

The Homogeneous Unit Principle Revisited Part Two: A Biblical Validation

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The English writer Pope reportedly once remarked, “fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Daring to challenge criticisms of the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) from the likes of Newbigin, Saucy, Yoder, Conn and others comes close to being “foolhardy.” The biblical and missiological issues involved, however, are compelling. They take on a holy urgency in the life of a church called to preach *the unsearchable riches of Christ* to the people groups of this world. This revisitation of the biblical data on the HUP and a response to its critics cannot be procrastinated.

A Synthesis Of HUP Criticism

In something of a collage of HUP critics past and present, Pentecost agrees with those who affirm that the homogeneous unit principle is not derived from Scripture.¹ Newbigin has stronger feelings. He believes the HUP is simply incompatible with fidelity to the New Testament.² Perkins is more bold. Branding the HUP a nasty heresy, he indicts American evangelicalism for surrendering biblical principle to the expediency of church growth philosophy.³ Robert Saucy believes that intentionally seeking to nurture a homogeneous church on the basis of personal preference is contrary to the gospel of reconciliation and the biblical structure of the church. ⁴ Larry McSwain doesn't hesi-

tate to call it an idolatry. For him, the HUP is unbiblical and a denial of the gospel which reconciles.⁵

The Focus Of This Study

This corps of critics accuse HUP proponents of operating in a biblical and theological vacuum. The challenge which confronts this study is thus quite pointed: Is the HUP validated by Scripture? Is it a grace to the church or a violation of its very nature?

The first part of this study will explore the biblical credentials of the HUP. Part two will examine textual and biblical criticisms being leveled at the HUP, while part three will validate the homogeneous church. Hopefully, this re-examination of the HUP will generate a new understanding of this basic societal construct. For the life of the church and its ability to confront the challenge of our inner cities, the HUP comes to us as an imperative.

Part One: The Biblical Credentials of Homogeneity

A Starting Point

The North American ideal of rugged individualism which valorizes an “in your face” type of personal freedom has obscured a basic fact of life: Our essential character is social. This is the conclusion of Gaede who writes,

“The first biblical insight (from studying the human condition) we must come to grips with...is this: God created the human as a relational creature. Note this point well. Humankind was created to relate to other beings...(and this) was not the result of sin. It was an intentional, creational given.”⁶

Later he adds, “*The essential...character of humanity is social.*”⁷ After reviewing biblical indications of God as a social being, Gaede suggests that God’s character is relational, and “those whom He created in His image will be relational by design.”⁸ If so, the relational attribute of our creatureliness becomes an attribute of the *imago dei*...a relational imperative.

The logic of Gaede’s thesis suggests that this relational im-

perative is universal...which it is. And whatever is universal is attributable to the God of creation. Like our cognitive and aesthetic capacities, the relational attribute functions as a grace of God. And if so, there should be no surprise when this attribute is compromised by sinful people.

The relational imperative causes people to organize themselves in groups which respond to their basic need structure. In a remarkable chapter analyzing *the sacred*, Ellul puts his own twist on this relational imperative. For him *the sacred* has the function of integrating individuals within groups.⁹ By way of a quote from Malinowski, Niebuhr agrees,

“The essential fact of culture, as we live and experience it, as we can observe it scientifically,...*is the organization of human beings into permanent groups*”¹⁰ (italics mine).

The groups of which Malinowski was speaking were formal groups and these groups, he says, are essential to the cultural experience of humankind. But how is this to be understood? We all are indebted to Baab who examined the biblical world from the perspective of a sociology of formal groups. His findings are significant,

“As we study biblical man from a closer vantage point, we may more precisely analyze his nature and discover its distinctive features. First of all, *man as we find him in the Bible exists not so much in his own right and by his own decisions as in his relation to his group His whole being is inextricably bound up with the life of the entire community. Hence man appears as a corporate personality rather than as an individual. Such social entities as family clan, tribe, and nation must be examined if man is to be understood. ...what looms large in biblical thinking is the social entity wherein each man may find the only kind of self-realization...of which he has any knowledge, namely, the welfare of the community to which he belongs*”¹¹ (Italics added).

No missionary anthropologist would fault Baab for his analysis and development of cultural life in the Old Testament. For

those living the Old Testament time frame, their identity was the group. And these groups—clan, tribe or nation— carefully defined the parameters of personal freedom.

Gaede is right. God created us to be social beings. And the essential fact of culture is our organization into permanent groups. Our *milieu* is people. Created in the image of God, we group to live! These evidences permit us to postulate that the HUP is rooted in creation.

And if so, it should be validated by Scripture. The work of Otto Baab has shown that "...man as we find him in the Bible...his whole being is inextricably bound up with the life of the entire community."¹² *And this relational nature which comes to us by virtue of our being a divine image bearer is codified in biblical theology as "the royal law." It commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves* (Jam. 2:8). These ideas, however, need to be fleshed out in Scripture.

The Cultural Organization Of Group Life In The Old Testament

If we are to understand the social framework from which the early Jew drew his national and self-identity—as Baab suggested—we need to review those social units the Bible calls *clans*, *tribes*, and *nations*. What follows is an overview of the basic people groups mentioned in Scripture. I have chosen four terms: tribe, people, language, and nation (Mt. 24:14, Rev. 5:9).

