

Theology Matters

Asian Perspectives on Theological Pluralism

by Scott W. Sunquist

Pluralism and Religious Harmony

Singapore is a small island at the end of the Malay Peninsula with a population of immigrants from China, South India and North India. In addition there are the local ethnic Malay. As a result of this mix, Singapore identifies itself as being a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-linguistic society. The government has great pride in this identification, but there is also great concern. Religious and ethnic violence periodically breaks out in the world, and has even done so in Singapore (1950s), so the government must be ever vigilant to ensure religious harmony. It was with this concern in mind that the government brought forward a very controversial bill in December of 1989 which gave the "Internal Security Department" (ISD) free reign to intervene in religious community affairs if their affairs were thought to be threatening to the religious harmony (social order) of the country. It was interesting to see how the various religious communities responded. By and large, the Hindu and Buddhist communities, thanked the government for its vigilance and concern for religious harmony. The fairly small Sikh community voiced some concern, but it was the Muslim and Christian

communities which voiced serious concern through representation in parliament. This issue roused the generally passive Christian community to meet, discuss, pray and voice concern to the government. Why is this?

Islam, Sikhism and Christianity all have a political and social dimension to their religious calling. Islam and Christianity are both missionary faiths: what they believe to be true is of universal significance and therefore it should be promoted. Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand are generally "other-worldly" faiths, with no essential agenda for this world. These simplistic distinctions were proven to be true in the political arena in Singapore. For our concerns here, we should note that the Christians acted just like we might expect followers of Christ to act. Christian leaders could not allow Christian faith to be merely a private practice of ritual, and so they spoke out about the social and political dimensions expressed in education, medical work and evangelism. These are all essential elements for a community named after the historic founder of the faith, who died, we might say, because he was a threat to the social order. Singapore is a pluralistic nation, and Christians live in that pluralist

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society, and yet faithfulness to Jesus Christ has meant the imprisonment of some, exile of others and questioning by the ISD of others. Life would be much easier for Christians in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and most other Asian countries if they would make one minor adjustment in their confession. If Christians would simply confess Jesus is **a** Lord rather than **the** Lord, then the Singapore government wouldn't have to worry so much about this growing community and the Christians' propensity to follow an outside authority.

My interest in this paper is to show that the modern debate of pluralism must be carried out on a global scale, more specifically from the context of Asia. The western church needs this broadening of the context of the pluralism debate to help move the discussion forward. At the present positions are clearly labeled. **Exclusivists** believe that people are saved only through a clear confession of Jesus Christ. **Inclusivists** believe that people are only saved by Jesus Christ, but Jesus saves even through other religions and traditions; all are included in Jesus' salvific work. **Pluralists** believe that there are many paths to salvation and following Jesus is one of them. In this heated debate an arsenal of articles has been written from all sides and the vast chasm separating the parties threatens to divide the western church over the person of Jesus. This western church division will be a tragic curiosity to the churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and it will divide down the middle of our denominations in the West. For the future of western Christianity the Asian perspective is needed. Another reason the Asian perspective is needed is historical: the debate and many of the ideas originally came from Asia (specifically South Asia and to a lesser degree East Asia). The experience of religious pluralism is relatively new to the West, but it is an ancient and complex reality in Asia. In fact the experience of pluralism is normative for Asian Christian communities. For too long we have been listening to our own voices regarding pluralism. It is time we listen to the Asian Christian tradition to gain the perspective of those who have only known Christian faith in a pluralistic context.

Pluralism Defined

Pluralism came into the English language in its earliest usage as a religious term in the 17th and 18th centuries (plurality of benefices and "plurality of wives and gods"). Its usage expanded in the 19th century to be used as a philosophical term ("the knowable world is made up of a plurality of interacting things") and later as a political term (in reaction to totalitarian governments in Europe). In this century it has been used as a sociological term ("cultural pluralism is a controversial expression") and then once again as a religious term (our special concern). We are much indebted to the Oxford English Dictionary.

And yet we must pause and note that pluralism has really been used in two ways: one descriptive (what is) and one prescriptive (what ought to be). In the 17th and 18th centuries plurality of benefices described a real practice, but it was not a good practice. It was not a prescription for how churches should be ordered, but it was a problem of church order which gave too much power to one person. When pluralism began to be used philosophically it began to take on a more prescriptive character: this is how we must understand reality. Today we have both uses. Pluralism describes the context of the Christian communities in Asia (and now in Birmingham and Boston). But pluralism is also a call to inclusion of all faiths as equally valid paths to salvation. It is used to prescribe how we should think, act and even worship. For Christians in Asia pluralism has always described their context for life and mission. But until recently Asian Christians were not told that this plurality required an end to their efforts to include all in the kingdom of God. Their pluralistic reality necessitated evangelistic endeavor, it did not preclude proclamation.

In the development of the term pluralism it has always referred to "more than one contained in one." Or inversely pluralism has expressed "the one expressed in more than one way." Pluralism today has become a major literary theme in light of the breakdown of western world dominance in the 20th century. Western Progressivism of the 19th century had as its declared goals both the civilizing of the non-western world and the Christianizing of its people. Although there were many tensions in these two goals, they existed together as the assured historical trajectory. All people would advance through "modern" learning, science and politics. As Western Colonialism neared collapse in the 20th century and the ideas and practices of the imperial lands returned to the West, new ways of thinking about the plurality of cultures were needed. As with most all theological movements we must acknowledge that the genesis of this discussion of pluralism is found on the missionary frontier of the church. Missionaries were exposed to these pluralities for centuries, but this was exposure while in power. When the back of Western Colonialism was broken there was a revisiting of the plurality of cultures and religions, but now in the West: The Empire Strikes Back. Not only the visit of the engaging Swami Vivekenanda at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, but also the many other Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Chinese religionists traveling to the West and studying in the West challenged normative interpretations of other religions. Modern Western Pluralism is a product of the missionary enterprise.

Asian Context of Religious Pluralism

Modern religious pluralism as a theology accepts the religious or salvific importance of all religions as equally valid. Thus, religions which have exclusive claims to salvation must be reinterpreted or revisualized from the

purely secular point of view. Religions are understood to be the human attempt to apprehend what God has done and is doing in this world. Revelation from God is general, open to all as experienced in creation, and is then “rationalized” and eventually institutionalized in various cultural forms. As long as a people have only their own religious understanding of the mystery of God there is little problem; this is the way to God. But when other religious systems become known and appreciated, the absoluteness of one’s own religion must either be jettisoned, reinterpreted or proclaimed. The Christian project of pluralism, a project born in the 1960s (the “Secular Decade”) and developed in the 1970s, has followed the middle path: reinterpreting Christian theology, language and tradition. Again, this process began, as we are told, because of the contact with Asian religions.

John Hick, arguably the father of Christian pluralism, tells it very clearly in his autobiographical statements in a number of his publications. Hick describes his conversion to Christianity through evangelical friends in Inter-Varsity Fellowship in England, but found the theology too “small.” After the war, with all of the experience of suffering and evil he made a physical, social and religious move. “A move at that time to Birmingham, England, with its large Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities as well as its older Jewish community, made this problem a live and immediate one.”¹ In another publication he explains further, “[I was]...drawn into some of the practical problems of religious pluralism. I now no longer find it possible to proceed as a Christian theologian as though Christianity were the only religion in the world.”² Paul Knitter, author of *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* makes similar comments about his pilgrimage. “For the past twenty years or so, I have felt no small problem in integrating what I have learned and experienced from other faiths with what I have learned from traditional Christian doctrines, especially concerning the uniqueness and finality of Christ and Christianity.”³ The encounter with religions, the major Asian religions, has necessitated a rethinking of exclusive claims of Christianity and therefore of the Christ of Christian tradition.

