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JESUS AND ETHNICITY

Tim Geddert

*...a focused
attempt to
break down
ethno-
centrism...*

“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” I Cor. 3:11. With this claim of Paul, the Gospel writers are in full agreement.

Jesus confined his mission almost exclusively to one ethno-religious group, the Palestinian Jews. Yet the Gospels can serve to instruct us on the relationship that ought to exist between the church and ethnicity.

At the very heart of Jesus' mission is a focussed attempt to break down ethno-centrism, the attitude to ethnicity which holds at a distance those who do not share one's ethnic identity. He does this by redefining the people of God in non-ethnic terms, by preparing a faithful remnant of Israel to break through ethnic barriers, and by establishing a foundation for a multi-ethnic church.

Baptism

By being baptized at the outset of his ministry, Jesus endorsed the radical new thing that John the Baptist initiated. He was baptizing Jews! He was taking a ritual normally reserved for proselytes and administering it to ethnic Jews. In this way he redefined membership in God's people. God's people were those who were ready to make a break with their

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past, (even if that past was Jewish!) in order to be re-constituted as a faithful remnant.

Spirit

At Jesus' baptism he was anointed with the Spirit. He, in turn, promised to baptize his followers with the same Spirit who was empowering him. That Spirit prepared him to face the enemy in the desert, to exercise the powers of the age to come, to cast out demons and to teach with authority.

The early church learned in due time that it was precisely because this same Spirit was given even to non-ethnic Jews, that these must be fully incorporated into the people of God (Acts 11:15-18). Moreover, the fact that the Spirit of Jesus had come upon Gentiles was evidence that one could be a follower of Jesus without adopting the Jewish religious and ethnic traditions (Acts 15:8-11).

Authority

Jesus adopted a teaching style which departed radically from Jewish rabbinic custom. The rabbis prided themselves on teaching nothing new — on being able to reproduce accurately the teachings of the rabbis of the past. Jesus, however, spoke with authority. He brought a fresh understanding of the Scriptures and of the fulfillment of God's promises.

In this respect he became a model for early Christian teachers. They too spoke with the authority of Jesus and by the inspiration of the Spirit. They re-interpreted the Scriptures in the light of the dawning of the new age. By avoiding and sometimes by repudiating the traditions of the Jewish legal experts, they built a foundation on which Jews and Gentiles could be incorporated on an equal footing. Thus Jesus' authority, and the authority of his followers rests on something other than the transmission of an ethnic heritage, even an ethnic religious heritage. It rests on God's commissioning to establish the people of God as multi-national and multi-ethnic.

Internalized Religion

Jesus' authoritative teaching resulted in the inevitable power struggle with those who followed "the traditions of the

elders" (Mark 7:1-5). He confronted them with Isaiah's prophecy: "These people . . . worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mark 7:7). Not content to expose their insincerity, he also redefined purity as internal rather than external. From now on cleanness and uncleanness would be defined in terms of the matters of the heart (Mark 7:14-19). The church quite rightly discerned that, in so saying, Jesus was preparing for the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God. Food laws and ceremonial laws would no longer be barriers preventing the full fellowship of Jews and Gentiles.

The New Family

But perhaps the most radical statement Jesus made on the matter of ethnicity was on the redefinition of his own family.

Jesus' mother and brothers on one occasion, fearing for his psychological equilibrium (Mark 3:20,21), summoned him through messengers (v.31). Even though he loved and cared for his family, he responded by modelling what he would later call his disciples to do: he gave up father and mother, brother and sister, for the sake of the kingdom of God. He asked the messengers "who are my mother and my brothers?" And then he re-defined his family as those who had chosen to sit at his feet and submit to his teaching. "Whoever does God's will," Jesus said, "is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31-35).

Family relationships count as little as ethnic identity in defining the true people of God. Not kinship but obedience defines "membership in good standing."

