

The Role Of The Church In A Pluralistic Society

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When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. This stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. . . . Leviticus 19:33-34

The need for an article in a Christian magazine on the role of church in a pluralistic society might be an enigma to some. After all, isn't the purpose of the church that of reaching people of all nationalities? Doesn't the present day church still believe the great commission of her Lord as authoritative and binding?

The answer to both of these questions is a resounding yes, but reminders and gentle nudgings always in order. Satan is very astute and subtle, and all of us are often distracted and forgetful. A Black family moves next door, and unless we are brought up short we shall think first of the possible declining value of our house before we think of becoming spiritually richer by incorporating this family into our church as brothers and sisters. Every new generation must be taught afresh that the church has a mission in a pluralistic society.

Mennonites, along with Lutherans, Reformed and Covenant churches are noticeably ethnic. Their ministry in English speaking North America, at least, has been directed toward a people with a common culture, history, and language. This is not strange nor wrong. The Anabaptists originally were effective cross-cultural missionaries. The forming of a multi-ethnic, multi-national, and multi-cultural church under one common Lord was their dream. They had had their fill of exclusive nationalism which had spawned decades of violence, suspicion, mistrust, and war. They were ahead of their times, however, and our forefathers were battered, beaten, pursued and persecuted almost to extinction. It is no wonder they joined together in groups, colonies, and

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communities, weary and self-defensive. Their only protection was the strength of community. A common language began to be used. A common culture born of memories, suffering, and pilgrimage bound them together. Common ideals for which their fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts had died united them. Perhaps without realizing what was happening, they gradually evolved into an ethnic entity. Their belief that the church must be a covenanting community led them unwittingly into an unhealthy exclusivism under the guise of ecclesiological purity.

From time to time some have seen this exclusivism as a dangerous introversion and have broken free, been revived, or have compensated for their embarrassing provincialism by sending missionaries to foreign lands among peoples of other ethnicities and cultures. The evangelizing of people in distant lands while at the same time ignoring those of other ethnicities at one's own doors raises the questions: Is the church being duped by the devious Devil again?

Today, Mennonite Brethren Christians along with everyone else living in English speaking North America are surrounded by a plurality of races, languages, customs, cultures, colors and religions. East Indians are ubiquitous in Vancouver; the French are in the majority in the cities and towns of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Hispanics of various nations are rapidly becoming the majority in cities of south western United States, and Blacks are everywhere. In view of our history and our present society, what is the role of the church in these multi-ethnic countries in which God has placed us?

In order to answer we must explain what is meant by "pluralism" in this context. A pluralistic society is one in which diverse ethnic, racial, religious or social groups live and maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture within the confines of a common civilization. A good example of this in the first half of this century was the British Commonwealth of Nations. The Scottish Highlander wore his kilts and talked with a brogue. The East Indians wore their turbans. Africans dressed in tribal garb. Yet, they all thought of themselves as loyal British subjects.

In like manner Christians often congregate in clusters of common languages, similar history, experience or a common race. There are congregations of Armenians, for example, who worship in their own language and according to their own ways. There are Spanish speaking, guitar playing congregations of Latins, and a few blocks away is a Ukrainian Church. In certain areas there are German Baptist congregations which lustily sing their guttural, deep chested songs that sound frightfully military. They all live in a common civilization, but retain their curry and rice, borscht, and tamales.

There is nothing wrong with this, but there can be certain dangers.

One danger is that of making culture, ethnicity, language and race more important as unifying factors than allegiance to our common Lord, Jesus Christ.¹ When that happens congregations and people tend to insulate themselves from others. They unwittingly and unintentionally move away from a mission of outreach in the community to an obsession with self preservation. Such a tendency almost always produces an ethnic pride and exclusivism whose end is pride and arrogance.