For these, and we might add most, western theologians, the new interactions with other world religions creates a new context which challenges western dogmatic assumptions about Christ. The central issue is the identity of Jesus Christ. Thus, the theology of pluralism is wedded very closely to the 19th century search for the historical Jesus. If one remains committed to the Christian tradition then the biblical record can not be dismissed. But the biblical record is so rigid, narrow and exclusive. Hick outlines the theological move which seems to be a logical necessity of Christian pluralism in

the preface to his volume, *God and the Universe of Faiths*.

In this field the most difficult problem for the Christian is to reconcile his allegiance to the person of Christ, by whom he is irrevocably grasped, with his awareness of God’s saving activity beyond the borders of Christendom. Two main paths offer themselves. A way that has often been taken is to give the idea of incarnation an adjectival instead of a substantive interpretation. One can then speak of divine incarnation in varying degrees in the great prophets, saints and seers of all ages. However, I prefer, in chapter 11, to reformulate the doctrine of the incarnation in its full traditional meaning and then to ask in chapter 12, to what logical category this doctrine belongs. I suggest that it is a mythic expression of the experience of salvation through Christ, and as such it is not to be set in opposition to the myths of other religions as if myths were literally true-or-false assertions. This option involves seeing Jesus as a human being rather than as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life. Such a view of him coincides with the conclusions of a growing number of New Testament, patristic and theological scholars today, and the realization that the notion of divine incarnation is a mythological idea of great historical power and importance is now fairly widespread.⁴

We quote this passage at length because it is one of the most succinct explanations of the theological move from Christian exclusivism to pluralism in light of the modern context of Asian religions. The biblical record stands, but it is reinterpreted not as historic fact (Jesus did not claim preexistence or identity with God) but as a metaphor developed by the early community. This, so the explanation goes, is ancient religious language of adoration and elevation of a community’s prophetic leader to the status of divinity.⁵ Even though Christians have lived in pluralistic religious environments since the time of Christ, the modern experience is seen as a “new fact” of our time. The newness of the fact needs to be clarified. What is new is that the “great” religions of Asia now have major communities in the West and at a time when the Christian communities are weakening and dying. In earlier centuries, as Christianity grew in Europe and America, there were other religious communities present, but they were overwhelmed being both culturally and militarily dominated by Christendom. Now Christian presence is weakening in the West and non-Christian religions appear to be vital and growing. This is the new fact.

The Asian church is far more experienced with challenges presented by competing truth claims and the struggles for identity when living in a multi-religious society. Asian churches in most countries today are thriving by most any

measurement of “growth.” They are involved in movements of nation-building, continuing efforts to increase literacy and education, establishing new Bible colleges and seminaries and baptizing new Christians at a rate far faster than was the case under Western Colonialism. There are three themes we would like to develop in gleaning insights on religious pluralism from the perspective of the Asian church. First we will look at **minority community** identity. Except in the Philippines, Christians in every Asian country live as a minority community. In western Europe practicing Christians have become a minority recently. This shift has occurred at the same time that Asian religions have exhibited new vitality. The minority status of Christian life is a central issue in discussing pluralism. Secondly we will look at the Asian Christian existence as a **suffering community**. As minority communities throughout the world know, periods or even cycles of violence, oppression and persecution mark their existence. We will look at the nature of this suffering from a theological perspective as communities of the suffering servant. Finally we will look at Asian Christian mission as **witness in bold humility**.⁶ One cannot afford to represent the suffering Christ with any arrogance or self-confidence as a minority (often oppressed) community. And yet witness to Christ is made with persistence and with confidence in the message itself.

Minority Community

The struggle of a minority community in a pluralistic setting is to maintain the community's identity and purpose when there are many other communities which have greater social influence. Early Christian communities in Asia (outside of the Roman Empire) remained distinct from local star worship and Zoroastrian devotion, and at the same time they increasingly became distinct from the Jewish communities along the Old Silk Route. Christians were living in the Parthian Empire, a Persian Empire that exhibited tolerance toward other faiths until its collapse in the early third century. Identity may be threatened with certain patterns of contextualization (especially in translation), but it is safe to say that the struggling Christian community in Asia maintained its Christian identity against many odds. Even with the Scriptures translated into Syriac, and even without the four distinct gospels of the western church,⁷ Christian identity was not only maintained but Christian presence was seen as a threat to the Zoroastrian social order by the third century. Christian identity held and in spite of major periods of persecution, Christian presence spread. Again and again the story has been repeated in Asia where a small Christian community develops and, in spite of cultural pressure to the contrary, a Christian identity is maintained with a noteworthy missionary spirit. Persian Christians in China, Naga Christians in India, Batak believers in Indonesia (not to mention Korean Christians throughout the world) all have clear Christian identities as minority communities.

Christian identity is only possible through clear identification of the community with Jesus Christ; the Jesus of history who became the Jesus over history. Sacramental, liturgical and ethical life is ordered around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It must be recognized that without this center the community takes on a new identity; a Christ-influenced identity, but not a Christian identity. Jesus Christ is worshipped as Lord over all. But a re-centering (or off-centering) does occur with some regularity in the history of the church, each new interpretation becoming a new religious community. These new religious interpretations become new entries in encyclopedias of religion: they become new religions. One would be hard-pressed to find a Christian community based on a mythic interpretation of Christ in a Hindu or Buddhist context. Such a community could be part of a Hindu community which honors Jesus as an avatar, an incarnation of God but not the unique incarnation of God.

Without the clear and singular claims of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible a Christian community in India becomes another sect of Hinduism. The Christian community which will not let go of these singular claims maintains its Christian identity but it may also suffer for it. Even today there is this temptation in India. The strong movement of Hindu communalism in India offers full inclusion to minority communities if they will describe themselves as Hindu-Christian or Hindu-Muslim. Christians can worship Jesus Christ in their own privacy, but they must acknowledge first that they are true Indians (defined as Hindu). If Asian communities were to accept this pluralist interpretation of Jesus as offered by Hindus or as defended by Hick, Samartha⁸ or Knitter⁹ they would lose their identity and dissipate into the religious landscape. They would be seen as another Asian sect having removed both the offense of the gospel and the center of the gospel.

It is also helpful to look at this pluralistic move, from a traditional to a mythic interpretation of Jesus Christ, from the Muslim perspective. A Muslim may be pleased by this democratization of Christology for the Christians (Jesus is like all other incarnations or Jesus is a prophet of God), but that is not the end of pluralism's demythologizing. Religious pluralism requires the same relativizing move for all religious claims, not just for one's own. Religious pluralism is absolute in this claim. Thus the same demythologizing and democratizing of claims must apply also to the Muslim believer. And yet the Islamic community is built around the confession, “There is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.” Pluralism requires that even though this is an exclusive claim it must be reinterpreted. Obviously few mullahs would stand for such a reinterpretation that would say something like, “Allah is the name for God for the Muslims and Mohammed is the Muslim's prophet, but there are many other equally valid prophets.” Muslims die for these exclusive claims. Religious pluralism in fact requires that the Islamic community deny its distinctive center built

around its central affirmations. Religions hold together around certain basic claims, and we argue here that the life and identity of the very community is lost if those central claims are relativized. This leads us to the second theme.