1) Tribe: "*phulai*"

According to Maurer, the Greek word *phulai*, as used in the Septuagint, designates primarily the Israelite tribal system. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TWNT) describes a tribe as "...a society of men who are bound together not only by common descent but especially by common leadership and law." The tribe itself may be further divided into clans and families.¹³ *The biblical idea of "tribe," then, is that of a kinship group bound together by covenant law and a common leadership. This is a homogeneous group.*

2) Language: "*glossa*"

People groups are frequently identified in Scripture by their language so that individual people groups are identified with the

language they speak.¹⁴ (see Dan. 3:7, Isa. 66:18). *The biblical idea of "glossa," then, is that of tribes or people-groups bound together by a common language. In this they are a homogeneous linguistic group.*

3) Nation: "Ethnos"

This word—as McGavran often reminded us—is our word for *people groups*. Schmidt tells us that,

"In most cases *ethnos* is used of men in the sense of a 'people.' Synon. are *phulai* (people as a national unity of common descent), *laos* (people as a political unity with a common history and constitution) and *glossa* (...a linguistic unity). *Ethnos* is the most general...denoting the natural cohesion of a people in general."¹⁵

Baab points out that in Scripture an *ethnos* implies a people group which traces itself to a common patriarch. In giving us the tribal genealogy of Esau, Moses begins by informing us, "This is the account of Esau..." to which he adds a significant gloss, "that is Edom" (Gen. 36:1). Nations were regularly identified with their patriarchal ancestor. Nowhere is this more true than in Genesis ten where the extended genealogies of Shem, Ham, and Japheth become the city states of Eber, Elam, Asshur, Lud, Aram, Cush, Put, Canaan, Gomer, Magog, *et al.*¹⁶ This chapter makes quite clear that the nations of Pentateuchal literature were kinship based and homogeneous by virtue of their patriarchal lineage.

Bertram puts this all together for us,

"From the first patriarchs there does not descend a single humanity, but a group of nations divided according to clans and differing in language, custom and situation. (With) the attempt to resist this in Gn. 11...God intervenes to reestablish the order imposed by Him. Similarly, in Dt. 32:8 the division of the world into nations is a divine order and not a punishment for human sin..."¹⁷

The Deuteronomy passage, "*When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons*

of Israel,” informs us that God is the prime mover in the formation of tribes, tongues, peoples and nations (viz. Gen. 11:1-9). So much so that Keil and Delitzsch write,

“The words, ‘when the Most High portioned out inheritance to the nations,’ etc....embrace the whole period of the development of the one human family in separate tribes and nations, together with their settlement in different lands....(the Scriptures) *simply show, that like the formation of the nations from families and tribes, the possession of the lands by the nations so formed was to be traced to God,—was the work of divine providence and government,—whereby God...determined the boundaries of the nations....*”¹⁸ (Italics added).

Biblically, God is the author of tribes, tongues and people groups. And he has granted these ethnic groups a divinely ordained specificity. In anthropological terms, these are homogeneous structures. Regardless of how distinct our contemporary multicultural society is from the above, the HUP remains a creation construct and emerges out of a biblical dynamic. Its biblical credentials are significant. Conversely, from an Old Testament perspective, the heterogeneous model is without biblical warrant.

4) People: “*laos*”

The word “*laos*” simply means “a people.” Old Testament writers largely restricted their use of this word to Israel. For in the divine initiative and covenant, Israel became “the people of God” (*laos theou*). This set Israel apart as a holy people, a people claimed by God (see Ex. 19:5, Dt. 14:2).¹⁹

In the New Testament, *laos* is reinterpreted and attributed to the church (Acts 15:14, Ro. 9:25, Tit. 2:14, etc.). The church now becomes the people of God with a missionary vocation (see I Pet. 2:9, Eph. 3:8-11).

The primary social unit in Scripture is the family.²⁰ A social unit which gave birth to tribes, ethnic peoples and nations. The dynamic which generated these homogeneities in Palestine, the Cameroons or New Guinea at “the dawn of civilization” continue to generate new homogeneities in the twentieth century. The

ways of God in bringing us his redemptive grace continue along homogeneous lines. But this needs to be synthesized into a biblical reconstruction.

The Emergence Of The People Of God: A Biblical Reconstruction

A cultural history of *the table of nations* (Gen. 10) is not possible from the biblical data. The major outlines of this process, however, are not difficult to follow. The culmination of God's creative acts was man, male and female. In the divine economy, the agency for accomplishing the cultural mandate was the nuclear family (Gen. 1:27-28).

From this family construct our basic societal forms emerge. The first of which was *the patrilineal extended family system* (the content of biblical genealogies). Adam's patrilineage—impacted by the Fall—bottomed out in the societal degeneration of Genesis six. The horror of this debacle concluded with a divine judgment and a new beginning in the man God found righteous, Noah. The same scenario of rebellion was soon at work in Genesis eleven as the patrilineage of Noah's three sons initiated their own version of rebellion in the construction of the Tower of Babel. Again God intervened directly sentencing the peoples with a confusion of tongues and displacement across the earth (11:1-9).

Attention shifts in the protocol of God from the general revelation of the Noahic Covenant to the special revelation of the Abrahamic Covenant. A covenant was made conditional to the faith response of Abraham, but with his faith response a covenant community was born...a community through which our redemption would be gained.

This redemptive program, however, remained a family affair. And there was Isaac and there was Jacob, the patrilineage of Abraham.²¹ The biblical text describes Jacob's extended patrilineal families fleeing to Egypt to enjoy the patronage of Joseph (Gen. 46:8-25). Not counting wives, Jacob's "sonship" came to seventy. Over a period of four hundred years, these "twelve" families became sizeable tribes (i.e. large kinship or consangui-

nal groups) under the mighty hand of God. In the shadow of Mt. Horeb, these extended families were commanded to undertake a census (Nu. 1:1-2). The report finished with these words,

“These were the men counted by Moses and Aaron and the twelve leaders of Israel, *each one representing his family*. All the Israelites twenty years old or more (exc. the families of Levi) who were able to serve in Israel’s army were counted *according to their families*. The total number was 603,550 “ (Nu. 1:44-47).

