



A Colony of Heaven



TITLE & AUTHOR

A Colony of Heaven
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I'd like to share with you a vision. I understand it to be the Lord's vision of His Church (the Ekklesia), as seen in the New Testament scriptures: *A multi-ethnic community of people who celebrate Jesus above their ethnicities* - namely, **a church built upon the Foundation of Christ**, rather than built upon any homogeneous grouping, ethnic affiliation, or cultural distinctive.



“Has Christ Been Divided?”

In America, almost all who still attend church worship services attend homogeneous¹ churches – including those groups which identify with the label, “Ekklesia”.²

¹ **The homogenous unit principle** states that people are a part of units which *"effectively function in a common frame of reference"* (Charles Kraft). As members of these cohesive units, people, when encountered with the gospel prefer to make a change in their religion *"without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers"* (Donald McGavran). This principle of homogeneity continues beyond merely the stage of evangelism and conversion into the life of an established church. It is estimated that 95 to 98% of churches in the world are homogenous (Peter Wagner). Homogeneity is thriving in the church.

² **Some thoughts on using the word “Ekklesia”:** Not everyone identifying with the word “church” is part of the Ecclesia of God. There is only one true Church made up of those who have received the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9-10) - those who “possess the Son”. (1 John 5:11-12) However, contrary to what is in vogue today for some, I make no distinction between the Greek word, ekklesia, and its English translation, “church”. I use the two words interchangeably. If I use the word “church”, I mean the full and accurate biblical meaning of “ekklesia”. Simply using the Greek word, ekklesia, in and of itself, helps no one understand the biblical meaning. The biblical meaning will always require explanation for the unlearned. Therefore, I think the English words, “church”, or “assembly”, or “community” are adequate translations. When writing, I sometimes find myself leaning towards using terms like “the people of God”, or “the disciples of the kingdom”, or “the followers of Christ” - depending on the context. Furthermore, not identifying as “Church” does not “automatically” make us the “Ekklesia”. If we are going to identify as the “Ekklesia”, there must be the reality of being and living as “called out” and “gathered together” and engaged in matters of the Kingdom. (it’s the latter that is demonstratively lacking today.) Donning the Greek word is duplicitous and inconsistent. If that were the thing to do, why aren’t we using Greek words to communicate 100s of other New Covenant truths? Moreover, don’t the words “congregation” and “assembly” also conjure up images of people sitting in a building? Doesn’t the term “ekklesia” conjure up the connotation “ecclesiastical” (man-made church systems)? We also have to reckon with Paul’s injunction: “Solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers.” (2 Timothy 2:14) What do we do with that? I think we are still “missing the mark” and “falling short” with all of this.

As “consumers”, we have succumbed to being relegated into various targeted market groups, and as “customers” have chosen to attend certain churches based on a variety of options offered and our personal preferences. For example: Most Whites still attend a church in the suburb in which they live, with people of the same income level, education, generation,³ and/or the same preferences for style of worship⁴. Most African Americans attend a “Black Church” because of the style of the music⁵ and the preaching, and because of the over-all culture which carries over into the churches.⁶ Most Hispanic people attend a Hispanic church because “Se habla Espanol”, and they desire to keep their Latino language and culture alive and well in America. These choices are not based on necessities like language, physical proximity, etc. They are based, blatantly, on cultural preference and cultural pride. And, although it would be an understatement to say it is “going against the flow” and “politically incorrect”, that is specifically what I am challenging here.⁷

³ Builders / Silent Generation (1928-1945), Boomers (1946-1964), Busters / Gen X (1965-1980), Bridgers / Millennials (1981 - 1996), Gen Z (1997- 2012)

⁴ Traditional, Contemporary, Blended, Emerging, et al.

⁵ I am a musician, and I would say that my favorite musical styles are rooted in African American Spirituals, Gospel, Blues, and Jazz.

