

Churches of reconciliation: the diverse church as good news for the world

By Nathan Hobby, WA TEAR Conference 19 September 2009

As TEAR people, you already know that the good news is more than personal salvation after you die. You know that justice is an essential part of the kingdom of God. But have you ever heard the church itself proclaimed as part of the good news for the world?

This good news is that there is a new humanity - the church - where different races and different classes, people who were once enemies, are now brothers and sisters, are now worshipping together and eating around the same table. The good news involves reconciliation and the place it's meant to happen is in the church.

Often when we think about justice issues, including reconciliation, we locate them out in the world. We think about how as Christians we can support programs and organisations which are promoting reconciliation. That's not wrong, but it's not the whole story. The church itself is meant to be a place where extraordinary reconciliation is taking place all the time. The life of the church is meant to show the world what reconciliation is all about. The life of the church is meant to offer hope to the world that it's possible to overcome cultural differences and racial tensions. The life of the church is meant to turn on its head the status differences and oppression that occurs between rich and poor and male and female. When the church has truly swallowed the gospel, it becomes good news for the world.

In my talk today, I'm going to be arguing that diverse congregations where different groups are reconciled to each other are an overlooked but important part of the good news of the kingdom. I'm going to start with a look at these reconciliations in the early church of Acts and the letters of Paul. Then I'm going to contrast it with the homogenous impulse in evangelical churches today. From there, I'll discuss some practical aspects of diversity and reconciliation in churches.

Biblical Basis

We see three important reconciliations happening in the early church – reconciliation between ethnicities or races, reconciliation between social classes and reconciliation between the sexes.

Paul mentions all three of these reconciliations in Galatians 3:26-29 –

You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Baptism is the start of reconciliation. On entering the church through baptism, converts are swearing their first loyalty to the new humanity. A convert's new primary identity is as a member of the new humanity. They remain a Jew or Greek, a slave or free, a male or a female, but these aspects of their identity are no longer primary.

Let's examine these three reconciliations in turn.

Jews and Gentiles

The best statement we have about the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in the new humanity church is in Ephesians 2:14-18:

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups – Jews and Gentiles - into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

We have to go back two thousand years and get our heads around just how amazing it was that Jews and Gentiles could be reconciled with each by coming together in the same faith community, the church. Paul wasn't exaggerating when he calls it 'hostility'. It was often mutual hatred. William Barclay says it like this: 'The Jews had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he has made.' (Milne: p.21)

Here in Ephesians, Paul is claiming that on the cross, Christ put to death the hostility between Jews and Gentiles. God's action in Christ creates a new humanity which anyone can enter by faith, rather than birth.

The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles was a major missionary and pastoral focus of Acts and Paul's letters. The reconciliation happened not by leaving each other alone and separating into two different types of churches. It happened by painfully staying together and sorting through issues.

Eating together was so important to the early church that it was the focus of many of the disputes. Table fellowship is critical to the church being a reconciling community. It is one of the activities the first church is listed as doing in the much quoted description of Acts 2:42-47 – 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' They were carrying on what Jesus had instructed them to do at the Last Supper – eating and drinking together in remembrance of him. Eating together in remembrance of him meant sharing food and sharing it with people you wouldn't normally share it with. The breaking of the bread became known as the agape – the love feast. It was critical to reconciling both race and class.

As the gospel spread beyond the Jews to include the Gentiles as well, the Jewish Christians wrestled with the legacy of strict dietary laws that made it hard for them to eat with the Gentile Christians. In the decades after Jesus, the churches were constantly struggling to work out how these laws still applied and what it meant in the life of the church. There were disputes and fights and splits, and the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, spent a lot of time trying to resolve these. He didn't advise them to go off and have their own separate agape; he tried to get Gentiles and Jews to give and take in love so that they could eat together (eg 1 Cor 8).