From these kinship groups, Israel emerged as a nation. Thieliicke writes,

“The Creator did not create men as isolated individual beings, but rather for each other. He ordained Adam and Eve for each other. He established the continuity of the generations in the relationship of parents and children. It is therefore quite logical that the *state* should belong in this line of creation. Is not the state too an expression of the fact that God designed men for ‘togetherness’? Is not the state a form of community...? *God’s creative hand fashions not only the small family cell in which he repeatedly performs the miracle of generation and birth; he also takes these cells and forms the great organism of human societies; he creates states and nations.*”²² (Italics added).

The prime mover and administrator of this societal evolution is God. *If families are of God, if the tribal construct is of God, if different tongues are of God, if ethnic nations are of God, HUPs are of God. So long as we have families, clans, tribes, and nations, we will have HUPs. The homogeneous kinship model carries the imprimatur of heaven.*

When we come to the New Testament, we lose none of the force of this homogeneous construct which structures the Old Testament narrative. If anything it becomes stronger. The New Testament church is homogeneous by virtue of being a kinship group in Christ.

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free...” (I Cor. 12:12-13).

When Christians come to the Lord's Table and take to their lips the cup, they bear witness to a “consanguine relationship.” The bread of the Lord's Table likewise bears witness to an essential unity in the Body of Christ. Without abridging our individuality, the Spirit of God forges a unity and oneness out of incredible diversity...this is homogeneity!

When we come to the social context of the twentieth century, many assume that in the cities of our world societal evolution has made a vestigial remnant of the idea of homogeneity. They believe that our sprawling urban agglomerations are defined by heterogeneity. This assumption is open to challenge, however. The rising nationalism of homogeneous populations within the former Soviet “empire” and elsewhere suggests that multiculturalism is an unstable political model. In the case of large urban centers, heterogeneity is an inaccurate description. They are more accurately described as *compounded homogeneities*. Urban agglomerations are a mosaic of homogeneous groups which for survival have learned to function in harmony. But this is not heterogeneity!

The Functional Role Of The HUP

The polemics of HUP controversy have consistently overlooked a key component: *the functions of the homogeneous unit*. In this vacuum HUP critics propose a very unflattering interpretation of the HUP. They assume *its function* to be no more than a *sociological device* to enhance church growth. In this they err to the hurt of many.

The primary group structures—as shown above—defining Israel's history were kinship groups bound together by a covenant culture,²³ religious commitment and charismatic leadership. Homogeneity was by divine design. We begin by affirming that the HUP, in principle, is *a function of common grace*. In this I appeal

to Calvin who...

“...developed alongside the doctrine of particular grace the doctrine of common grace. This is a grace which is communal...and does not effect the salvation of sinners. It...maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible...and showers untold blessings upon the children of men”²⁴

A primary function of the HUP is the administration of goodness. We first encounter this grace of divine goodness in the creation of nuclear families. “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen. 2:18).²⁵ The call of Abraham and the election of Israel were both a national and universal good. Israel’s obedience called forth the blessing of God (Dt. 30:9,15-16). To his audience on Mars Hill, Paul proclaimed the diversity of nations a divine good meant to point us to God and cause us to seek after him (Acts. 17:26-28).

The extended family, the clan, the tribe, and ethnic peoples are for “*the common good*” of all peoples. Homogeneous units all, they are by divine design meant to nurture, strengthen and protect our persons, families, societies and the moral-spiritual order for good. While the sociologist may view this process of group homogeneity differently, he is obliged to recognize their societal good...as did Malinowski. A case in point is Berger’s interpretation of the sociological realities of life,

“The reality of everyday life is shared with others. The most important experience of others is *in the face to face situation*. All other types of social encounter are derivative of this face to face experience....Together, people share a common *stock of knowledge* that differentiates reality and provides the necessary information to carry on in everyday life”²⁶ (Italics added).

God as the divine architect has designed a variety of homogeneous groups. Through them, the richness of his graces accrue to humankind. Our ability to confront life, cope with the human condition, to resolve hurt and bring healing to the human

experience are largely learned in the intimacy of homogenous groups...formal and informal. This divine grace functions to strengthen and protect our persons, our families and our societies in view of the dominion of sin...which explains why God created us group dependent.

A second function of Old Testament clans, tribes and ethnic peoples—according to Baab—was to create a societal framework which would foster corporate identity and yet demand personal accountability. He writes of the social experience of the Old Testament,

“Every member of a clan group shares the consequences of the conduct of its individual members....Guilt and punishment are not confined to the actual perpetrators. The ties of blood and corporate personality which unite them require them all to suffer”²⁷

Group solidarity—be it family, clan, tribe, or nation—held the group responsible for individual behavior and sin. This is vividly illustrated in the account of divine judgment coming upon the Korahites (Nu.16:1-35). It leads Baab to comment,

“The community was blessed as well as cursed by reason of the behavior of its members, generation after generation... Conformity with tribal mores is so deeply imbedded in the nervous systems of the members of the group that violations are looked upon with horror.... *God is regarded as the defender and preserver of the community's solidarity* and is both judge and executioner when a transgression occurs”²⁸ (Italics added).