⁶ There are many aspects of the African American culture of previous generations which I hold in high esteem and find inspiring. At the same time, I think that White Americans have lost and be restored to aspects of character found in previous generations. For example, an understanding of character shaped through suffering, the value placed on family, and respect for elders, et al.

⁷ I speak from the following life-experience: I am an “Anglo” Boomer, married to a “Latino” Builder, have lived in the North, South and Midwest USA and also in

Please don't misunderstand me: I have very much respect for – and experience in - cultural diversity: I enjoy my Italian heritage – especially the food! But, to me, the idea of belonging to a church comprised of only those who are of Italian extraction is just plain silly. I also very much appreciate the Latino culture – I think that may have something to do with my marrying a Latina! As missionaries in South Africa for 13 years, my wife and I ministered into and absolutely enjoyed the diversity of cultures in that nation – African (9 major tribes), Afrikaans (Dutch extraction), Coloured (mixture of African and European), British, Indian, and Portuguese. We lived and ministered in South Africa both during and after “Apartheid”. We went on a missions to Botswana and Zimbabwe. I have been excited by and blessed by my extended visits to churches in the nation of Brazil. I have found it very interesting to minister to churches in the northern, southern, and midwestern parts of the USA. I enjoy and respect cultural diversity. But I will not accept any culture as the foundation of a church. **“Has Christ been divided?”**⁸ This culture-bound, ethno-centric practice of church is contrary to Christ, who is the only

Africa (for 13 years), have attended a “Spanish-speaking” church, and have worked on staff at an African American church, as well as a number of White churches.

⁸ I Corinthians 1:13

Foundation God has given and the only Foundation that can be laid.⁹

Before I continue, I feel I need to state succinctly what I am and am not advocating: While I believe the Church as seen in the pages of the New Testament is definitely multi-ethnic, *I am definitely not advocating multi-ethnicity per se as the foundation of the Church.* **Jesus Christ is clearly the only Foundation God has given for the Church.** What I do hope to communicate is this: **An essential part of the mystery of Christ predicates multi-ethnicity. Therefore, when and where Christ is, in reality, the Foundation of the Church, multi-ethnicity will be part of the manifestation of that reality.**¹⁰

I have been a visiting minister in 100's of churches on 4 continents, and I've seen very, very few churches like the ones described in the New Testament. I've seen many "White" churches, "African American" churches, "Hispanic" churches, and churches comprised of various other ethnicities, but I have rarely seen truly multi-ethnic churches like the ones pictured in the pages of the New Testament.

⁹ I Corinthians 3:10-11

¹⁰ Ephesians 3:2-7

The Church is by and large culture-bound. In practice, it is much more cultural than it is spiritual.¹¹ In its desire to communicate the Gospel in “culturally relevant” ways, I think the Church in America has “shot itself in the foot”, so to speak. True “seekers” are looking for something they don’t already have¹² – something that exists above and beyond their “culture”. The American Church’s misguided approach naturally has to do with human nature; but also, much of it has to do with modern philosophies of ministry and methodologies of church planting. Almost everything I have ever heard or read about church planting advocates targeting and marketing to homogeneous groupings. I just don’t see that approach being advocated in the Acts of the Apostles or their Epistles. In fact, **the apostolic proposition is just the opposite of “culture-bound” “ethno-centric” churches.**

¹¹ I think the reality of this may only be apparent to those “cross-cultural missionaries” who have had the blessing of experiencing “church” outside of their homeland. This is where one is challenged to find Christ minus your own cultural trappings. It is here that one sees cultural trappings for what they are.

¹² In John 10:10b Jesus was offering life to people who were already alive. He was obviously offering them a kind of life they didn’t already have.