Rich and Poor, Slave and Free

Table fellowship created issues for the reconciling of different classes too. Slaves and masters, rich and poor didn't normally eat together. In the Roman empire, slaves made up as much as one third of the total population (Finger, 2007:

p.31). It was unheard of for slaves to dine with masters. Slaves were seen as property, not as equal human beings worthy of dignity. Yet the revolutionary new humanity church expected that masters would treat slaves as equals.

Slaves, at least, had enough food to eat. Former slaves and the working class were often poor and hungry. The table fellowship had a real economic meaning for them: it was where they got fed. The rich would have brought the food to provide for them. It was a form of justice – the poor could rely on getting at least this meal. The pattern in the first church in Acts is that the disciples started by sharing food and then stepped up a level and started sharing everything, selling off property to provide for everyone. In Acts 4:34 we read ‘There was not a needy person among them’. The common meal was the start of an economic reconciling where the differences between rich and poor were overcome socially and even abolished (Yoder, 1992: p.20-21). Reconciliation between classes involves redistribution.

In 1 Corinthians 11:17-33, Paul rebukes the church at Corinth for letting the divisions between poor and rich show themselves in the agape. The poor and the slaves were probably later getting to the gathering because they had more work to do and by the time they got there, the leisured rich had already eaten the good food and got drunk. Instead of being a reconciling, equalising meal, the agape was reinforcing the divisions. Paul tells them it is not the Lord’s Supper they are observing; they are not respecting the body of Christ, that is the believers in all their diversity.

From where we stand in the twenty-first century, it’s easy to think that Paul didn’t go far enough in reconciling master and slave. He didn’t insist that Christians free their slaves. Yet the life of the early church was more effective at reconciling Christian slaves and masters than the abolition of slavery in the USA in the nineteenth century. Abolition has been followed by more than a century of racism and inequality in the USA. To this day a gulf exists between blacks and whites. Don’t get me wrong – legal solutions are a necessary part of reconciliation. But the early church had no hope of influencing the empire to abolish slavery. What it could do - and what was good news for the world - was to bring Christian slaves and masters around the table as equals. No such respect and dignity would have been given slaves if they were simply declared free and sent out into a society where they had no status and no money.

Male and Female

The reconciliation of the power imbalance between male and female in the church is something that was started in the New Testament, but not brought to completion. Unfortunately, present day conservative readings of the New Testament read it in the opposite direction to which it is headed and use the New Testament to reinforce the patriarchy rather than critique it.

One commentator writes

It is hard to imagine how badly women were treated in antiquity, even in Judaism, and how difficult it is to find any statement about the equality of the sexes, however weak, in any ancient text except those of Christianity. The Jew prayed, ‘I thank God that thou has not made me a woman’ (common morning prayer). Josephus wrote, ‘Woman is inferior to man in every way’ (Contra Apion, 2.24). The Gentile world had similar expressions. But Paul reverses this. Indeed, in this statement [Galatians 3:28] we have one factor in the gradual elevation and honouring of women that has been known in Christian lands. (Boice : 469)

At a time when women’s participation in society was much more restricted than it is today, we see signs of an early church giving unheard of responsibility and participation to women. We are told in Luke 8 that the community of Jesus’ disciples was funded by a group of rich women. In Romans 16:7, we have a female apostle, Junia. In Acts 18:26, we have Priscilla, the house church leader who taught the faith to Apollos and with her husband Aquila was a ‘co-worker in Christ Jesus’. We have Phoebe, the wealthy benefactor who delivered Paul’s letter to the Romans and read it out, no doubt interpreting it and explaining it on Paul’s behalf (Finger, 2007: 61-62).

The assumption of one of the most sexist passages in the New Testament, the head-covering passage of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, is that women *have* a role in the church prophesying. Paul's concern is that they do it in a way that doesn't make others think they are behaving scandalously, with loose hair like prostitutes. In all the heat generated by his sexist justifications for this, we lose sight of the fact that he doesn't challenge their right to prophesy.

It is this giftedness of all believers in the body that has an important reconciling effect. The gifts of the spirit for the building up of the body are poured out on every believer, not just the powerful ones. The fact, for example, that slaves and women will be given prophetic words to speak to the rest of the body keeps everyone humble.