Suffering Community

It is hard to imagine that a pluralist would ever be persecuted for her or his faith. What uncompromising belief would they hold onto which would be an offense to the oppressor? Most of the terrible persecution of Christians in Asia have occurred not for major aggression and militant evangelistic work, but for minor improprieties, behaviors that most reasonable people would change. And yet Persian Christians would not honor the sacred fires of the Zoroastrians. Japanese Christians (as well as Chinese and Korean Christians under Japanese rule) would not bow down to a Shinto Shrine (a simple genuflect would suffice). Indian Christians today refuse to say that Jesus is a Lord, but insist that he is the Lord of all people, including Lord of the Dalits. Indonesian Christians insist on worshipping God in Christ and so churches are burned down and riots ensue. Absolute claims and absolute loyalty threatens the social harmony of a non-Christian state. Persecution of Christians in Asia has at times nearly or actually erased the Christian church. Such was the case in late Tang China, in 18th century Japan and such has been the case in North Korea. A pluralist cannot—logically speaking—be so unyielding to a mythic Christ (one of many) as to bring on persecution from those in authority. A pluralist is not a threat to the social order, for the pluralist is tolerant of other positions and other truth claims. And yet the Christian community has survived in Asia both through its clear identity with the Jesus Christ of Scripture and through terrible persecutions. The two are closely related and once again they find their home in Jesus. Not only Jesus' **self-understanding** as Son of God, but also Jesus' **lifestyle** of associating with the poor and outcast brought him into conflict with both the religious and secular leaders.¹⁰ His self-understanding was affirmed in his actions, and his lifestyle was both radical and attractive to the masses. Absolute loyalty to his lifestyle is based on faith in his self-understanding. He speaks the very word of God to us.

What western pluralists can learn from Asian Christians here is the inseparability of Jesus' concern for the outcast and Jesus' self-understanding as the Son of God. India is a case in point. Christian growth among the Dalits (outcast) in India is so rapid in India today that it is difficult to keep up with the villages and families that enter the church each week. These Dalits are often poorly educated or illiterate, and yet their commitment to Jesus Christ is to the Jesus who identified himself as the Son of God. They will not accept a reduced Jesus: a Jesus who is one of the many thousands of incarnations of God. They

are committed to Jesus who has power over spirits, over the caste system and over sin and death. "Good news to the poor" is proclaimed, and the "Kingdom of God is at hand." In light of the rapid growth of the church among Dalits in India, persecution both officially (from the Bharatha Janatha Party—BJP) and unofficially (from angry Hindu village mobs) has increased. If the presentation of Christ in India was not clearly on the side of the poor and outcast, the Dalits would not be coming to faith. On the other hand, if the presentation of Christ was without the clear and unapologetic proclamation that Jesus was God in the flesh, then there would be no reason to convert. The warp of Jesus' self-understanding, and the woof Jesus' lifestyle has been the making of the Christian community fabric in India.

Vinoth Ramachandra describes these twin features as the essence of the scandal of Jesus. For our purposes here, we carry the logic a step further and see that the scandal of Jesus becomes the scandal of the followers of Jesus. There is no denying that this fabric holds together, both in the biblical account and in the history of the church. A Christian fundamentalist may be uncomfortable with the scandal of Jesus' lifestyle and a pluralist may be uncomfortable with the scandal of Jesus' self-understanding, but the lifestyle and self-understanding are of one fabric. Pluralism, in lowering the Christology of Jesus also removes the power of transformation which raises the outcasts and saves the sinner. Pluralism's refashioning of Jesus to be one of many makes Jesus indistinguishable from the many other gods for the nations. The pluralist's Jesus will not produce martyrs in India, but neither will he reach the outcasts.

Witness in Bold Humility

The Greek word for witness is *martyria*, martyr. And so it is a natural transition from the suffering community to the witness of the community. Pluralism, as we noted, denies the distinctive identity of a minority Christian community, and dichotomizes the self-identity and lifestyle of Jesus. In addition pluralism calls into question the transforming power of Christian witness. What is true of the Christian community, no matter how small that community may be, is meant for all communities. Another way of phrasing this is that the gospel reality of God in Christ is an "open secret" meant for all.¹¹ A community centered on the Gospel is by definition a missionary community. Acceptance of the Messiah is acceptance of his mission. Conversely, privatized Christianity was never an option Jesus left open to his disciples. The one who was sent to the world sends us. This brings us into the very core of our Trinitarian faith. "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Christian communities in Asia have struggled with their faithfulness to God's mission often in times of great persecution and social pressure. We note that it has not been the mere presence of religious pluralism that has led to the reduction of Christian mission, but the threat of persecution or annihilation which has led certain Christians to accept a reduced form of culture-Christianity. Persian Christians living under the Sasanian rulers in the third through sixth centuries were a vital Christian community which faced a difficult choice: either become a non-missionary community (a ghetto or melet community), or face extinction. The persecution and the list of martyrs were extensive. Many small communities accepted a reduced mission, limited to self-contained survival. These communities survived by accepting Jesus as "their" savior, and acknowledging that other Persians had the Zoroastrian path to salvation. Each community did what was right in their own minds. One is not to judge the practice of many of these Christian communities, for their suffering was far greater than we can imagine. Our purpose for mentioning it here is to show that the reduction of Christian life to a non-missionary form was a choice that came under pressure of extinction, not a choice to recognize that all other religions are ways of salvation. Pluralism in Asia has often turned into religious oppression, but the mission of the church has seldom turned into self-suppression.

Our concern here is to understand the missionary nature of the church in the context of the modern endorsement of religious pluralism. What is the relationship of pluralism to Christian mission and how can that relationship be understood in ways that honor the Trinitarian and Christocentric nature of Christian community identity? The key, as we will see is two-fold. First, we must remember that the cause of the modern pluralist theology is found in the missionary movement. Secondly, we must say something about eschatology.

Pluralism, as we mentioned earlier is the kingdom striking back; Christian mission pushed the frontiers of the faith into other faith communities and as a result these faith communities became a challenge to traditional exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. But pluralism is not only the **product** of the missionary enterprise, it is also **part of** the missionary enterprise. The gospel of Jesus Christ is itself without limits: it is by nature an inclusive gospel, meant for all people. The gospel is to take root in all cultures and therefore it will take on all cultures. We might say that the gospel is meant to both transform and be transformed. As the gospel takes root in a predominately Hindu Indian culture it transforms oppressive structures and the exclusivism of the upper castes. Patterns of worship, moral and ethical behavior which deny the grace and law of Jesus Christ are challenged by Jesus Christ.

But this is only one side of the story. At the same time the gospel itself is transformed to become Indian. The very

words of Scripture are translated into Tamil or Hindi or Urdu. The Scripture is read with Indian or Pakistani eyes and it becomes a word to and for a local context. Jesus becomes the savior for the local Punjabi village, while still being the savior of the world. Because the gospel itself is transformed it has the power to transform. The gospel becomes relevant as a social irritant when it is transformed by local cultures. This incarnational move of the gospel in mission is never ending. As long as there are cultures and people who have not met the Jesus of their culture, the mission of the gospel is incomplete. There is an absolute plurality about the gospel. In this sense we need to recover the sense of plurality and inclusivity of the gospel, because these are concepts which are very much a part of the missionary nature of Christianity. The gospel of Scotland is not to look like the gospel of the Sea Dyak, and yet the gospel is meant for all these peoples.