The Gospel writer, Mark, deliberately links this story with a harsh exchange between Jesus and the religious authorities of Israel. The Jewish teachers blasphemously accused Jesus of being demon-possessed. They attributed Jesus' divine authority and power to Beelzebub, the chief of the demons. By demonic power, they claimed, Jesus was casting out the demons. Jesus responded that such blasphemy constituted an unforgivable sin against the very Spirit by which he spoke and worked (Mark 3:29,30).

Mark skillfully interweaves the account of this confrontation with the story of Jesus redefining his family. Using the literary technique called "bracketing" he places in parallel and complementary positions the accusation of his family,

“He is out of his mind,” and that of the religious leaders, “He is possessed by Beelzebub.” By reporting Jesus’ response to the second charge first, Mark utilized a technique called *chiasmus*, a technique designed to encourage the reader to interpret the two events in the light of each other. It is Mark’s way of saying that those who imagine that kinship connections offer special privilege and status are no less guilty of blasphemy than those who attribute the power of Jesus to the demonic.

Misdirected Mission

Jesus reserved his harshest rebukes for the Pharisees. They are proud, self-righteous and ethno-centric. But in fact the Pharisees were a mission-minded people. They were indeed concerned to reach out to people of other ethnic backgrounds and incorporate them into the people of God. Should they not be commended for this? Jesus does not think so. Instead, he characterizes their mission thus: “You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Matt. 23:15). The implication follows that even breaking out of one’s own ethnicity is misdirected if the goal is to reproduce one’s own ethnicity in the converts. Jesus restricted his own ministry almost totally to Jews but he laid the foundations for a multi-ethnic church by reconstituting a faithful remnant and preparing them for worldwide missions.

Application

What does this have to do with the present situation in the Mennonite Brethren church? Our sixteenth century spiritual forebears affirmed that the true church is to be defined solely in terms of response to Jesus. It was not to be an ethnically homogeneous church.

But historical and geographical circumstances and sometimes declining Christo-centrism produced situations in our history where we have had to struggle to maintain a clear Christo-centricity rather than an ethno-centricity. We have sometimes found it difficult to distinguish between our ethnicity and our commitment to Christ. As a result we have occasionally had difficulty incorporating others fully into our fellowship when they shared our faith but not our ethnicity.

Does that make us like the Jews whom Jesus was addressing?

By God's grace, unlike Jesus' opponents, our own denomination has chosen not to oppose Jesus, but to follow Him. In that respect we are not like the Jewish leaders. We have committed ourselves to be the people of God, under the authority of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. Our goal, though imperfectly realized, is to reach out to all ethnicities. We affirm that the church is not defined in terms of Mennonite ethnicity in the twentieth century any more than Jewish ethnicity in the first.

Is the Gospel material therefore irrelevant to us? I think not. Though we are committed to follow Jesus' way, we do not always succeed in doing so. We now recommit ourselves to being as multi-ethnic and inclusive as Jesus intended his church to be. Jesus worked hard to break down ethno-centrism. As his followers we join him in that task.

The Name

With respect to the name, I feel it is about as appropriate to call our denomination "Mennonite Brethren" as it would have been to call the early church, "The Church of the Jewish People" or perhaps, "The Church of the Jewish Men." I am not sure that a name like that would have helped the early church in its mission to Gentiles. I'm not sure ours helps us much either in reaching out to other ethnicities.

But does that mean that it is worth the pain of dispute to try to find and agree on a more appropriate name? At this stage in our search for self-identity and unity, I doubt it.

Re-focusing, it seems to me, is a higher priority right now than re-naming. If we are living up to our high calling, our name (whatever it is) can be an asset. In some places even the name "Mennonite Brethren" invites associations like "multi-ethnic", "inclusive" and "Jesus-centered." In other places it invites the opposite associations. I am not persuaded that changing our name will change our attitudes and actions. Neither am I persuaded that a name change will greatly affect what our name means to other people. If our name is a barrier, our highest priority is to be changed ourselves.