

Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations

BY DAMIAN EMETUCHE

A distorted culture is always at the heart of racism, prompting us to react to people of other cultures in ethnocentric ways. How is unacknowledged ethnocentrism manifest in contemporary practices of church planting in the United States?

To better understand racism, we must understand its root. The basic dictionary definition of racism is “an excessive and irrational belief in the superiority of one’s own racial group. A doctrine, program, or practice based on such belief.”¹ Missiologists prefer to use a broader term, “ethnocentrism,” of which racism is one prominent species. Enoch Wan defines ethnocentrism as “the belief that one’s own people group or cultural ways are superior to others.” This belief often breeds attitudes that lead to unfair treatment “manifested in individual action or institutionalized policy toward others as in the case of anti-Semitism, apartheid, bigotry, fascism, and racism.”²

Of course, no one is born a racist. We acquire the distorted beliefs, programs, and practices of racism and pass them along to other people through the processes of acculturation. Charles Kraft argues that “culture patterns perceptions of reality into conceptualizations of what reality can or should be, what is to be regarded as actual, probable, possible, and impossible. These conceptualizations form what is termed the ‘worldview’ of the culture.” This worldview is “the central systematization of conceptions of reality to which the members of the culture assent (largely unconsciously) and from which stems their value system.”³ Therefore, a distorted culture is always at the heart of racism, prompting us to react to people of other cultures in ethnocentric ways.⁴

CULTURE, GOSPEL, AND RACISM

The American evangelical church has not lived above the ethnocentrism in our culture because it has been unwilling to challenge some of the defining aspects of the Western cultural worldview. Because cultural worldviews are “largely unexamined and implicit,” Christian missiologists warn, they “are reinforced by the deepest of feelings, and anyone who challenges them challenges the very foundations of people’s lives.”⁵

The West accepted the gospel and correctly contextualized it to fit the Greco-Roman mindset. With the rise of Western political states and spread of colonization, Western missionaries spread Christianity and planted churches worldwide. However, indigenous churches were never given the opportunity to contextualize the gospel in their culture. On the contrary, because of Western cultural preoccupation with order and control, along with ethnocentrism, missionaries planted churches that reflected their home cultures, and changed indigenous names to English, Greek, or Hebrew names even when the native names were more theologically sound than the imported.

Likewise in regard to music for worship, the missionaries simply translated traditional Western hymns for the new Christians to use. One might hear almost the same tune, rhythm, and style from London to New York, Hong Kong to Mexico City, and from Lagos to Sao Paulo. The colonial missionaries, because of their lack of interest in the culture of the people they were serving, imposed their musical style on the indigenous population.⁶

This is not to say that every colonial missionary action was racist, though some of them definitely were. Even the best people will often default to behave uncritically according to their culture and traditions. “It has always been the aim of the missionary to present to the non-Christian the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ without local or cultural adulteration. But this has, in fact, proved impracticable. We are all conditioned by our background and traditions, by our forms of speech, by inherited values which have little relationship to the Christian gospel,” Stephen Neill observes. “It was natural for the representatives of each western nation to regard their own culture as superior to that of other western nations; it was natural for the representatives of all the western nations to regard western culture as superior to that of the countries in which they carried on their missionary work, and to regard as Christian many things which only remotely, if at all, related to the Gospel.”⁷

While the missionaries may have been versed in the Scriptures, they did not understand the people they were called to served, and this led to their message not being understood by the people.⁸ “Churches they planted were often alien and, as a result, remained dependent on the outside support for their existence,” Paul Hiebert concludes. “Missionaries brought with them, not only the gospel, but also Western cultures, and often they failed to differentiate between the two. Many rejected Christ because they rejected the foreignness of the missionary message – not because of the offence of the gospel.”⁹

THE HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE

Ethnocentrism is expressed in other ways in contemporary practices of church planting. Let me briefly describe three of these ways.