This pluralism of the gospel may be very strange for us in the West, but that is because our gospel has been the dominant expression of Christianity for so long. We have become numb to the dynamic pluralistic nature of the gospel of Christ which is found on the missionary frontiers of the church. For many churches in the West the gospel has become so unitextual and bland, we might even say tame, that it is difficult to imagine that Pentecostal or African indigenous Christianity is really Christianity. But we must remember that the gospel is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is the gospel for and in all the nations. If the gospel is not transformed in a culture, it will not be able to transform that same culture.

The great Indian church leader M. M. Thomas once created a lively debate when he wrote about "Christ-centered syncretism." The problem was the last word. Syncretism had become a word reserved for mixing of religions in such a way that the original religions are lost. Syncretism described heresy. And yet Thomas was trying to recover the word to describe just how dynamic and profound is the process of contextualization. In a similar move, we must not consign the term "pluralism" to the trash pile of heresies. The word describes something important that happens as the church remains faithful to its missionary calling. The modern pluralism debate was spawned on the missionary borders of the faith and for that reason alone the word should be retained. We need this word to describe just what a strange and glorious banquet it will be when people from every tribe language are feasting in the kingdom of heaven. It is truly a banquet honoring the One (Jesus Christ) in the many (all nations). This is the fundamental meaning of Christian pluralism.

This leads us to the final observation regarding pluralism, **eschatology**. Various visions of the heavenly existence are given in Scripture (mansion, banquet, throne, heavenly city), but all of the images relate to the centrality of Jesus Christ as Lord ("I go and prepare a place for

you”) and Savior (“the Lamb who is on the throne”). It is a pluralistic existence. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9b). In this pluralism the one includes the many. Another way of expressing this is that the universality of the gospel is both commanded (“you shall be my witnesses”) and portrayed in Scripture (“every nation, tribe...”). But also the particularity of the gospel is both commanded (“in my name”) and portrayed (“the Lamb who is at the center of the throne”). Thus the universality of the gospel is witnessed to in the particular. The heavenly banquet is a pluralism of prodigal grace; grace overflowing through the life and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the particular and universal host, broken for the world.

This Christian pluralism is expressed in Asia every time a Malaysian Chinese goes to Cambodia to witness to Jesus Christ. Every time an ethnic Chin missionary in Burma (Myanmar) moves to Rangoon to tell the ethnic Burmese about Jesus Christ we see the particular expressed in the universal. Ethnic divisions are broken down when this gospel is proclaimed. Political and social divisions are broken down as Jesus’ life and self-understanding are proclaimed.

I attended a wedding in a Methodist church in Singapore in the early 1990s. The bride and groom were Tamil Indians and both were converts from Hindu families. Many of the wedding guests were Hindu. The groom, however was a seminary student and so he invited the whole pluralistic group from the seminary to attend. There were Chinese from China, Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia. There were two Americans, one Ethiopian, a couple from Sierra Leone some students from Thailand, a group from Myanmar, a young lady from the Philippines and another couple from Pakistan. All were invited to the wedding feast, but the ceremony and the feast were services of worship honoring Jesus Christ who saved this couple and who brought them together. All were invited to worship God in Christ singing praises and lifting prayers of thanksgiving. The gospel is gloriously

inclusive and pluralistic, centered on Jesus Christ. Pluralism is demanded of the gospel, but it is always a Christ-centered pluralism for which we strive and for which we pray. “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

¹Hick, John, “Spiritual Journey” in *God Has Many Names*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p.17.

²Hick, John, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1973/1993), p.x (1993 ed.)

³Ibid. p. xiii.

⁴Ibid. , p.x.

⁵It must be noted that this notion is not actually the fact.

Hinduism’s incarnations are basically mythic figures; their historic reality is of no fundamental importance. Buddhism’s founder, Siddhartha Gautama, did not claim divinity and his followers recorded this fact. In the Dhammapada, reported to be the teachings of the Buddha himself (especially chapter 12,) salvation is found in ones’ self. In Zoroastrianism, the prophet looks forward to a day when the savior figure (Shaoshant) will come; Zoroaster was a prophet who was not elevated by his followers. Mohammed was a prophet, not a divine incarnation.

⁶Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology Of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991). In describing mission and dialogue he says, “It is, however, a bold humility—or a humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses...”

⁷The Syriac Peshitta was the canonical text for East Syrian Christians and the life of Jesus was told as a single narrative from the four gospel accounts: diatessaron. Not until the fifth century did Persian Christians have the four gospels in Syriac.

⁸Samartha, Stanley, *One Christ--Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁹Swidler, Leonard and Mojzes, Paul, eds., *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997). This is a more finely nuanced argument from within Christian pluralism, containing critiques from both pluralists and non-pluralists.

¹⁰Ramachandra, Vinoth, from the chapter “The Scandal of Jesus” in *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

¹¹Newbiggin, Lesslie, *The Open Secret*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

Jesus Wasn't a Pluralist

by James R. Edwards

Reprinted with permission from Christianity Today, April 5, 1999, p. 64-66

I have often been invited by my denomination (PCUSA) to debate proponents of homosexual lifestyles, especially those who advocate the ordination of practicing homosexuals. One of the stock refrains that I hear in nearly every debate is that Christians who believe the practice of homosexuality is a sin and who refuse to ordain practicing homosexuals are guilty of an ugly and punitive exclusiveness that is contrary to the open, inviting, and inclusive spirit and practice of Jesus.

Those who oppose homosexuality are accused of “a selective reading of a few Old Testament texts,” as the refrain goes and are dismissed as legalists who fail to understand the grace of Christ that is offered in the gospel to all persons, regardless of their condition. Repeatedly I have been reminded that since we all are sinners, heterosexuals have no right to single out homosexuality as a deviant lifestyle.

So runs the argument, which usually garners easy assent in our permissive day. But the argument is mistaken—and rendered so by Jesus himself.

In many respects, Jesus was inclusive. He offered forgiveness and fellowship to outcasts within Judaism, and to Gentiles outside it, in a way that was unprecedented among Jewish rabbis. But in other respects, Jesus was more exclusive than his Jewish contemporaries: he refused political alliances with Herod Antipas, the “fox” (Luke 13:32) who beheaded John the Baptist; he refused to replace God with Torah (or with any ideology); and he refused to identify the kingdom of God with any of the prevailing sects of Judaism.

The first century pulsated with a plethora of mystery cults and Greco-Roman religions, including quasi-emperor worship, many of which penetrated into Palestine. Judaism, often thought of as ethnically and religiously homogeneous, was actually a patchwork of royalists (Herodians), isolationists and purists (Essenes), liberation movements (Zealots and Sicarii), and renewal movements (John the Baptist and Jesus), in addition to establishment Pharisees and Sadducees.

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How did Jesus relate to this diversity? Consider only the two most centrist sects, the Pharisees and Sadducees. There is no record that Jesus sought to engage the Sadducees—or the Sanhedrin dominated by them—with his message and movement. There are, to be sure, isolated references in the Gospels to Jesus’ disputes with Sadducees and the Sanhedrin, but it was they—not he—who initiated contact. For his part, Jesus remained aloof from the Sadducees and from their considerable influence on Judaism.

Jesus, however, did seek to engage the Pharisees with his message and movement. Why the Pharisees and not the Sadducees? The answer seems to be that on confessional grounds—belief in divine providence, the sinfulness of humanity the resurrection from the dead, and the existence of the spiritual world of angels and demons—Jesus and the Pharisees shared common ground. (That is why they disagreed so!) Of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said: “Obey whatever they say to you, but don’t follow their example” (Matt. 23:3, NLT). The Sadducees did not share this common confessional ground with Jesus, and the New Testament leaves no record that Jesus shared the kingdom with them.