This solidarity was not only horizontal, it was vertical. Encoded in the Ten Commandments is the solemn warning that the sins of the fathers are visited to the third and fourth generations (Dt. 5:9, see also 2 Sam. 21:1-9). That groups are accountable for the actions of its members within the biblical context gave a special significance to group solidarity. Group identity was sustained only so long as personal responsibility was maintained. This law of group life left little room for heterogeneity.

A third HUP function is its divinely endowed responsibility to

restrain evil and lawlessness. The major dilemma for all peoples is their alienation from the God of creation. Genesis three interprets this alienation in terms of the Fall and confronts us with the ugly truth of the human predicament.

Once into Genesis four, we are confronted with the impact of sin in the first family and the lawlessness it introduced into society. Lamech is the prototype of *the man of lawlessness* (Gen. 4:18-24). Genesis six describes a world which has followed the way of lawlessness into moral and social anarchy. Thieliicke describes this evil with a moving narrative portrait,

“...wherever man exercises his dominion, all creation lives in fear. Now a sinister pall will hang above the world and change its climate....henceforth the dissonances of violence, injustice, and megalomania will reverberate and shrill throughout the earth; that Cain will have his successors, and man will lay violent hands upon his fellow man despite the fact that he is in the image of God....”²⁹

The rebellion of Genesis six was a washout. The judgment of God came in the form of a flood engulfing the peoples...only Noah and those with him in the ark survive (Gen. 7:23). And because of the voracious appetite for sin,

“...it became necessary for God to exercise forbearance, to check the course of evil, to promote the development of the natural powers of man, to keep alive within the hearts of men a desire for civil righteousness, for external morality and good order in society, and to shower untold blessings upon mankind in general.”³⁰

No sooner did the waters recede than God renews with Noah the cultural mandate (8:17, 9:1-3,7). In a text of great narrative beauty, he institutes a universal covenant for all time (9:4-17). Included in the covenant is a *nomos principle*: “for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting” (Gen. 9:5). With these words a strong proactive stance is adopted by God toward sin, violence, and anarchy. Henceforth, he shall actively restrain the irrepressible human fascination with lawlessness and anarchy

unleashed by the Fall. Immediately the text takes us into the account of divine judgment which fell at Babel.

In Israel, God was acknowledged as the Lawgiver, judge and executioner. And among the Israelites, according to Baab, the restraint of lawlessness and anarchy was sustained by a compelling corporate identity which held the community responsible—as we have seen—for the sins of its members. In this tension, the responsibility for obedience to the divine law fell to the whole community. It led to a corporate identity in which “biblical man (became) coextensive with the biblical community.”³¹ Its homogeneous enclaves—families, tribes, caste, clans, and nations—now bore the responsibility for the restraining of sin. Thieliicke adds,

“Nevertheless, it is a great mercy that men were not permitted to rend and devour one another....and that God instead preserves them until his ‘good last day’ *by means of the compulsion exerted by the order of the state, and even in these forms of compulsion exerts his preserving goodness*”³² (Italics added).

When we come to the apostle Paul, the rule of law and order is now exercised by the state (Ro. 13:1-4). Though authoritarian in structure and influenced by pagan religion, the state is now viewed as “the servant of God” to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. In Scripture, it becomes the “restrainer” of sin and lawlessness.³³ Anarchy is anathema to God!

That family, clan, tribe, and state can and do restrain the evil of sin and the violence it generates is a manifestation of common grace. For Berkhof, this grace “curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe making an orderly life possible...and showers untold blessings upon the children of men”³⁴

Part Two: The Biblical Challenge to Homogeneity

For those who hold to the authority of the Scriptures and are among those who affirm the HUP, the critical challenges of men like Fee, Robert Saucy, Yoder and Newbigin are unsettling. These critiques are not so much a challenge to the HUP; they

are, however, a test of our ability to grow through dialogue and surmount the challenges of a postmodern pluralism. The critiques of these men pose four major challenges.

1. *The Colossian Argument*

In Colossians we read, “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (3:11).³⁵ For HUP critics, these words mandate the heterogeneous agenda for the local church. They led Gordon Fee to comment...

“...the tendency for various sectors of society to gather and worship with their own kind (*racially, sociologically, economically, or ethnically*) is a serious departure from Paul’s mandate that, through the Spirit, ‘They all be one in Christ Jesus.’ *Four words in Paul, says Fee, obliterate the concept of the homogeneous church: ‘Jew, Gentile, slave, free’*³⁶ (Italics added).

To suggest that these four words—*Jew, Gentile, slave, free*—obliterate the notion of HU churches is quite unfortunate. Paul was neither validating the heterogeneous church model nor debunking the HUP with those four words. Fee was simply out of line.

Colossians chapter three begins with Paul validating the Christian experience of the church family at Colosse. A thematic summary of the first eleven verses of chapter three would sound like this:

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above....For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God....Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature...rid yourselves of all such things as anger, rage, malice, slander...since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

These verses develop a basic fact of church life: Once identified with Jesus Christ in his death, burial and resurrection (viz. the logic of baptism), our only *status* in the church is that of being in Christ. Those who enjoy this status, Paul says, are “being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (3:10). Not only identified with Christ, but coming to be like him. This oneness in him and resemblance with him preempts any social status and ranking we “owned” outside the Body of Christ.

This text makes clear that a local church which is racist, classist, and elitist is sinning against its very nature. Does this preclude homogenous groups? It certainly does preclude *some* homogenous churches. Consider churches which insist on the principle of *the autonomy of the local church*, does “freedom” of the local church permit it to adapt attitudes and/or policies which are classist, racist, or elitist? The answer is *negative* when homogeneity is predicated on pride, hatred, fear, selfish interests or some hierarchy of races concept.

