearly, the wisdom to which Paul refers contextually describes God’s wisdom in reconciling both Jews and Gentiles as one in Christ, (c. Ephesians 2:16). Yet with no other words in the text following the phrase, “in the heavenly ...,” we are left only to speculate how Paul might have finished the sentence.

The NASB supplies the word, *places*, so that the verse concludes, “in the heavenly places.” Likewise, the NIV supplies the word, *realms*. Yet, surely Paul—in the totality and context of his thoughts—did not intend to limit God’s intended display of wisdom to those rulers and authorities only dwelling in heavenly places! We can most certainly affirm that Paul has in mind the rulers and authorities of this world, as well (c. Ephesians 3:21, where Paul specifically states that the glory of the Father is to be displayed in the church and in Jesus Christ *to all generations forever and ever*,” emphasis mine).

In this case, the NLTB is, perhaps, more instructive in ren-

dering the verse,

“God’s purpose was to show his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church.”--*The New Living Bible*

Peterson, too, sees it much the same way:

“Through Christians like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!”--*The Message*

Paul closes his parenthetical statement (Ephesians 3:13), then, by speaking to the inherent difficulty of both communicating and establishing just such a church and by encouraging the Ephesians not to lose heart (in this regard) on his behalf.

Love Beyond Measure

Just what is Paul’s prayerful hope for diverse people pursuing God together as one via the local church?

In concluding the chapter (Ephesians 3:14-19), Paul prays to the “Father, from whom the whole family (the church) in heaven and on earth derives its name,” (Ephesians 3:15). This verse necessarily flows from the context of Ephesians 2:11-22 and is rightly understood only in connection with the transitional phrase, “For this reason ...,” (Ephesians 3:1; c. also 3:14). In other words, the opening of this section (Ephesians 3:14 -19) further supports the notion that diverse people in the church at Ephesus are to see (and to act) themselves as one in Christ.

In addition, and far more significantly, Paul’s oft cited prayer (Ephesians 3:17-18) is rightly and contextually tied to the hope that both Jews and the Gentiles will live as one together through the local church. With my own thoughts added in parentheses, Paul prays that the Ephesians, “being rooted and grounded in love (i.e., a love without distinction) may be able to comprehend with *all the saints* (emphasis mine, i.e., both Jew and Gentile alike) what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the (unconditional) love of Christ which surpasses (human) understanding, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God,” (i.e., “perfected in unity,” c. John 17:23). It is a love, he suggests, that can be comprehended (experienced) only through an environment of inclusion, where people find common ground through the cross (Ephesians 2:16); namely, the multi-ethnic church.

So Paul concludes, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly beyond all that we (might) otherwise ask or think (possi-

ble), according to the power that works within us (i.e., Jewish and Gentile believers alike), to Him be the glory *in the church* (emphasis mine) and in Jesus Christ forever and ever, amen.”

How Should We Then Live?

Beginning with chapter 4, Paul turns his attention to practical living as many have shown; but what is too often missed, is that he does so completely with the unity of the church (multi-ethnic) in mind (c. Ephesians 4:1). What is the calling that they (we) have been called to walk worthy in? It is the call to love and to walk as one with diverse believers in the context of the local church (Ephesians 2, 3).

Yet how can this, realistically or practically, be achieved? Paul says it can happen (only) when believers walk together, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve *the unity* (emphasis mine) of (made possible by) the Spirit in the bond of peace,” (Ephesians 4:2, 3). Here he outlines for us, then, the fundamental principles upon which the multi-ethnic church can be established.

Experience tells us that it is much easier to walk humbly, to be gentle, to show forbearance and to love others who are more like us, i.e., with those who share with us the same ethnicity, education and/or economic background, etc. As the planter and pastor of a multi-ethnic local church, I, too, can attest that apart from the willingness of all involved to embrace such a mindset, unity and diversity cannot otherwise be achieved.

Finally, we might ask, “What is the motivation to even try at all?” Paul summarizes the whole of his argument by writing, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is over all and through all and in all,” (Ephesians 4:4-6). Need we say more?

Conclusion

While government and educational programs, together with the efforts of countless individuals, groups and agencies, have long-sought to eliminate prejudice and the disparaging consequences of institutional racism still deeply embedded within our society, is it not time to recognize that true unity—a unity that respects and celebrates diversity—cannot be achieved apart from the establishment of churches which intentionally and joyfully reflect the passion of Christ for all people of the world? For it is not the institutions of government, nor of education throughout America that have been ordained by God to this task, but rather

the local church, the bride of Christ; we, His people (John 17:1-3, 20-23; Acts 11:19-26, 13:1, 16ff.; Galatians 3:26-28; Ephesians 4:1-6; Revelation 5:9-10).

Surely, it breaks the heart of God to see so many churches—in Little Rock and throughout this country—segregated ethnically and/or economically from one another and that little has changed in the fifty years since Martin Luther King observed that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the land. Brothers and sisters, it should not be so.

Concerning the movement of American Christianity towards racial reconciliation in the 1990's, author Chris Rice—in his book, *More Than Equals*—wrote the following profound words ...

“Yes, deep reconciliation will produce justice, and new relationships between the races. Yes this will lead Christians to become a bright light in the public square. But I have become convinced that God is not very interested in the church healing the race problem. I believe it is more true that God is using race to heal the church.”

With the above in mind, we should recognize that the local church is intended to be multi-ethnic and, as such, to uniquely manifest God's wisdom and His glory both in this world and in the one beyond. To the degree that local church leaders today are willing to embrace such a vision and to pursue the establishment of congregations free of distinction, it will be possible to radically transform the American church (and, I believe, society) in our lifetime. Indeed, according to Jesus' own words (John 17:20-23), we should view the multi-ethnic church as the most effective means for reaching the world with the gospel!

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NOTES

1. The term “multi-ethnic church” will be used throughout this article to define a church in which people of diverse race, ethnicity, education and economic background worship God together as one.

2. According to Acts 11:20 and 13:1, the leadership team at Antioch comprised men from Africa (Niger and Cyrene), the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, Asia Minor (Tarsus) and Judea (Jerusalem).

3. I am aware that some prefer to interpret “Greeks” here to mean “Greek-speaking Jews.” Yet from the context of this passage and the book of Ephesians itself, this is most certainly not the case.