The Apostles & Their Epistles

The ethnic issue in the first-century Church largely revolved around Jew and Gentile relations within the local congregations.¹³ The ways in which the Holy Spirit led the apostles to address these situations give biblical principles for all inter-ethnic relations in the Body of Christ – namely, **a framework which is, in reality, Christo-centric rather than ethno-centric.**

I believe we see this issue (and many others) addressed by the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:3: “... for we are the true circumcision, who **worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh....**”

If we look at this verse in the context of Paul’s epistle, and consider what Greek scholar, W.E. Vine, has to offer, this verse could very well be translated like this: “... *those truly consecrated to God*¹⁴, who serve and minister¹⁵ in the Spirit of God and **take pride in and boast**

¹³ Cf. “The synagogue of the Freedmen in Acts 6:9 contained all those who had been freed from slavery, regardless of whether they were Jews, proselytes, or devout Gentiles. Likewise, with the Cyrenians, the Alexandrians, and the Cilicians and Asians.” (Acts 13:5, 14:1, 17:1, 10 & 17, 18:4 & 19, and 19:8) Roger Greenway, Ed., *Discipling the City: Theological Reflections on Urban Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979) p. 154.

¹⁴ Greek: *peritome*, Strong’s # G4061

¹⁵ Greek: *latreuo*, Strong’s # G3000

in¹⁶ Christ Jesus and are not persuaded by nor have confidence in¹⁷ nationalities¹⁸”.

Normally, we (myself included) have understood “confidence in the flesh” to mean “confidence in our own human efforts and abilities”. I think this is a legitimate interpretation and is part of what Paul is saying.¹⁹ But if we look at the context – the next 2 verses²⁰ - we see that he is specifically and definitely referring to the possibility of his **being persuaded by and putting confidence in his ethnic roots and national background**. Let’s look at his words:

“... although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, **of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee....”**

He told the Philippians that “these things he had counted loss” (in some real sense of the word) **in order to “gain and know Christ”²¹** - he had to make a choice between the two – he could not swear allegiance to both. Paul also told the Colossians that **he had to “lose” his**

¹⁶ Greek: *kaucamai*, Strong’s # G2744

¹⁷ Greek: *peiqo*, Strong’s # G3982

¹⁸ Greek: *sarx*, Strong’s # G4561 Note contextual reference to nationality: Philippians 3:4-6, W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

¹⁹ Philippians 5b-6, 9

²⁰ Philippians 3:4-5

²¹ Philippians 3:7-11

ethnic/national distinctives in order to truly and completely “put on” Christ; so that “Christ is all”.²²

He wrote essentially the same things to the Romans²³ and the Galatians.²⁴ If we take Paul, the “apostle to the Gentiles (nations)”, as our ministry model, we should endeavor to “become all things to all people”²⁵. But we must also bear in mind that Paul’s was a **Christo-centric ministry, which came across as “foolishness” and was a “stumbling block” to the surrounding cultures**²⁶. Indeed, the all-embracing principle of Paul’s ministry was that which the Reformers later identified as **“Sola Christo”** – meaning that **we must not be persuaded by, have confidence in, boast in, or have pride in anything above Christ.**²⁷

The gatherings of the Ekklesia in the first century were **mosaics of different ethnicities meeting together as one community**. David Hesselgrave puts it well: *“Chromosomes, color and class did not bring those communities together. Nor were they allowed to keep the*

²² Colossians 3:10-11

²³ Romans 10:12

²⁴ Galatians 3:28

²⁵ I Corinthians 9:20-22 (NRSV)

²⁶ I Corinthians 1:23

²⁷ I Corinthians 1:31. Consider Paul’s quote from the Old Testament in context: Jeremiah 9:23-26. There is a definite connection between Jeremiah’s reference to the “circumcised/uncircumcised” – namely, the Jew/Gentile and the culture-bound / ethno-centric situations Paul was addressing in the churches in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Philippi and Colossae.