Nor was Jesus’ response to the Sadducees unique. There is no record that Jesus sympathized with either the Zealots or Herodians, two influential (though vastly different) political parties. As for the Essenes—a rigorous and respectable sect in first-century Judaism, knowledge of whom has been greatly enhanced by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls—they are not once mentioned in the New Testament.

Unlike the general tendency of mainline churches today, Jesus did not forge alliances with the dominant ideologies of his day. He spoke of his way as steep, narrow, and difficult, as opposed to the broad and easy way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). He characterized his coming not in terms of harmony and tranquility, but as a sword that cuts and divides (Matt. 10:34), taking precedence over all other allegiances, even causing division among intimate relationships “father against son...daughter against mother” (Luke 12:53).

Step by step in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), Jesus sets forth his teachings in contrast to other ways. God and Mammon are opposed to one another, they

divide the world, and one cannot serve them both (Matt. 6:24). Indifference to the rigorous nature of the kingdom of God has catastrophic consequences: many who assume they belong on the inside with Jesus find themselves standing outside the kingdom, hearing from the Lord, “I never knew you” (Luke 13:23-30).

The early church followed Jesus’ particularity with reference to purity of doctrine and fellowship. Those who cause division and act contrary to the doctrine once taught should be avoided, “for they do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 16:17-18). The adulterated gospel of Galatia was a false gospel, no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-10). Representatives of a false gospel in Philippi are “evil workers,” “dogs” to be shunned (Phil. 3:2). The sharp rebukes of false teaching and teachers in the Pastoral Letters, 2 Peter, and Jude illustrate the zeal of the early church to maintain purity of faith and defend it from corruption. With the single exception of Philemon, every book of the New Testament mentions doctrinal error and testifies in one way or another that to preserve the purity of faith and unity of the church, false doctrine and exclusion of those who practice it must be condemned.

The gospel proclaimed by Jesus produced a “crisis,” to use the language of the fourth Gospel. It demanded hearing, discerning, deciding, following, and thus forsaking and excluding incompatible alternatives. The “table” to which Jesus invited people was not defined by Torah or the tradition of the elders, much less by the heterodox vision of Hellenism: it was defined and determined by himself.

The First Order of Business

Browse through the religion section of a good bookstore today. There are no fewer than a dozen big sellers on the shelves that, with considerable erudition and scholarly authority, intend nothing less than a wholesale reformulation of Christianity. Their authors are Episcopal bishops, members of the Jesus Seminar, professors, Re-imaginers, New Agers, and mainliners of all sorts. They are not “outsiders,” but in one way or another they are connected with the church.

What these diverse and often impressive studies share in common is their dissatisfaction with confessional and creedal Christianity and their attempt to replace it with something more palatable. Invariably, the point of attack is the person and work of Jesus Christ. If Jesus can be unseated as Son of God or compromised as the sole Savior of the world or demoted from one who sits at the right hand of the Father and will some day judge the world, then Christianity can be made into something other than the evangelical faith.

In the second century, Irenaeus, the brilliant defender of orthodoxy, argued that an improper estimation of Jesus Christ lies at the root of all heresy (*Against All Heresies*).

Just as an entire building is rendered fundamentally true by a properly laid cornerstone, so a proper Christology determines right theology and ecclesiology. The first order of business, then as now, is to recover the centrality of the “second article” of the Apostles’ creed relating to the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is because the saving benefits that Scripture and creed ascribe solely to Jesus Christ are increasingly in our day being ascribed to creation and human nature.

In most mainline denominations, there is confusion over whether Jesus is the Lord, or a lord; whether God’s will is known uniquely from Scripture and creed, or whether God’s will is known through changing social custom; whether the love of God is known through Christ, or apart from Christ; whether apart from grace we stand condemned as sinners, or whether our nature is condoned by God without redemption and transformation; and whether the work of Christ on the cross and sanctification by the Holy Spirit alone render life pleasing to God, or whether unredeemed human nature is sufficiently pleasing to God.

American Church Captive

We need to ask the question: What does American pluralism have to do with “our common salvation” (Jude 3) that has been believed everywhere, always, and by all?

We Americans are deeply committed to the just and equitable access of all citizens to the rights and freedoms guaranteed by a constitutional democracy. Whether theologically conservative or liberal, most of us affirm the values of tolerance, inclusiveness, diversity, and pluralism. These values, in fact, seem so inviolable and inherent that we reflexively transfer them to the mission of the church.

We may even assume that these American values are interchangeable with the purposes of the church. The result is that we are now experiencing in the mainline the reverse of what happened in seventeenth-century Puritan America, where church norms were imposed on society at large, violating certain civil rights by narrow theological concerns. Today, civil norms, as defined by pluralism, inclusivism, and tolerance without regard to merit, are being imposed on the church, threatening to jeopardize its message and mission.

I think most Christians agree that the love of God and the death of Jesus Christ for sinful humanity obligate Christians to acts of compassion, aid, and defense in the name of that love, even for those with whom they disagree. The results of such acts can indeed be described by terms like *inclusiveness* and *tolerance*, and are, in my judgment, the noblest expressions of it. But such attitudes and acts derive not from themselves but from the love and

justice of God. (See “Are You Tolerant?” CT, Jan. 11, 1999, p. 42.)

The problem arises from assuming that pluralism, diversity, and inclusiveness are in themselves Christian values. They are not automatically so. Today, however, pluralism is asserted as a primary value itself. Marvin Ellison (in *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* [Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996]) gives architectural shape to a very different ethic and church when he claims, “The fundamental ground rule for liberating sexual ethics is that voices from the margins must be brought to the center of the conversation on their own terms.” If Ellison is right, the church’s one foundation is no longer Jesus Christ her Lord, but “voices from the margins.” Pluralism, not theological and confessional orthodoxy, guarantees a place at the table.

I believe that Ellison’s position and those like it are mistaken because they hold the church in a Babylonian captivity to ideologies and norms that cannot be interchanged with the “faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Nowhere in Scripture or creed are pluralism, inclusivism, and diversity declared the specific ends of the church. They indeed play a role, but they play a role in subordination to the great ends of the faith, not as replacements for them!

Liberating the Church

Years ago Dorothy Sayers argued in *Creed or Chaos?* for a hard and solid Christianity over a soft Christianity. Sayers vigorously challenged the assumption that the way to make Christianity palatable was to dilute its theological content, or strip it altogether and substitute soft and vague concepts of Christian sentiment.

Sayers describes our predicament today in the mainline American churches. We have ceased calling sinners to repentance, and church discipline is lax or nonexistent. We have been less than zealous for the truth of the gospel and purity of faith. We have failed to teach our children the faith. We have been indifferent to apostasy, mission, and personal holiness.

Mainline Protestantism has historically championed the ideals of liberal democracy. In doing so it has too comfortably and uncritically regarded society as a social extension of the church. That accommodation is no longer possible—if it ever was. The pluralism of modern culture is not only not compatible with the evangelical faith, but increasingly inimical to it.

The confusion in the mainline today with regard to cultural norms is due to our continuing to think of the church in Constantinian terms as a national institution, a *Volkskirche*, that gives voice to the dominant culture. That is the wrong model. The church is no longer a majority church, but a diaspora church. We need to unlearn old ways. The task before us is neither to imitate the culture nor blindly react to it, but to pray for sanctified wisdom that the church may become a critical, confronting, and compassionate voice for salvation within the culture.