One may qualify these categories differently, but Colossians 3:11 (no less than I Cor. 12:13 and Gal. 3:28) makes clear that the church which embraces discrimination, racism or classism is sinning against its very nature. No one can defend this! The church of Jesus Christ is not free to sin against the whole tenor of Scripture nor violate the principle of love (Col. 3:14).

Let it be clear, however, an all white congregation cannot be labeled racist for being all white. Nor should a church whose membership is largely upper echelon professionals be automatically tagged a “classist” church. An Afro-American church is not tagged “racist” for being black nor is working-class congregation considered “classist.” The deeply felt need to root oneself in homogeneous contexts—as we have shown—does not lead to discrimination, racism or classism. Pride, hatred and fear do!

By the same token, heterogeneous churches are not exempt from the sins of discrimination, racism or classism. In certain circles, there is a false idealization of the heterogeneous model which sees it as a cure for the sins of discrimination and racism. Those who espouse this idealism have little patience with the HUP. Worse, they appear blind to the incredible problems the

heterogeneous model brings to church life (see following section on heterogeneity as a dysfunctional model).

When people come together to glorify the Lord in worship and serve him with their lives...and the church group which forms is monoracial with similar sociological particulars, this is neither racism, ethnocentrism, nor elitism. A homogeneity which emerges out of the constraints imposed by geographical proximity, by ethnic considerations and/or personal needs honors God (see Mk. 2:27). The same homogeneity which forms this church and causes a membership to be more like Christ becomes open to all who love the Lord. Wagner writes,

“...growing churches ordinarily find their memberships are drawn basically from one people group or so-called homogeneous unit. This does not necessarily mean they are racist, or that their doors are closed to anyone from any other group....It does mean, however, that they offer programs that are meeting the particular spiritual needs of the members of a specific people group...”³⁷

A recent interview in *Christianity Today* of a black activist pastor, Eugene Rivers, put all this in perspective,

“Progressive modern evangelicals confuse reconciliation with integration. The theologically conservative community, black and white, got caught up in the integrationist language, and so we ended up accepting the view that everything had to be salt and pepper for it to be equal and godly. *Now, I love my Calvinist brothers, but let's get beyond this notion that somehow I've got to sit in your one-hour service where you can hear a mouse yawn, or that the Calvinistic children have to come to my high-octane black service that lasts for four hours. We don't have to be together around everything to be reconciled*”³⁸

Those who malign the HUP on the basis of Colossians 3:11—or its sister passages—have failed to respect the message and intent of the text.

2. *The Ephesian Argument.*

In February of 1973, John Yoder wrote a major article entitled, *"The New Humanity"* for a Mennonite church growth study group. In his article, Yoder focused on Ephesians chapters two through four.³⁹ In June 1977, a group of Christian leaders convened at Fuller Theological Seminary to debate the homogeneous unit in light of this Ephesian text. A report followed under the title, "The Pasadena Consultation—Homogeneous Unit Principle."⁴⁰

This discussion of the "The Ephesian argument" is a response to the basic charges of Yoder, the Consultation reporter, and others. From Yoder's perspective, the issue looks like this,

"The mystery entrusted to the Apostle Paul by revelation, according to Ephesians 2 and 3 was that the church is the unity of two kinds of people (Jew and Gentile) who were fundamentally incompatible through their cultures, religions and otherwise....Paul says the whole point of God's eternal purpose 'revealed in my ministry' is that God wants to make one people out of these two kinds of people. The breaking down of the wall between two ethnic groups is the gospel. It is not a fruit of the gospel; it is not an object lesson in the gospel; it is not a vehicle of the gospel, it is the gospel....(this) seems to be the major theological tension between the New Testament and the 'church growth' emphasis."⁴¹

The Pasadena Consultation report is not so easy to synthesize. From Ephesians 4:4-6, the Consultation reporter draws the conclusion that since we have but one church, we are responsible to maintain its unity, visibility and spiritual maturity. He restates this "responsibility" in the form of two disingenuous questions,

"How then can the unity of the church...and the diversity of cultures...be reconciled with one another? More particularly, how can separate HU churches express the unity of the Body of Christ?"⁴²

These two questions assume their conclusion. They assume

that Paul was in effect charging successive generations of the church with the responsibility of forming multicultural churches capable of witnessing to the cultural and racial unity of the Body of Christ. To answer his two questions, the Consultation reporter turns back to Ephesians 2:13-16 which he takes to be a biblical refutation of the HUP,

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself...has destroyed the barrier, *the dividing wall of hostility (“echthra”)*, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man of the two...and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (italics added).

So “How can the unity of the church...and the diversity of cultures...be reconciled with one another?” From his reading of Ephesians 2:13-16, the Consultation reporter answers: By overcoming the twin evils of *cultural hostility* and “*racial and religious alienation.*”

“...the dividing wall which Jesus Christ abolished by his death was *echthra*, ‘enmity’ or ‘hostility.’ All forms of hatred, scorn, and disrespect between Christians of different backgrounds are forbidden, being totally incompatible with Christ’s reconciling work. But we must go further than this. The wall dividing Jew from Gentile was not only their active reciprocal hatred; it was also their *racial and religious alienation* symbolized by ‘the law of commandments and ordinances.’ This, too, Jesus abolished, in order to ‘create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace’ (Eph. 2:15).”⁴³

However keen the problems these men are addressing, formidable textual barriers prevent us from reading this text as have Yoder and the Consultation reporter. Three of these “barriers” need mentioning.