A second danger of congregating within a single ethnicity in a pluralistic society is that of believing that patriotism toward a benevolent and adopted country is more important than loyalty and patriotism to the Kingdom of Christ to which Christians of all ethnicities should pledge their first allegiance. It is especially easy for previously persecuted Christians to half-worship nations which provide them with almost every material thing of which they were previously deprived. There are Christians who have formerly lived in atheistic totalitarian countries with nothing but fear and want. Now, they have returned to their fatherlands. The exhilaration of new freedom, the generous financial bonus, and the comparative affluence of those who have never experienced it is almost overwhelming. Who wouldn't be eternally grateful and indebted to such a magnanimous benefactor? And with this gratitude also comes the temptation to place one's trust more in a human government than in God.

On the other hand, there are those who have never experienced the former sufferings of their fathers and feel that certain rights are denied them in a new country. These people tend to create a romantic patriotism and dreamy confidence toward the country of their origin. The end product of either kind of thinking will be a greater willingness to die for the earthly nations than for the supra-national people of God.

In short, the church which rises above the color of a man's skin, his language and his seeming excentric idiosyncracies and accepts him as an equal brother is the church that reveals the love of Christ most. As true Christians we are church members and citizens of a nation whose king is Christ and whose constitution is the Holy Bible. We are of many cultures and maintain our distinctive food, history, and language. Yet, we live within the confines of a commonwealth of heaven that supersedes our earthly national citizenships.

If it is not ideal to separate ourselves into ethnic enclaves as Christians, how should we live as Christian Church members? The Apostle Paul answers that question by pointing us to God's purpose for the church:

God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he has pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely to bring all things in the heavens

and on earth into one under Christ's headship (Eph. 1:9-10, NEB).

God's purpose throughout all of human history is that of forming a new people of all ethnicities, cultures and nationalities under Christ's sovereignty. The unifying factor in this new people is the person and authority of Jesus Christ. The instruments God uses are Christians of all cultures working together for this one purpose. This new people which exists in a continual reformation is a pluralistic kingdom which supersedes yet finds itself within the confines of existing nations. When Christians recognize this kingdom and submit to its sovereignty and mission — and it is impossible to be a true Christian without submitting to them — ethnic distinctives, language differences, and cultural idiosyncracies are retained but become subservient to the central person and mission. Instead of dividing the church they unify and enrich it.

All this leads to the meaning of "culture" from a Biblical point of view. "Culture" is a term which designates the activity of man by which he fulfills the creation mandate given to man. Man was created and placed on the earth to have dominion over it and subdue it for God (Gen. 1:27-28).² We are created in God's image to serve as viceroys over the earth under his supervision (Heb. 2:5-9). The vicissitudes of history depended upon the deeds of man. Man is to study and interpret the meaning and purpose of the world. He is to restore it to the original glory from which it fell, dedicate it anew to God, and rule over and utilize it for God.³

This mandate is given to the entire human race. It cannot be done under God's authority and supervision nor for Him, however, until those who do it are reconciled to Him and to one another under Christ's lordship. The reason for racial discrimination, ethnic exclusivism, separating nationalism, and the endless dialogue about the comparative values of socialism and capitalism is that men are competing for control of others in their world. But human being are equals, and only God has the right of authority over those made in his image.⁴ The church is supposedly the only people who have submitted to the sovereign purposes of Christ.⁵

What does all this mean to Mennonite Brethren? It means that we must transcend our cultural traditions which prevent us from converting our church in North America into a multi-ethnic body. One of our distinctives is the concept of the church as a covenanting community. A covenanting community consists of people who agree together to live congruently with certain mutually accepted rules. An infraction of those rules ideally results in discipline, temporary ostracism or expulsion from the group. This concept is a noble ideal, but is it possible to have such a community without tyrannically usurping the authority over equals that belongs only to Christ? Is such a community possible without its tradi-

tions and rules evolving into law? Can such a community avoid constructing buildings and institutions to keep non-conformists out instead of incorporating them into the fellowship? Does such an exclusive society create inner cliques that themselves become exclusive?⁶

Without a constant vigilance and repeatedly returning to our ideals on the part of all, people of other tradition and ethnicities are reluctant to enter the inner ring. They gain the impression that they are not really part of the “in group”. They are likely to live under a cloud of pending disapproval for committing an infraction of a law, tradition or custom of which they were not aware. In short, there is the danger of identifying the cultural distinctives of the group with Christianity. An illustration is in order.