The church of the former East Germany may be an instructive model for us today. During its 40 years in the wilderness of communism, the church was forced to be the church neither for communism nor against it—for in either case communism would be a controlling factor; it was the church *within* communism, holding fast to its creedal foundations and accepting its mandate not to mirror society but to bear witness to it from the sole promise of the gospel. The allegiance of the church in East Germany to the mandate of the gospel produced an identity and power against which the state was increasingly defenseless. Although the church did not set out to overthrow communism, it played no small role in its eventual downfall.

Today, we too must differentiate between the norms of society we inherit and the greater norms of the church to which we have been called. Athens is not interchangeable with Jerusalem, nor the city of God with the city of man. Let the church be the church! We must indeed render to Caesar what is Caesar’s: equal access—even to those with whom we disagree—to the rights and responsibilities of a constitutional democracy. But we have a higher allegiance to render to God what is God’s. Let the church be liberated from a false allegiance to ideological pluralism and liberated for the great ends for which it was created—to glorify God and bear a redeeming witness to the world.

Unity and Diversity: God's Idea, or Ours?

by Michael Boyland

Everything is made to worship God

God has a plan for history. His purpose is that the world he created should reflect his glory. All creation is intended to show the praise of God, for everything God has created finds its fulfillment in echoing the wonders of God's character. The whole world is created to give God glory, as Psalm 148 says:

Praise him, all his angels,
Praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon,
Praise him all you shining stars...
You great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning
And hail, snow and clouds...
Fruit trees and all cedars,
Wild animals and all cattle,
Small creatures and flying birds,
Kings of the earth and all nations,
Young men and women, old men and children.
Let them praise the name of the Lord.¹

Genesis chapter one shows God taking the initiative as the universe unfolds in its complexity of stars, sun and moon, land and water masses, and vegetable and animal life. This great diversity, held together in the unity of creation, shows God's greatness as nothing else could. The millions of species of beetles, the billions of galaxies each with its billions of stars, demonstrate God's wisdom and power. Unity is not uniformity. Uniformity would be a piece of music written with one single note; unity is a chorale sung by a choir. God's glory shines through the diversity of species and life forms united in their dependence on the Creator.

Since everything that is made reflects the character of the One who created it all, women and men have a vital role to play. Genesis 1:27-28 tells of the creation of human beings and of God's purpose for them.

So God created human beings in his own image, In the image of God he created them; Male and female he created them...God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it..." And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

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The first people were not made to lounge in a garden, but to launch out to the world. There is an outward-bound thrust to humanity. The human race is made to represent God on the earth. They have the capacity to resonate with God's qualities as nothing else can. God wants to see the world filled with beings who find their meaning in him. This plan has not changed throughout the vicissitudes of history.

The entry of evil into the world that God created made things much more complicated. Sin defaced the bright image of God in every living person. The likeness of the Creator was so tarnished as to be unrecognizable. Deceit and distrust displaced the God-given love one person has for another. Greed took over from holiness. Violence broke the unity that held the creation together. Discord shattered the symphony, as people trusted in themselves rather than in God. They brought chaos by worshipping created things rather than the creator. Diversity degenerated into confusion.

Yet God promised ultimately to defeat evil. In Genesis 3:15 he told the serpent, "The offspring of the woman will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." In this cryptic phrase, God pledges that there will be an Individual who will defeat evil at the cost of his own suffering. Salvation is an act that only God can bring about. It has to come through a mediator, and it affects the whole human race. God's promise that his love will triumph through suffering is given to the representatives of all humankind. It holds for the Chinese, the Native American, and the European too.

Jesus Christ fulfilled this covenant promise, the protoevangelion of Genesis 3:15. He is the Seed of the woman. He crushed the head of the serpent, the evil one, the accuser.

God wants people to glorify him and enjoy him forever, because it is for this that we are made. His purpose is that every human language be used to tell of his goodness and that each ethnic group, race and tribe contribute to the universal song of praise to the Creator and the Redeemer. God is a missionary God. As John Piper says, "mission exists because worship does not." Worship is ultimate and eternal. Missions is temporary, a necessary expedient to bring people to worship God. As long as there are people who do not render reverence to God, and

as long as the Lord tarries, missions are needed to spread abroad the love of God.

God's Plan Involves Nations and Peoples

Genesis 10 shows the human race divided into ethnic groups, lineages, languages, territories, nations and peoples (Genesis 10:5). God made people to be together, and he sees human beings as they relate to each other.

Languages and customs do make barriers that we have to cross when we try to understand each other, but they also have great capacity to glorify God in a myriad of ways. All the segments of mankind can be redeemed to show the power and wisdom of the One who created humans in all their diversity. Every language can tell of his goodness and power.

Genesis 10 has the same sense of harmonious pattern that we see in Genesis 1. The 6,703 languages that God has spread abroad in the earth³ show how he takes pleasure in variety. Diversity within the unity of dependence on God reflects his glory and his creative power. Genesis 10 shows the peoples of the world in their potential to reflect the goodness of God.

In Genesis 11 we see the nations in their misery, alienated from God through pride and greed. The fall of the nations in Genesis 11 is very much like the fall of the individuals in Genesis 3. The comforts of a city enticed the builders of Babel rather as the flavor of the forbidden fruit lured Eve and Adam (Genesis 3:6). The fruit held a lot of eye appeal to Eve and the construction bosses wanted people to look at their temple as it towered above the flat plain. As Eve and Adam wanted the fruit for the cleverness it gave, so the city builders sought the fame that comes from "making a great name for themselves." The three-fold temptation that trapped Adam and Eve's was also the downfall of Babel. In a word, it was the appeal to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).

To short-circuit the impending disaster, God dispersed people around the earth. He confused their language and scattered them abroad (Genesis 11:8). The net result of all their labors is a half-built ruin. Since the motley cultures and languages were not held together in the unity of worship to God, the chorale degenerated into cacophony.

Jesus Brings Unity

Our Lord Jesus Christ had a great deal to say about His Father's plan to bring the diverse peoples of the earth into divine unity. "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God," (Luke 13:29) is just one of his many statements on this theme.

The central theme of the Bible is Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection, which will bring some from every people group on earth into the forever family of God. Each of the four Gospels and the book of Acts quote Jesus' instructions to bring the good news to the whole world. He promised that he would send his Holy Spirit to give his followers power to make disciples of all nations.

But more than talking, Jesus did something to make unity possible. "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Colossians 1:19, 20) Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is the only center strong enough to rebuild the shattered shards of the human race into a vessel worthy of his presence. The early church was held together by the confidence that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Diversity Increases in the Early Church

For the first couple of decades the followers of Jesus were almost exclusively Jewish. Some spoke Greek and some spoke Aramaic, but they all lived in communities centered on the synagogue, all ate only food prepared according to the law of the Talmud, all regarded a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem as a high point of their religious life. The earliest church showed no more diversity than did Judaism of the time.

As the church began to expand, however, it had to deal with the issues at which Jesus had only hinted when he said, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:16) The good news spread through the eastern end of the Mediterranean and west to Mesopotamia. In Antioch in Syria, the third largest city of the Roman Empire, a people movement to Jesus began among non-Jews.

The worldwide church shows huge diversity, held together by dedication to Jesus Christ and based upon the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. In every nation on earth there now are some who are "fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20). Jesus' people are called by many different names. Some do not even call themselves Christians, as the first followers of Jesus were not called Christians, but prefer the name "Messianic Jew" or "Muslim follower of Christ." It was the Gentile believers in Antioch who were first dubbed with that derogatory epithet. The point is not the name of the association, but the unity of the Holy Spirit. Christ's death and resurrection made possible the unity of his body on earth.