The initial barrier. While Paul gives no particulars about what

provoked this hostile barrier which alienated Jew from Gentile, we know exactly how its demise came about, Christ "...destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations" (Eph. 2:14-15).

Since the abolishing of the law with its commandments and regulations destroyed that barrier, the biblical student is given to understand that the *echthra* of which Paul speaks is a fallout of the giving of the law and the election of Israel as the people of God. In this a hostility was born which alienated Israel from the Gentile world. The issue was theological, not discriminating prejudices or racial animosities.

So that when Marcus Barth concludes—as did the Consultation reporter—that "this verse says that Jesus Christ has to do with whatever divisions exist between races and nations...",⁴⁴ he is taking unwarranted liberties with the text. The hostility of which Paul spoke was between Jew and Gentile, not the terrifying animosity between Hutus and Tutsis. The hermeneutic which interprets Ephesians 2:13-16 to mean that on the Cross Christ destroyed *all divisions which separate races, peoples and nations* is capable of considerable mischief in biblical theology and church life.⁴⁵

A second barrier. The use of an aorist participle makes very clear that the destruction (*lusas*) of this dividing wall of hostility was a decisive historical act on the part of Christ. When Christ set aside the law on the Cross, he utterly destroyed for all time the hostility which divided Jew and Gentile ever since Horeb. The hostility of which Paul speaks and the hostility these critics speak of are two different kinds of hostilities!

A third observation: the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile was for the express purpose of forming the body of Christ...the church. Paul writes that the intention of Christ was "...to create in himself one new (*kainos*) man out of the two...and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross" (2:15-16).⁴⁶

Paul appears to be saying that the institution of the Body of Christ is predicated on the destruction of this hostility provoked by the law. If any hostility born of the election of Israel were to

remain, the very existence of the Body of Christ would be brought into question. This text is abused when the hostilities of which Paul spoke are identified with the hostilities which plague the peoples of this world. While those hurts are very real, their response is not to be found in Ephesians 2:13-16.

For those who respond, "But what of Paul's plea, '*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*'" (4:3). The question is appropriate, the answer not hard to come by.

Ephesians chapter two has one theological specificity, Ephesians chapter four has another. *The "unity" of Ephesians two* is "the unity of Jew and Gentile within the Body of Christ." That unity was decisively achieved on the Cross. *The "unity" of Ephesians four* is the corporate unity of the Body of Christ, its oneness. Its a unity which the Spirit of Christ seeks to maintain among the people of God.⁴⁷ Failure to guard it grieves the Spirit of God (4:30). These two texts differ significantly one from the other!

This is no attempt to disqualify the concerns of those who cry out against discrimination and racism within the church. This is to affirm that no one is helped when the biblical basis for racial and ethnic reconciliation is attributed to a text whose theological intent lies elsewhere. *The place to theologize on the ugliness of racism and social discrimination is in a biblical theology based on the character and nature of God, the imago dei and kingdom ethics.* Not in Ephesians chapter two!

3. Jew And Gentile: A Pauline Theology

Yoder tells us that for Paul, "...the whole point of God's eternal purpose ...(was) that God wants to make one people out of these two kinds of people. The breaking down of the wall between two ethnic groups is the gospel."⁴⁸

With this statement the Scriptures are in complete agreement. Yoder and Paul, however, are saying two different things.

In the Ephesian letter, the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile becomes a *crux* theme. Yoder understands this theme to be a cultural, ethnic, and religious reconciliation between two kinds of

people who were fundamentally incompatible.⁴⁹ Reconciliation comes for Yoder as these hostile barriers are resolved. Unfortunately, he has *transgressed* the text.⁵⁰

A major biblical drama is captured with these words, *Jew and Gentile*. The dividing wall of hostility which alienated Jew and Gentile is not to be understood—as Yoder suggests—as a cultural incompatibility. *The hostility which separated Jew from Gentile came about as a consequence of the covenant promises made to Abraham and Israel's election as the people of God*. This is what Paul wants us to understand when he writes,

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations” (Eph. 2:14-15, see Psa. 2).

To transform the intent of the gospel into a victory over cultural hostilities—if that is what Yoder intended to say—is frightening theology. In the calling of Abraham and the election of Israel, God placed the Gentiles on a different track...until the fullness of time (cf. Eph. 1:9-10). The reconciliation of Jew and Gentile which came about with the putting away of the law (Eph. 2:14) was a sign of the partial fulfillment of the covenant promises made to Abraham (this is the specific thrust of Ro. 15:5-12, Eph. 3:1-13). *Even more, it was a sign for all peoples that with the Gentile apostolate the divinely instituted separation of Jew and Gentile was now terminated. This reconciliation meant that now the mystery of God—the church of Jesus Christ—might be revealed to those of faith*. To misunderstand this is to have misread most of Paul.

Yoder's concern, even passion, is praiseworthy. The issues of cultural, racial and ethnic reconciliation which so burden him and other critics are terribly real. We all share them...or should! However, the place to theologize on these problems is not in Ephesians two!

4. *The Message of Ephesians*

Both Yoder's study and that of the Consultation reporter have a problem with the problematic and message of the Ephe-

sian letter. As I understand these HUP critics, they read Ephesians 2:13-16 as Paul scolding homogenous churches for their cultural hostility and racial discrimination. In this perspective, the message to the Ephesian churches is a call to nurture a cultural pluralism which can witness to the multicultural diversity of the Body of Christ. That is not the message of this letter.