Recently a couple whose culture and race are not Anglo/Nordic but who speak only English visited a Mennonite Brethren Church. They were attracted to it, but were politely informed that there was a church of their own culture nearby where they would feel more at home.

“Thank you very much,” was the gracious reply, “but we don’t speak the language of the people there.”

This incident could have been a sincere desire to help, but when it was repeated for three consecutive Sundays, the couple concluded that that church believed that ethnic purity was a Christian value and a requirement for membership. Of course they did not return.

A young couple would like to become members of a church. The husband is already a member of the denomination but his wife is a Roman Catholic. She has submitted herself to Christ as Lord, does not believe in the saints, the Virgin Mary as co-redemptrix nor intercessor with Christ, nor in the authority of the Pope. Her desire is to be baptized as Christ, but she is not willing to join the church. She observes that to join the church means she must direct her love and loyalty principally to the local church members. She already does this, but is reluctant to limit her love only or especially to Christians. She is well aware of Paul’s admonition to do good to all men, and especially, to those of the household of faith. The question of Jesus, “Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you?” is most emphatic. Consequently, she is excluded from the Table of the Lord and the inner sanction of the brotherhood. Can a covenanting community that has difficulty distinguishing its own ideals and culture from the cosmopolitan ideals of the truly catholic church be effective in its missionary mandate to all peoples?

It is a difficult thing to distinguish culture from Christianity. Unless it is done, however, churches are bound to exclude some peoples whom God has accepted. Exclusivism and discrimination is an integral element of the believers’ church, but how exclusive should this be?⁷

For some, speaking of the official language of the country is a Christian requirement to be applied to those who come from an ethnic background other than that of the church in question. This issue has been rather successfully resolved within the framework of the Mennonite Brethren constituency in the North Kildonan Church in Winnipeg, Canada where the sermons are in both, German and English. This seems to be acceptable. One wonders, however, if the German and English languages are more Christian than French or Spanish. Multilingualism is admittedly not ideal, but we do well to remember that in the synagogues of Jesus' day there were Jews who no longer could speak Hebrew. So an Aramaic translator interpreted both texts and sermons.⁸ Multilingualism did not begin with twentieth century America.

There really is a need for a greater understanding of cultures and a greater tolerance among Christians. Edward T. Hall is right when he warns that there are no national technological solutions to the crises of the population explosion and of man's relationship to himself, to his ideas, to those around him, and to the many cultural groups that inhabit the earth.⁹ All of us must begin to break out of the confining limitations imposed by our institutions, our philosophies, and our cultures. Hall claims that this can be done only when we "recognize and accept the multiple hidden dimensions of the nonverbal side of life."¹⁰ It is the old story of actions speaking louder than words.

The Church in a pluralistic society cannot long endure if it concentrates on making itself into a group of believers who covenant together to guarantee conformity to a man-made righteousness which coincides with tradition.¹¹ Tenaciously holding to tradition to ensure self preservation is self defeating. Jesus himself taught that anyone who seeks to save his own life will lose it, and he who loses his life for the sake of the gospel will save it. If the tradition that the church wishes to preserve is obedience to the Great Commission of Christ without preoccupation for self preservation, it will be preserved, and it will thrive. The reason for this is that the church's reason for being is to reach out into pluralistic societies to incorporate people into the multi-ethnic body of Christ. The Apostle Peter even hints that the completion of this task will hasten the return of Christ.¹² The church exists as a people who dedicate themselves to the reconciliation of peoples from all cultures. It exists as Christ's body to show to all men and spiritual rulers and powers in the non-material world that all ethnicities can and must be incorporated together into a new nation, family, and people.¹³ The church is to consist of congregations with a diversity of equals. This requires that we all acquaint ourselves with the cultures of those we consider strange. After all, oddity is only in the eye of the beholder.