Romans: A Practical Approach to Unity and Diversity

Romans is a letter from a missionary to a mission church. Paul grapples with the question of how to maintain unity in Christ in the face of human diversity. “The Gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Romans 1:16).

Paul lays down the principles by which different ethnic groups can get on together in the same church. “Some consider one day more sacred than another; others consider every day alike. Everybody should be fully convinced in his or her own mind....If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord” (Romans 14:5, 8). This is the nitty-gritty stuff of living in unity with diversity.

All who come to Christ receive what he has to give into their empty hands. He gives the life-changing power of his Holy Spirit. “The law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death...the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.” (Romans 8:2, 6). “Now that you have been set free from sin and you have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (Romans 6:22). Jesus offers forgiveness of sin. More, and very importantly, he gives the strength to leave sin behind. Unity is found as people of every stripe face the cross of Christ and are drawn by its life-changing power. Unity is found in the simple statement, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

As the good news spreads it transforms not only individuals, but also whole societies. Just as a person who comes into Christ is made new, so a whole group of people can turn to Christ and find new life without losing their cultural identity. In Christ, their language and many of their customs remain the same, but some things are changed. The presence of Christ reduces drunkenness, revenge killings, sexual promiscuity, grinding down the poor. The Gospel of Jesus Christ changes life for the better.

Heaven Is A Mixed Neighborhood

We may think that the varied hues of humanity will be bleached to a heavenly uniformity in the unmediated presence of God. Some suppose that the distinctions of tribe and people group will be pressed out on an apocalyptic ironing board. Not so. The Revelation of Jesus Christ, the last book of the Bible, shows many different “nations, tribes, peoples and languages” as together they worship God and the Lamb (Revelation 7:9). Eternity does not obliterate the diversity of mankind. Revelation 21:3 actually says, “They will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them and be their God.” Most translators balk at the plural and render it “his people,” but the text maintains the diversity of people groups and tribes and tongues as God wipes away every tear from their eyes.

God’s glory is reflected in a variety of styles, languages and musical styles. The multitude without number worshipping God in heaven is from every tribe and tongue and language and people. In our world there are both the unchurched and the unreached. The unchurched are those who could go to church if they wanted to, but do not choose to do so.

The unreached, on the other hand, are those who do not have access to any church. There is no church in their neighborhood, or the local Christians speak a different language or eat things they may consider unclean. We long for these groups of unreached people to join God’s family and find eternal life in Jesus Christ. But for them to hear and see an invitation that they can understand and accept, someone has to cross a barrier of language and custom, as the apostle Paul did. Only thus can the full human diversity be brought into the unity of Christ.

Unity and Diversity

Jesus promised that when he was lifted up from the earth, he would draw all people to himself (John 12:32). When people are moving closer to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, they can find unity. God is glorified by the vast array of stars and galaxies, and by the manifold forms of life. The varied ways of men and women also give him glory when they are directed to him. The unity in Jesus Christ is imperfect as yet, but it is real. True unity is founded in people’s faithfulness to God and in the faithfulness of God to his people.

The church in our time is no longer centered on the North Atlantic nations. Most followers of Jesus live in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Most cross-cultural missionaries come from those regions, where the churches are growing the fastest.

The simple affirmation, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” is the unbreakable cord that ties together the church of Jesus Christ, the largest movement of all human history. To say, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” is to affirm that the Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee and who died on Golgotha is God, Savior, and Victor over sin and death. He is big enough to encompass great diversity, and strong enough to bring unity.

1. Bible quotations are from the NIV, Inclusive edition.
2. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Regal Press.
3. Barbara Grimes, *Ethnologue*, Thirteenth edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL, 1997.

Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

Study 2: The Church in the World

by Rev. Mark Atkinson, PCUSA pastor in Warsaw, Poland.

Prologue -- Revelation 1:1-8

Revelation begins: *The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him to show His servants--things which must shortly take place.*¹

Who is taking the initiative to reveal himself? Who is the subject of that revelation? Who is the means of the revelation? To whom is the revelation ultimately given?

The phrase *things which must shortly take place* must be understood in light of the Apocalyptic literature of the time. In Apocalyptic literature, drawing upon Daniel 2:28, the phrase *latter days* is a code phrase for a time far in the future. By using this phrase, John is telling us that in the coming of Christ, the latter days have arrived. Hence the revelation being given, though it bears many similarities to first century Apocalyptic literature, is not to be seen as describing events far in the future. It is a revelation given to the church today, for its work and ministry and comfort, for the latter days have arrived.

The author identifies himself as John, nothing more. He does not need to say more. He was well known to his readers. Early church tradition is consistent in identifying the author as John the Apostle. He had been Bishop of Ephesus for years before his exile to the island of Patmos.

He would have been in his eighties at this time. He is the only one of the twelve who died a natural death. He was a man who embodied the transforming power of Jesus Christ. When he first met Jesus he was a hot headed youth, having earned, together with his brother, the nickname, *Sons of Thunder*. Church tradition tells us he ended his life having been given a new nickname, the *Apostle of Love*, derived from his habit of ending letters and sermons with the words: *Little children, love one another.*

Revelation is addressed to the seven churches of Asia. Yet we know that there were at least ten churches in Asia Minor at this time. We will explore the symbolic meanings of biblical numbers later. Suffice it to note at this time that the reference to the *seven churches* is best understood as meaning *all the church*.

What is the three-fold-office John uses to describe Jesus Christ? How might this description of Christ's work, accomplishment, and authority provide encouragement to Christians facing an uncertain future?

What great truth about Jesus Christ is affirmed in v. 7? While this is encouragement to believers, what is the response of the world?

In v. 8 we find one truth about God repeated in four different ways. Who is speaking? What is he revealing about himself? How might this aspect of God's character be encouraging for a church facing persecution?

Scene 1: The Church in the World -- 1:9 - 3:22

The Church Centered Upon Christ 1:9-20

Any good pastor will seek to identify with his/her flock. How does John identify with his readers? What does John see? List the key elements.

There is no question that John's first sight is of Jesus Christ in majesty and glory. Vs. 17-18 make it certain that the *One like the Son of Man* is our risen Lord. Where is Jesus Christ when John first sees him? According to v. 20, what do the seven lampstands represent? What meaning then would you draw, to the symbolism of this first vision of Jesus Christ standing in the midst of the seven lampstands?

The lampstands represent the church scattered in the world. We first see Jesus standing in their midst. In this he is the fulfillment of the promise of the prophets, he is Emmanuel, God with us.

Now look at how the Lord is attired. It may be intended to reflect the clothing of the High Priest, revealing Jesus Christ to be the one true mediator between God and man. How are his eyes described? What does that suggest to you about the Lord? What color is his hair? What might that mean? His feet are described as bronze. What might that image suggest about firmness and foundation? Have you ever stood beside a large waterfall? John says the Lord's voice was like *many waters*. What does that suggest to you about Jesus' voice and authority?

What does the Lord hold in his right hand? The right hand is the hand of readiness. A soldier with sword drawn is ready to fight. Think about the ancient world and the common belief that the stars and planets controlled human events. What might John be suggesting as he writes of Jesus Christ holding the stars?