Some of the most troubling passages of the New Testament, the household codes which call on wives to submit to their husbands, are actually empowering in their context. They are based on secular household codes which were addressed only to those in power. The New Testament codes first address the people who were not in power – wives, children and slaves. For the first time, subordinates are being addressed as moral agents, called upon to make moral decisions, to choose submission even in the knowledge of their equality in Christ. Slaves and wives are called to win their masters and husbands to faith by their strange voluntary, revolutionary subordination (Yoder, 1994: 162-193). It was likely the new found freedom in the gospel for wives and slaves was causing scandal and disrepute for the gospel. Paul and Peter's call for submission is not a timeless decree but a pastoral strategy, an intervention for reconciliation in that context.

The reconciling intent of the household codes is seen in the call for husbands to love their wives at a time when love had little to do with marriage. Masters are called in Colossians to provide their slaves with what is right and fair.

Summing up the Biblical Picture

So what we see in the New Testament is a new humanity church, where believers adopt a new identity, a new primary loyalty to Christ that allows them to be reconciled to each other. Whereas once the divisions of the world were what defined them, now they belong to a new nation that overcomes all these differences. Paul Louis Metzger puts it like this:

The church is a power instituted by God. It was designed with the particular mission of bearing witness to God's advancing kingdom of beloved community through participation in the crucified and risen Christ, and of being consumed by him on behalf of the world for which Christ died. As such, that beloved community should be breaking down divisions between male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and it should be confronting the demonic forces that distort and reduce people to races and classes, to rugged individuals in isolation, people whose value lies in how much they produce and consume. (2007: p.36)

Evangelicalism Today: What Mega-churches and the Emerging Church Have in Common

Unfortunately, in the name of evangelism, we have lost this good news. Evangelicals have misunderstood salvation and distorted the Great Commission to come up with too many homogenous churches which simply don't show enough of the good news of reconciliation.

'Make disciples of all nations as you go, baptizing them, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' Matthew 28:19-20. Many evangelicals understand the Great Commission as the most important part of their Bible, the central command with which to interpret the rest and with which to decide what our purpose as church is.

Evangelicals have tended to privatise discipleship and make it simply a case of 'asking Jesus into your heart'. So when some evangelicals are interpreting the Great Commission, they assume that 'making disciples' means getting people across the line and into heaven. The more people we can convert, the better we are fulfilling the Great Commission – what could be more important than that?

This sort of thinking is behind the church growth movement. Even if you don't hear about the church growth movement in sermons, it has strongly influenced the shape of evangelical churches over the last thirty years.

Church growth uses research to attract members, by working out sociological and marketing strategies to attract unchurched people to church. The father of the church growth movement, Donald McGavran, used the term 'homogenous unit principle' to describe the idea that people like to worship in churches that are monocultural. The gospel is best received when it doesn't involve crossing cultural boundaries. To be effective, we shouldn't try to bring together black and white people or rich and poor people into the same church – it will put people off. George Yancey put it like this:

Church growth experts argue that to spend energy putting together a church of many different racial groups detracts from the church's main duty – to win as many souls as possible. (2003: p.30)

You can see this approach used in 'seeker sensitive' services and many mega-churches, where the good news is a self-help message, a way to personal fulfilment. Bill Hybels is the pastor of one of America's biggest churches, Willow Creek, a pioneer of seeker-sensitive services. It's interesting to see his shift in attitude. He said in a 2005 interview:

Willow Creek started in the era when, as the book noted, the church growth people were saying, "Don't dissipate any of your energies fighting race issues. Focus everything on evangelism." It was the homogeneous unit principle of church growth. And I remember as a young pastor thinking. *That's true*. I didn't know whether I wanted to chance alienating people who were seekers, whose eternity was on the line, and who might only come to church one time. I wanted to take away as many obstacles as possible, other than the Cross, to help people focus on the gospel. So now, 30 years later... I recognize that a true biblically functioning community must include being multiethnic. My heart beats so fast for that vision today. I marvel at how naive and pragmatic I was 30 years ago. (Gilbreath: p.38)

It makes it hard to know what to say when the target of your criticism has so publicly repented of his old attitude, and writers on this subject like Paul Louis Metzger don't know quite what to do with Hybels' turn around (Metzger, 2007: p. 57). It's certainly good news and we can only hope that it translates into diverse mega-churches. However, I'd also say that the mega-church itself doesn't easily fit with the diverse new humanity church I'm talking about. Even if there is a mix of classes and races, it is much harder to gather around the table and have the level of fellowship which allows the church to embody the good news.