A widely used guideline in church planting, often called “the homogeneous unit principle,” states that “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”¹⁰ A leading church-growth strategist, Donald Garvan, famously wrote, “It takes no great acumen to see that when marked differences of color, stature, income, cleanliness, and education are present, unbelievers understand the gospel better when expounded by their own kind of people. They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves.”¹¹

Church planters who embrace the homogeneous unit principle in the United States believe that a gathering of people who share an ethnic background, political beliefs, social standing, and so on, will be more comfortable with one another and, therefore, more successful together in forming a new congregation. Yet this does not follow the guidance of the New Testament, in which there are no homogeneous new congregations. The Jerusalem church in Acts 2 consisted of Jews from more than fifteen nations, and Gentile proselytes. The Antioch church in Acts 13 was a multicultural congregation of Jews and Gentles. All of the Pauline house churches were located in strategic cosmopolitan centers and their members were drawn from diverse ethnic backgrounds and social standings.

Why do we employ the homogeneous unit principle in church planting? The primary reason is that it appeals to our fallen cultural sensitivity. We love to congregate with people of the same affinity; we resist integration across racial, ethnic, and class barriers

because we cherish personal freedom and individualism. This principle does no harm, of course, when it is applied in the settings of homogenous tribes – because there are no competing cultures and no part of the population is left out or discriminated against. But to apply the homogeneous unit principle in modern cosmopolitan centers today is to violate the New Testament model.

By adopting the homogeneous unit principle in urban centers, the church has accepted a sociocultural reality in place of biblical principle. Michael

By adopting the homogeneous unit principle that says “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers,” church planters in urban centers have accepted a sociocultural reality in place of biblical principle.

Emerson and Christian Smith make the point that “white evangelicals’ cultural tools and racial isolation curtail their ability to fully assess why people of different races do not get along, the lack of equal opportunity, and the extent to which race matters in America.... [A] highly effective way to ensure the perpetuation of a racialized system is to deny its existence.”¹² Non-caucasians, in reaction to the racialized culture of the American church, have planted immigrant and ethnic congregations. Many of these, on close inspection, are not much more than subculture social organizations which further segregate the people of faith. This is contrary to the Jesus’ prayer for the unity of all his disciples:

They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:16-23

FUNDING OF ETHNIC CHURCH PLANTERS

A second manifestation of ethnocentrism is evident in the discrepancy of financial support for ethnic church planters. All church planters have difficulty securing ministry partners, but nonwhite planters have the most trouble. A good number of the established white evangelicals do not connect with the ethnic planters, share their concerns, or support them financially. Most ethnic planters suffer financial hardship, and many work odd jobs to support their families.

One of the contributing factors to their financial difficulties is lack awareness by the majority of white churches. “I do not think the majority of people involved in church planting in the United States even think about this issue, so they cannot be aware of the disparity,” Gary Irby, the church planting director at the Puget Sound Baptist Association, told me in an interview. “I know this to be true because I am usually the one raising the issue and peoples’ reactions are that of surprise or ‘I never even thought about that.’ Just as denying the existence of racism is the strongest support of perpetuating it, the lack of awareness about the inequity in funding is one of the biggest issues in overcoming it.”¹³

A Hispanic church planting strategist in the northwestern part of the United States recounted the following experience of one of his church planters. The church planter was a full-time Hispanic pastor in a congregation in which the Hispanic membership was spiritually vibrant and growing as new converts were baptized. In the same congregation, a part-time Anglo pastor served the Anglo portion of the congregation which unfortunately was dwindling in numbers and experiencing no spiritual growth. Yet, the church placed the Anglo pastor on a salary of over \$4,000 a month, while the hard working, full-time Hispanic pastor received less than \$2,000 a month. The Hispanic pastor discovered what was happening only when the bookkeeper of the church made a mistake and sent the wrong payment voucher to him. When the Hispanic pastor tearfully confronted his colleague, the Anglo pastor pretended he was not aware of his financial difficulties. The Hispanic minister asked him, "Is it because I am not white?" Such racial insensitivity and lack of financial support toward non-Anglo church planters is all too common in some mainline evangelical denominations.

LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

A third manifestation of ethnocentrism that affects church planting is that the decision-making bodies of most, if not all, major evangelical churches in America are composed disproportionately of Anglos. There is still resistance in accepting people of color in leadership positions. The church leadership appears to be the last bastion of racism even in the midst of changing demographics in the country.