In the development of Paul's problematic, *the matter of the dividing wall of hostility and its destruction was a missiological issue*. In his letter to the Ephesian churches, Paul was seeking to parlay the truth of the Jewish-Gentile reconciliation into a missionary appeal. If Jew and Gentile are one in the Body of Christ, then the Ephesian churches were no less accountable than Paul for the Gentile mission.

After delivering in chapter one a finely structured prolegomena to his message, Paul describes in chapter two how Jesus destroyed the barrier which alienated Jew and Gentile. Their reconciliation becomes, for Paul, the ground of the church and a promise of their reconciliation with God (2:15-16). Henceforth, believing Gentiles are fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household...to fulfill God's promises to Abraham (2:19-23). All of which leads Paul to issue a profoundly moving appeal in chapter three for the participation of the Ephesian churches in the Gentile mission. A mission over which there was some uncertainty with Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Here is the burden which animates this letter and the message it carries.

5. A Summary

The text of Ephesians chapter two is championed by those who have experienced discriminations (viz. the Consultation reporter) and injustices (viz. Escobar) in which the church was compromised. Others (like Yoder) find in this text a directive to reconcile alienated culture groups and generate a multiculturalism in the church which reflects its universal appeal. For each, the HUP is to be rejected. They perceive it as being hostile to the realization of cultural reconciliation and an obstacle to the unification of cultural diversity within the life of the church.

The merits of their concerns aside, this text is focused else-

where. The dividing wall of hostility was a function of the law, not racial and ethnic discrimination. The enmity which had long divided them was once for all destroyed on the Cross. Nor is there any textual evidence to suppose that *the kind of hostilities alluded to by the Consultation reporter* actually existed among the churches of the New Testament diaspora.

The biblical theme of a Jew-Gentile reconciliation must be understood in the light of the covenant promises given Abraham and Israel's election at Horeb, not ethnic discrimination and/or racial prejudice. The message of this letter to the Ephesian churches was an eloquent appeal to join Paul in the Gentile mission. This not to diminish the apostolate of reconciliation which some men bear, but to identify the burden and message of Paul as he wrote to the Ephesian churches.

It is ironic that the textual evidences for the "obliterating" of the HUP have been so misread from their Pauline sources. One could wish that Paul would have revealed to us another mystery: Why some oppose so vehemently the homogeneous instinct which comes to us as a function of the *imago dei* and whose role in history and the church is for good.

Part Three: The Local Church as Homogeneous

Heterogeneity: A Dysfunctional Model

In the Pasadena Consultation report on the homogeneous unit principle, the reporter affirms a high view of the culture construct and assures us that heterogeneity does not mean "...that Jews ceased to be Jews, or Gentiles ceased to be Gentiles."⁵¹

This falls in the category of wishful thinking. It is sheer idealism to imagine that a multicultural and multi-level congregation living by the kingdom ethic can integrate its diversities, idiosyncrasies, and gifts into a single congregation without suppressing much of its cultural identity. In the name of dialogue, the shortcomings of the heterogeneous model bare some critical reflection. Consider the following three sentences:

Heterogeneity is a culture to no one.

Heterogeneity by its very nature works against group formation and unity.

Heterogeneity becomes dysfunctional in group life.

Culture can only be born in a homogeneous context. Whatever culture a urban context sustains, it assimilates from its homogeneous elements. Groups come together for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons which only have meaning when shared in common; except for statistical groups, heterogeneity is hostile to the process of group formation. The core of any culture is a system of cultural themes which unite it.⁵² Heterogeneity strikes at the heart of a cultural system by rendering those cultural themes dysfunctional. And the greater the heterogeneity, the greater the dysfunctionality.

What concerns me as a student of things missiological is the failure of HUP critics to reflect on the profound transformations which accompany the introduction of heterogeneity into group life. A reconciling of Asian, Afro-American, Hispanics and Anglos into the intimate dynamics of a local church faces prodigious problems.⁵³ These problems are basic and far reaching. The cognitive processes of African, Asian and Western cultures are quite dissimilar. Likewise the fabric of their cultural life, their value systems, their leadership patterns, their patterns of conflict resolution, etc. To heterogenize these cultural idiosyncrasies in group life either leads to a pattern of dysfunctionality or the dominance of one element and the suppression of others. Such groups are unstable and dysfunctional. Heterogeneity has the potential of much mischief in church life. The complexity of really *doing* multicultural reconciliation simply escapes many who are its most ardent advocates.

The Homogeneous Imperative

If the heterogeneous church model is in fact the biblical norm for church life and ordained of God to illustrate our oneness in Christ, we should expect our churches to be overwhelmingly heterogeneous? With few exceptions, however, genuine heterogeneity is largely limited to the executive offices of major denominations, not local churches. A simple question: "Why are Christian Churches not overwhelmingly heterogeneous?"

Because our Heavenly Father *leads his sheep to folds pre-*

pared to nurture them. For those who bear his Son's Name, God desires a church life which will be for their redemptive good in the face of life's troubling issues and the perplexities of the human condition.

The large amorphous population centers of our land and their inner cities are incredibly dehumanizing and alienating. In them, people are robbed of their birth cultures and are subjected to the tyranny of anarchy. For survival, they search for a milieu in which they can "live, move, and have their being." A milieu which will sustain their personhood and give them a self-identity. Homogeneous churches are born in this matrix.⁵⁴

In this context, looking for a church which embodies a particular ethnic or social composition is not a vote for apartheid. Neither can searching for a church with a value system, worldview, and mindset compatible with one's own be considered discrimination or racist. In the context of urban anarchy and anonymity, it is a survival instinct. Our churches are our spiritual homes.