You see an interesting echo of church growth in the emerging missional church (EMC) in Australia. I like a lot of what the EMC does in questioning the received ways of doing church and responding creatively rather than defensively to postmodernism. It also has a welcome emphasis on justice. However, despite reacting against the megachurch phenomenon, the emerging missional church seems to be built on church growth theory as well.

Some of you will be familiar with the key EMC text in Australia— Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost's *Shaping of Things To Come*. Their model for mission is for what they call 'incarnational' living amongst particular subcultures of society. Perhaps you find a club with an enthusiasm for model aeroplanes or motorbikes and you join it, befriending the people and walking alongside them. The hope is that the whole community finds itself moving toward God together. The idea is that these communities already exist, and instead of expecting seekers to be extracted from their natural cultural setting to an attractional church and thus asking them to accommodate to church culture, we should turn their community into a church.

When I asked one emerging church leader about the homogeneity of the EMC approach, he said that the homogenous unit principle was a missional strategy, while diversity was a goal of worship and discipleship. I'm unconvinced by this – I think that if we create churches out of special interest groups, they will probably stay homogenous.

British theologian John Milbank wrote a harsh polemic against the emerging church in an article called 'Stale Expressions: The Management-Shaped Church':

In all this there lies no new expression of church, but rather its blasphemous denial. The church *cannot* be found amongst the merely like-minded, who associate in order to share a particular taste, hobby or perversion. It can *only* be found where many different peoples possessing many different gifts collaborate in order to produce a divine-human community in one specific location. St Paul wrote to Galatia and Corinth, not to regiments or to weaving-clubs for widows. He insisted on a unity that emerges from the harmonious blending of differences. Hence the idea that the church should 'plant' itself in various sordid and airless interstices of our contemporary world, instead of calling people to 'come to church', is wrongheaded, because the refusal to come out of oneself and *go to* church is simply the refusal of church *per se*. One can't set up a church in a café amongst a gang of youths who like skateboarding because all this does is promote skateboarding and dysfunctional escapist maleness, along with that type of private but extra-ecclesial security that is offered by the notion of 'being saved'. (2008: p.124)

Milbank's tone is combative and I don't think his criticism is true of everything done in the name of the emerging church movement. But I do think that his challenge is one that needs to be heard and grappled with.

Practicalities

What, then, does the new humanity church of reconciled peoples look like today?

It might be tempting to think that there is little scope for a local church to be diverse, that suburbs are homogeneous. But the reality is that every suburb is diverse in some ways; if your church is homogenous, it probably doesn't reflect your suburb.

I live in Nedlands, one of the wealthiest suburbs in Perth, yet amongst the Mercedes Benz and BMWs there are also students renting houses and blocks of flats housing low income earners. There is a high population of people born in Asia. There is a wide range of ages, an aspect of identity I didn't discuss from the Bible, but which we could apply similar thinking to. And of course, there is an even spread of men and women.