On a positive note, the Christian Reformed Church has responded to this situation by instructing their Board of Trustees to take concrete steps toward ethnically diverse leadership in their denomination.¹⁴ Their task will not be easy. It will require what Margaret Guider has called a new "moral imagination." Church power structures in North America "continue to be largely under the direction of the descendants of Europeans, power to make and enforce decisions continue to be in their hands. They set the standards of behavior considered to be normative, if not superior, and these standards continue to be those by which the behaviors of other groups are judged," Guider has warned. "When talking about racism, the descendants of European immigrants often define reality incorrectly. As the beneficiaries of racism, they fail to understand that the 'problem' tends to be constructed in ways that repeatedly overlook the dynamics of racial privilege."¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here? We must recognize that racism is present in our fallen culture, and that our own attitudes and actions often are embedded in unacknowledged ethnocentrism. Therefore, we need vigilant circumspection and correction by our brothers and sisters in Christ in order to recognize and repent from racist thoughts, words, and actions.

The church must reexamine her institutions, including administrative and ministry structures. Any that promote racial discrimination must be restructured to reflect more of the kingdom of God. For example, mission and church leaders could raise an awareness of our racialized church culture by deliberately featuring non-Anglos as instructors and keynote speakers in settings other than ethnic conferences. And in the area of church life in which I work, the church planting assessment kits could be redesigned to be more multicultural. This would increase the chances of recruiting non-Anglo planters.

The prophet John saw that heaven is a noisy, multicultural community:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Revelation 7:9-12

In God’s kingdom there is no room for individualistic faith. We are a family.

NOTES

1 *The New Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary of The English Language*, International Encyclopedic ed., s.v. “Racism.”

2 Enoch Wan, “Ethnocentrism,” in A. Scott Moreau, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 324.

3 Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 53.

4 This ethnocentricity is evident in our popular stereotypes of other cultures. “The Statue of Liberty may not be choosy about the wretched refuse she allows in the door,” Jeffrey Kluger notes, “but Americans haven’t always been so hospitable. Immigrants from Ireland landed in the U.S. in the 1850s only to find shop windows festooned with signs reading ‘No Irish Need Apply.’ The Chinese toiled to build our transcontinental railroad in the 1860s only to see the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act signed in 1882, suspending further immigration.” Jeffrey Kluger, “Stereotypes Persist Even Where Immigrants Don’t,” *Time* (August 12, 2009, accessed February 15, 2010), <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1915768,00.html>.

5 Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 40.

6 Damian Emetuche, "Issues In Planting a Multicultural Church," in *Global Missiology. Org* "Featured Articles" (April 2009, accessed February 15, 2010), 12, www.globalmissiology.org/portugues/docs_pdf/featured/emetuche_issues_planting_multicultural_church_2_2009.pdf.

7 Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (London: Lutterworth, 1966), 415-416.

8 See Damian Emetuche (D. Tuhe), "Contextualization," in *GlobalMissiology.org* (October 2008, accessed February 15, 2010), www.globalmissiology.org/portugues/docs_html/contextualization/Worldviews-Part%204_April_2009.htm.

9 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 10.

10 A. Scott Moreau, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle," (no date, accessed February 15, 2010), www.docstoc.com/docs/2235726/The-Homogeneous-Unit-Principle-A-Scott-Moreau-1-What-is-the-H.

11 Donald A. Gavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, third edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 167.

12 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89-90.

13 Gary Irby, interview by author, October 20, 2009, in Seattle, Washington.

14 Chris Meehan, "Synod Seeks to Diversify Leadership" (June 16, 2009, accessed February 16, 2010), www.crcna.org/news.cfm?newsid=1386.

15 Margaret E. Guider, "Moral Imagination and the *Missio ad Gentes*: Redressing the Counter-Witness of Racism" in Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 101.



DAMIAN EMETUCHE

is Associate Church Planting Director for the Puget Sound Baptist Association, and Pastor of Agape Community Church in Mountainlake Terrace, Washington.