And this is the will of God. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." For "children" who bear his Son's Name, God desires a church life which will be for their redemptive good. He could desire no less in the face of a post-Christian society demonized by media manipulation and the agenda of sin.

Writer

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1. Edward C. Pentecost, "Solicited Comments," in Frederick W. Norris, "The Social Status of Early Christianity," *Gospel in Context*, vol. 2, No.1 (January, 1979), 21.

2. Lesslie Newbigin, "Solicited Comments," in Frederick W. Norris,

"The Social Status of Early Christianity," *Gospel in Context*, vol. 2, No.1 (January, 1979), 19-20.

3. John Perkins, "Something Is Wrong at the Root," in a forum on "The Myth of Racial Progress." ed. Andres Tapia, *Christianity Today* (October 4, 1993), 18.

4. Robert L. Saucy, "Cultural Homogeneity in Church Growth: Parts 1 & 2," *Bulletin of Talbot Theological Seminary*, Part one: Winter 1975, 55-9; Part two: Spring 1976, 8-10. A very flawed understanding and analysis of the HUP.

5. Larry L. McSwain, "A Critical Appraisal Of The Church Growth Movement," *Review and Expositor*, vol. 77, No.4 (Fall 1980), 529.

6. S.D. Gaede, *Where Gods May Dwell* (Academie Books, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 98.

7. *Ibid.*, 100

8. *Ibid.*, 99

9. Jacques Ellul, *Les Nouveaux Possédés* (Biarritz: Librairie Ar-thème Fayard, 1973), 72

10. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 32-33.

11. Otto J. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdom Press, 1949), 56.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Christian Maurer, "phulai" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IX, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 276.

14. Johannes Behm, "glossa" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 270.

15. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "ethnos in the NT" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), 369.

16. Otto J. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdom Press, 1949), 56.

17. Georg Bertram, "ethnos, ethnikos" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), 367.

18. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol.3 (Grand Rapids:Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), 469-470.

19. H. Strathmann, "laos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand

Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 33-36.

20. Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1967), 58.

21. See Allan R. Tippett, *Church Growth and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 29.

22. Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began: Man in the First Chapters of the Bible*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 291-292.

23. In anthropological categories, the Pentateuch comes to us as a culture construct, a "Yahwistic culture." Before Horeb, the Israelite culture could only be classified as a Sumerian sub-culture.

24. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 434.

25. See S.D. Gaede, *Where Gods May Dwell*, 99-100.

26. Robert Wuthnow and others, *Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jurgen Habermas* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 32.

27. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, 56-57. See also David Filbeck, *Social Context and Proclamation* (Pasadena: Wm Carey Library, 1985), 46.

28. *Ibid.*, 57-58.

29. Thielicke, *How The World Began*, 290.

30. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 438.

31. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, 56-61.

32. Thielicke, *How The World Began*, 292-293.

33. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1974), 530.

34. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 434.

35. This text is also found in I Corinthians 12:13 and Galatians 3:28.

36. Gordon Fee, quoted by Wendy Murray Zoba in "Father, Son, and..." a review of Fee's book, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, "Christianity Today, (June 17, 1996), 24

37. C. Peter Wagner, *The Healthy Church* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1996), 18.

38. Eugene Rivers, quoted by Wendy Murray Zoba in "Separate But Equal," *Christianity Today*, (February 5, 1996), 19.

39. John Yoder, "Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective" in *The Challenge of Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk and others (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 25-47.

40. *The Pasadena Consultation-Homogeneous Unit Principle*, Lausanne Occasional Papers, no.1 (Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978).

41. John Yoder, "Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective" in *The Challenge of Church Growth*, 25-47.

42. *The Pasadena Consultation-Homogeneous Unit Principle*, Lausanne Occasional Papers, 4.

43. Ibid.

44. Marcus Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959), 39-43.

45. The fascination of some with liberation theology is not unrelated to this hermeneutic. See Frederick W. Norris, "The Social Status of Early Christianity" in *Gospel in Context* (January 1979), 12-13.

46. Other texts dealing with our unity in Christ have the same focus; see Ro. 12:5, I Cor. 10:17, 12:12-13, 27, and Eph. 1:22-23.

47. F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1977), 430.

48. John Yoder, "Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective" in *The Challenge of Church Growth*, 43-44.

49. Ibid., 43.

50. A matter of some concern is the imprecision in the use of this term "reconciliation." In the sources dealt with for this article, one is never sure whether "reconciliation" is understood to be within the Body of Christ or a mission of the church to the world or both. Yoder writes, "My claim would be that the message of Ephesians 2-3 doesn't have to do only with the original Jews but that it always has to do with the borders of the church and the borders between the religious people and the nonreligious people" ["Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective" in *The Challenge of Church Growth*, 44.]

51. *The Pasadena Consultation-Homogeneous Unit Principle*, Lausanne Occasional Papers, 4.

52. Charles V. Turner, "The Sinasina 'Big Man' Complex: A Central Culture Theme," *Readings in Missionary Anthropology II*, ed. William A. Smalley (Pasadena: William Carey Library), p.211-212

53. Wagner effectively uses the expression "sociological tissue rejection" to explain rejection of outsiders. Peter Wagner, *The Healthy Church*, 65.

54. These reflect conclusions drawn from my research study: Walther A. Olsen, "The Dynamics of Religious Conversion in France: Research in Progress." (M.Th. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1977),

133-177.