Bruce Milne pictures the new humanity church like this:

'What should churches look like as they gather for worship?... Even if the congregation is situated in a mainly homogeneous neighbourhood in respect of ethnic origins, we would hope to see good numbers of both men and women, clearly comfortable together, with all the age groups and generations represented, plus signs of different kinds of family structure, different wealth levels, and probably indications of diversity in regard to how long the individuals or family units have been part of the congregation. Hopefully there might be also be signs of a spread of work setting between blue-collar and professional, and evidence of people who are still seeking for a personal Christian faith, as well as the mature, seasoned believers. Here and there the presence of people with physical or mental challenges would indicate a further expression of the congregation's diversity.' (2006: p.74)

This idea of the new humanity church which sees reconciliation between different groups as a part of the good news is no good if there's nothing you can do about it when you return to your normal life at the end of this conference. It's rare to be starting a church from scratch, so the practical consequence can't be a prescription of how we might go about establishing the perfect new humanity church. Instead, you're going to need some steps that you can start with where you

are. Some of these steps are at the level everyone can do, others are at a higher level that only church leaders can do. But perhaps church leaders will listen to suggestions you have.

Worship

‘Worship wars’ are a familiar problem facing evangelical churches. The dividing line tends to be along generational lines. The stereotype is that old people want traditional, perhaps formal worship. The baby boomers want relaxed worship. And now Generation X and Y want either rock concerts or postmodern emerging worship. And so, in response, we tend to get age segregated services, with a different worship style for each. I suspect that in today’s church the tension between generations is of as much significance as the tensions between races and classes in the early church.

Worship which disenfranchises parts of the church dishonours God. It needs to be ‘consciously shaped so that all members of the congregation can experience it as a generally meaningful vehicle for their response to God.’ (Milne, 2007: p.107) There should be a lot of give and take between generations or groups in the church, so that worship pleases our neighbours as well as ourselves.

Mosaic Church in Little Rock, Arkansas is a truly multi-ethnic church with blacks, whites and Hispanics worshipping together. They have seven different worship teams, all with different styles, who rotate leading the worship. Words to the songs are projected in both English and Spanish. To accommodate those Latinos who don’t speak English, once every two months a whole service is conducted in Spanish, with English people having to wait for a translation, instead of the other way around (Kennedy, 2005: p.43).

For me, small, participatory churches are the best way to ensure there is reconciliation in worship. Bill Hybels’ Willow Creek makes sure there’s black and white people up on the stage, and that’s their version of diversity. But for me, giving everyone a chance to contribute to worship is closer to what Paul was talking about, perhaps best shown by 1 Corinthians 14:26:

What then shall we say brothers and sisters? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

Leadership

Seeking diversity in the leadership of your church is an important step. Are there men and women in leadership positions? Are there young and old? Are there working class people as well as the university educated? Is there anyone who’s not from the dominant ethnicity?

Eating together

Eating together was crucial to reconciliation and diversity in the early church. I think it is crucial today too. Recovering the shared agape meal of the early church as a regular part of worship would visibly bring all the different people of your church around the same table.

It is also something that you can also practice as a household, inviting people from within the church and your local community to eat with you. Eating together is surely a good way to defuse tensions within a church. If there is someone whose faith and beliefs is most at odds with yours, then perhaps that's the person to invite back for Sunday lunch.

Reconciliation and Redistribution

In his book *Consuming Jesus*, Paul Louis Metzger insists that 'reconciliation involves redistribution'. He calls for a redistribution of need, so that the affluent start realising they need to learn from the poor about surviving oppression and being poor in spirit. We achieve this redistribution by listening to the poor and spending time with them. The redistribution of resources means that churches with resources should give time and money to those without. He also calls for the redistribution of blame, by which he means taking responsibility for the sins and injustices of the past committed by our ancestors and embedded in structures today. (Metzger, 2007: p. 143f.)

Conclusion

I want to finish my talk today by mentioning some of the unanswered questions and weak points in my argument.

Firstly, there's the danger of hypocrisy. I like the idea of diversity across race and class. But what about across theological lines? That's more uncomfortable. I find it difficult to worship and fellowship with many types of Christians; I get frustrated, annoyed or bored. I gravitate toward people whose version of Christianity matches mine most closely. What about reconciliation with these other people? If I can't show them Christ's love, if Christ's reconciling power is not evident there, then surely the good news is not being worked out? This is one reason why I need to think of myself as blessed for being a part of a theologically diverse church where I have to at least stay in touch with other types of Christians.