The Letters to the Seven Churches 2:1- 3:22

Ephesus 2:1-7

Note that each of the letters to these seven churches are addressed *to the angel of the church of...* Angels are messengers. This formulation therefore probably means that Christ is addressing, the prevailing spirit, of each particular church. So let us examine the prevailing spirit of the church at Ephesus. What is she commended for? Nevertheless, the Lord has a complaint to bring. What is it? How important is this one thing lacking? (See I Corinthians 13:1-3). In what ways might a church today face a similar temptation? Do you think this can be a temptation for individual believers as well?

Five of the seven churches are given warnings by Christ. Two, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are facing or about to face persecution, respectively. To them Christ speaks a word of encouragement. Only the first and last churches, Ephesus and Laodicea, are threatened with the severe judgment of outright extinction. Why do you think our Lord's judgment on Ephesus would be so great? In fact Ephesus' lampstand was removed. Because its harbor kept silting over, the city eventually was abandoned. Since it had not been destroyed by war, today the ruins of Ephesus are among the most impressive in the Middle East. The silting has continued through the centuries. The ruins are now five miles from the coast.

Smyrna 2:10-11

The Biblical town of Smyrna was located at the site of the modern town of Izmir, Turkey. Like several of the towns to which these seven letters were addressed, it was known for its cult of emperor worship. What is the imminent threat the church at Smyrna is facing, according to v. 10? Who is the primary source for the persecution of the Christians of Smyrna? They believe they are serving God in persecuting the Church. According to the Lord, who are they truly serving?

How is the church at Smyrna described? What contrasts does Christ make between the church's outward appearance and its spiritual reality?

How does the Lord offer encouragement to this church about to face persecution? What is the promise for those who may suffer even unto death?

How long will be the time of suffering? We can be sure that this is a symbolic, not a literal number. What is Christ saying to the church when he tells them that the length of the time of their suffering will be days, as opposed to months or years?

When we face trial and difficulty in life, it is often our prayer that God would remove the tribulation from us. How do you think Christ's words of encouragement might suggest we change the nature of our petitions during such troubling times?

Pergamum 2:12-17

What is the temptation facing the Pergamum church? What sin in their midst do they tolerate?

Take the time to read Numbers 22 to learn the story of Balaam and Balak. Balak finds that he is thwarted by Almighty God in his hiring of Balaam to curse the Israelite people. Now read Numbers 25:1-4. How does this alternative plan proposed by Balaam accomplish the same end by another means? What does this tell us is the nature of the failing of the church at Pergamum? What does this suggest to us about the importance of right teaching and doctrine in the church?

In v. 16 we find a sobering warning of what will happen if the Pergamum church does not repent, permitting the false teachers in her midst to continue? What is that warning?

The letters to the Seven Churches can be seen as describing the state of the church. In differing times and places, one letter might be more applicable to a church than another. I believe that it is the letter to Pergamum that is the message most applicable to the PC(USA) today. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

The world seeks to give to the church a choice: persecution or seduction. Pergamum was the place of Satan's throne: probably a reference to the large temple to Zeus in the city. The Lord refers (v. 13) to a prior time of persecution when a believer named Antipas was martyred. The church apparently held firm during persecution only to be compromised by theological seduction.

Thyatira 2:18-29

How is the church at Thyatira characterized? For what does Christ commend them? Does it seem to you that this was a vibrant, active church? At the same time, there is a problem, a corruption in their midst. What is it? Christ calls this woman Jezebel. The original Jezebel (see I Kings 16:31, 19:1-2, 21:5-26, and II Kings 9:30-37) led God's people into idolatry and sexual immorality. Is there a word for our churches today from the letter to Thyatira? Are we too tolerant of moral sin in our midst?

In v. 20 the Lord chastises the church for permitting Jezebel to teach in their midst. How closely should church leaders monitor what is taught in our Sunday schools, pulpits and seminaries? If there were a *Jezebel* in our midst today, could PC(USA) find the courage and conviction to silence her?

In vs. 24-25 the Lord gives his instruction to those who are faithful at Thyatira. What are they to do? Christ called the church at Pergamum to repent. Why do you think he does not call Thyatira to do so?

Sardis 3:1-6

Sardis was a city of great wealth. The legend of King Midas arose here. Is Sardis an active church? Are her activities what Christ desires? Program and activities are not the same as Christ centered spiritual vitality. What do you believe are the necessary ingredients for a truly healthy church?

Here we have a church that appears healthy to outside observers, but is dead or dying inwardly. What instruction does the Lord give to Sardis? Many congregations today face similar temptation. Like ancient Sardis, we too are rich. We run the risk of filling our time with church activities while neglecting the spiritual life. If the risen Christ were to send a letter to your local congregation, what would he commend? What would he rebuke?

Philadelphia 3:7 - 13

List the things for which Christ praises this church in v.8. He also tells them that he has given them *an open door*. What do you think he intends by this image?

In v. 10 he tells them they are about to face a time of trial. They are opposed by *the synagogue of Satan*: those who believe they are serving God, but are not. Which do you think is more difficult, to face opposition and hardship from those who believe they are serving God in harming you, or from those who are indifferent to the things of God? Why? Why not?

Why do you think there is no rebuke given to the church of Philadelphia?

On a first reading, v. 9 is very surprising. It is reasonable to assume, since to assume otherwise would run contrary to the teaching of the rest of Scripture, that the only true object of worship is God himself, that when the church's opponents fall at the feet of the Philadelphian believers, they are not worshipping them. What other possible meanings might be intended? What else does verse 9 say about the significance of this event? How would this verse strengthen the hearts of those about to face *an hour of trial*?

What are other words of encouragement in this letter do we see that Christ offers to a church facing persecution?

Laodicea 3:14-22

How would you characterize the problem with the Laodicean church? What are the three aspects of her self perception? What are the Lord's three assessments of her true state? Can you think of modern examples in which a church's self perception might be at odds with the perception of her Lord and Master?

The town of Laodicea in the ancient world was known for its finances, its production of an eye ointment (cf. v. 18), and the lime-laden lukewarm water that flowed from a spring six miles away. Apparently the Laodicean church

was relying upon these material resources and not upon the Lord. Remembering the contrast between their self perception and our Lord's assessment, what three things does Jesus offer to give to them? Why?

Christ condemns the Laodicean church for its lukewarmness. Why do you think that it is preferable to be hot or cold over merely lukewarm? How does the Lord characterize the meaning and purpose of his chastisement in v. 19? How might Proverbs 13:24 help us understand the harshness of Jesus' words to this church?

Revelation 3:20 is one of the most well known verses in New Testament. It is often applied in evangelistic contexts in which a non-believer is exhorted to open the door of his heart to Jesus, receiving him as Lord and Savior. Whom is the Lord addressing in v. 20, believers, or non-believers? What does this suggest to you about the right application of this verse in the life of the church? Is this an invitation to evangelism? Or is it a call to reformation? V. 21 is an invitation to those who *overcome*. What is it they must overcome?

Review of the Letters to the Seven Churches.

In one or two words, how would you summarize the spiritual need of each of the Seven Churches? Some of the churches are rebuked for having lost a key element of spiritual vitality. How would you summarize what they have lost? Some of the churches are specifically praised for aspects of their life and ministry. How would you summarize what they are doing that earns the Lord's approval.

	Need	Loss	Praise
Ephesus	_____	_____	_____
Smyrna	_____	_____	
Pergamum	_____	_____	_____
Thyatira	_____	_____	_____
Sardis	_____	_____	
Philadelphia	_____	_____	
Laodicea	_____	_____	

We have now completed the first of the eight scenes of Revelation: The Church in the World.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.



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