The sin of ethnic exclusivism seems symptomatic of two basic fears: the fear of losing traditional and nostalgic values, and the fear that moral goodness would be endangered if the predominant and original ethnic

group became a minority. These fears inevitably cause people to be unduly critical of themselves and others.¹⁴ The most effective way to avoid this subtle paralysis is to become obsessed with the truth which the Holy Spirit spoke in addressing the same problem in the early church:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were afar off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:13-14).

Communicating the Gospel cross-culturally in a pluralistic society is the mission of the church. This is our calling. It requires hard work, a fertile imagination, a deliberate effort to know people of other cultures well, a firm obsession to incorporate them into the body of Christ, an unwavering belief that without this they are lost forever, and the firm conviction that the instrument of our peace is disinterested love.

And now for some practical models. The North Kildonan M.B. Church conducts bilingual services regularly in German and in English as well as providing services for the Vietnamese in their language. This is all done in the same facilities.

In Los Angeles a Baptist Church has congregations of several different races and languages meeting at different hours of worship under the leadership of their own ethnic pastors. This, too, takes place successfully in the same building.

The Richmond Bethel Mennonite Brethren Church in Vancouver, B.C. meets in one multi-purpose church building along with congregations of people from the Far East. Their worship services are conducted in each group's own language and according to their own culture.

Eddie and Ruth Carter, a Black couple, and Treatre Thumith, my wife's sister, served in both Black and White Churches in the U.S., Canada, and the Antilles Islands for twenty six years as a full time inter-racial interdenominational team. Today the Carters serve in a Mid-western church of Blacks and Whites.

Mennonite Brethren share in the French ministry in Quebec, the Portugese work in Winnipeg, the large radio ministry in Manitoba to the Low German speaking people, and a Mennonite Brethren church in Denver, Colorado has special ministries to single mothers, divorcees, foreigners, and drug addicts and other suffering people.

Attitudes and practices of inclusivism within the church are from God. All exclusivism based on racial, language, or cultural differences is from the Adversary. The realization of a true universal brotherhood is not easy, but it is God's ideal and should be our endeavor.

To be the Church in a pluralistic society means that we rise above

the nationalism, the ethnicity, the language, the culture which separates and that we deliberately incorporate people of diverse ethnicities into our family and fellowship. Such an action will not destroy us; it will purify and enrich us as a part of God's great family.

References

¹ Arturo Carrauz, a former Mexican American student states that "Culture is made up of three components: (1) History, (2) language, (3) and values. Cultures are neutral in value. They are bad when they turn into an ethnocentric pride or enslaving exclusivism. They are good when they give us the security to go beyond our familiar world." Quoted from "Cross Cultural Understanding," seminary lectures series, Vol. 3, No. 1, December 1980, by Leslie E. Mark.

² Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1959), Preface.

³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), p. 30.

⁴ John Milton's *Paradise Lost* expresses this idea clearly as a result of his disappointment over the failure of his political activism to change the government of England from a monarchy to the rule of justice under Puritanism. The result was a religious fascism under the autocratic rule of Oliver Cromwell.

⁵ Leslie Mark, "Teaching Appreciation For Our Spiritual Heritage," in *Called To Teach*, A symposium by the Faculty of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, ed. David Ewert (Fresno, California: Center of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1980), p. 207.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 55-66.

⁷ All discipline in the church, as well as the very assumption that people outside the church are lost, presupposes an exclusivism of some sort. The church obviously is not all-inclusive. It excludes those who do not subscribe to its entrance requirements.

⁸ Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968) p. 123.

⁹ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), pp. 1-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹¹ Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 48.

¹² In 2 Peter 3:11-12 the Apostle speaks of an active impelling of the coming of the Parousia as though its coming depends upon the right living of God's people.

¹³ Ephesians 1:16-22 suggest that the Christians so live as salt and light before civil and political powers that they will recognize that Christ is King over them and will in response work toward justice as it is exemplified by the church living within the Kingdom that has come.

¹⁴ Edward T. Hall, *op. cit.* p. 3.