Secondly, I'm not sure what to do with homogenous minority ethnic churches, like Chinese churches and Aboriginal churches in Australia. Is ethnic diversity something they should be striving for too? Rory Shiner made an interesting comment on a blog about the homogenous unit principle:

Like most Christians I suppose, I have an intuitive hostility to the idea of a homogeneous church. However, I do repeatedly come across situations where the argument against a homogeneous church/ministry comes from the people who are loving things just the way they are: e.g., the white power-holders in Australian country churches who oppose the setting up of Aboriginal fellowships because they love the expression of unity from black and white worshipping together. Problem is, of course, the same people would never dream of allowing their church meetings to become the sort of 3 hour affairs that Aboriginal Christians expect, complete with country music, altar-calls and multiple sermons. As long as those well-meaning people insist on the expression of unity (on their terms), the work amongst the Aboriginal Christians suffers. (Chester, 2006)

In terms of immigrant congregations in Australia, there is a strong argument for church services in people's first language. For the immigrants who don't understand English well, this is a good thing. But there is still room for involvement of people with different ethnic backgrounds as visitors and maybe even members of these congregations. And what about the next generation, who are comfortable with the English language? Often, a new service is started for them, making it both culturally and age homogenous. I think this is a mistake, and this is when the church needs to strive for greater diversity.

Thirdly and finally, I want to acknowledge how difficult diverse churches of reconciliation are. In 2006, a Harvard political scientist named Robert Putnam reluctantly released his findings that ethnic diversity breeds mistrust in

communities. 'His extensive research found that the more diverse a community, the less likely were its inhabitants to trust anyone, from their next-door neighbour to their local government.' (Wilson, 2006) It's findings like these that seem to strengthen the case for homogenous churches. But we can argue it the opposite way. We can see in this finding the urgent need of the good news of a reconciled people who embrace diversity, who choose to love and trust each other.

Of course, the mistake would be to think we can do it on our own. Metzger (2007: p. 91) writes:

Attempts to confront race and class divisions can be intense and overwhelming and will not bear lasting fruit - indeed, could end in anger or apathy - unless we experience the undying love of God that is poured out into our hearts through the Spirit of grace, whom God in Christ freely gives us to transform our hearts and lives. What is required is a great awakening, a turning of the tables of the heart in which the Spirit inspires within us an all-consuming passion to follow the downwardly mobile Christ in the world.

Further reading

All of these books are available from Koorong or Word or at Vose Seminary Library (20 Hayman Rd Bentley).

Milne, Bruce. *Dynamic Diversity: The New Humanity Church for Today and Tomorrow.* Nottingham: IVP, 2006.

A well-organised book, spending a chapter outlining the New Testament case for the importance of the new humanity church, and then a chapter demonstrating how the concept fits doctrines like the Trinity, creation, atonement and the church as the body of Christ. He outlines what a new humanity church looks like and then argues that the idea is particularly relevant to our culture because of the resemblance between the Roman Empire of the first century and the globalisation of today. A series of practical chapters follow, explaining what worship and leadership, discipleship and mission look like in the new humanity church.

Metzger, Paul Louis. *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in the Consumer Church.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Metzger's focus is on the way consumerism divides the contemporary evangelical church and the historical and cultural factors that have led to it. His solutions are more radical and more sacramental than Milne's. His writing is perhaps more exciting than Milne, but less well organised and less accessible.

Pierce, Ronald W. and Groothuis, Rebecca Merrill, (editors) *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy.* Downers' Grove, 2005.

This is an excellent collection of essays arguing (biblically) for egalitarianism between men and women in the church and the home. It is thorough, covering almost every aspect of the debate, from biblical, historical, theological and practical angles.

Yoder, John Howard. *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World.* Scottdale: Herald Press, 1992.

This is the book which has influenced my understanding of the church most. It is short but difficult and redefines the practices of the church in terms of their radical social character, from the Lord's Supper as a shared meal to baptism as entry into a new humanity. I have written a simplification you can download from <http://perthanabaptists.wordpress.com>.

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