*believers of those communities apart.”²⁸ C. Rene Padilla succinctly addresses the issue head on: “The apostles rejected imperialistic uniformity but they also rejected segregated uniformity.”²⁹ **Neither ethnicity nor diversity was the foundation of the New Testament Church – Christ was.**³⁰ And that is precisely why Christ was and continues to be “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” to so many.³¹*

²⁸ *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p.194

²⁹ “*The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle*”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6 (1982)

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:10-11

³¹ Romans 9:32-33, 11:9

The Church: A Colony of Heaven

A truly multi-ethnic church is pictured prophetically in both the Old and the New Testaments. In Isaiah 41:19-20 we find:

“I will plant in the wilderness the cedar and the acacia tree, the myrtle and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the cypress tree and the pine and the box tree **together**, that they may see and know, and consider and understand **together**, that the hand of the Lord has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it.”³²

A key word in this prophecy is **“together”** – the various trees, although different from one another, are planted **“together”**; and **“together”** they consider and understand that this is **“the planting of the Lord”**.³³ Isaiah also tells us that the variety of trees planted **“together”** was to “beautify the place of My sanctuary... and make the place of My feet glorious”.³⁴ If one accepts that this prophecy points to the Church – namely, a multi-ethnic Church – I think one would have to agree that the word, **“together”**, depicts, **not only the Church “universal”, but specifically the local expressions of the Body of Christ as multi-ethnic.**³⁵

³² NKJV

³³ Isaiah 61:3

³⁴ Isaiah 60:13

³⁵ There does seem to be some places in the world where multi-ethnicity may not be possible, simply due to the fact these localities are just not composed of a

In Revelation 5:9 we find the following:

“... You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God **from every tribe and language and people and nation....**”

These are the words of what is referred to as “a new song”.³⁶ It is a **“new song” about a “new thing”** – a song about a **new expression of God’s kingdom – “a light to the nations”³⁷.**

In Isaiah’s prophecy, God referred to it as “a people I have formed for Myself who shall declare My praise.”³⁸

This prophecy first came to pass on the Day of Pentecost in 33 A.D., when Divine providence had gathered together in one place (Jerusalem) “devout men **from every nation** under heaven”³⁹ for the out pouring of the promised Holy Spirit upon all peoples, as prophesied.⁴⁰ This was a new expression of God’s people - the birth of the Church.⁴¹

multiplicity of ethnicities at the present time. This, in fact, may be the situation in some places at this time; but it is also a disappearing situation. Not only, but particularly in the United States, even smaller towns and villages, and certainly, all cities have multi-ethnic populations. Never-the-less, the New Testament scriptures clearly communicate God’s desire, plan and purpose for a multi-ethnic church – universally and locally.

³⁶ Revelation 5:9 English Standard Version

³⁷ Isaiah 42:6, 49:6

³⁸ Isaiah 42:1, 6, 9-10 & 43:18-19, 21

³⁹ Acts 2:5

⁴⁰ Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18

⁴¹ Specifically, an expression which was now multi-ethnic rather than solely Jewish.

We see this again in the Acts of the Apostles 13:1: “Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas (*a Levite from Cyprus*), Simeon who was called Niger (*Black*), Lucius (*a Gentile name*) of Cyrene (*a North African city*), Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul (*a Hebrew ex-Pharisee and Roman citizen*).”

The church at Antioch, where the disciples were first called “Christians”, was a truly multi-ethnic congregation. It was this multi-ethnic church at Antioch which replaced the homogeneous church in Jerusalem as the church planting model in the opening chapters of church history.⁴²

In fact, throughout the Acts of the Apostles and their Epistles,⁴³ we see a **people extracted – called out and gathered together⁴⁴ - “from every tribe, and language, and people and nation”⁴⁵ to be citizens of another kingdom – “a heavenly country”⁴⁶**

⁴² Acts 14:21-28

⁴³ Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians

⁴⁴ Greek: *ekklessia*

⁴⁵ Greek: *fule*: “tribe”, *glossa*: “language”, *laos*: “people” (group), *ethnos*: “nation”. I think this may be a repetition for emphasis on the part of John; but it would prove interesting to investigate the various shades of meaning and implications of these words.

⁴⁶ Hebrews 12:22-23

As I said earlier, the key to the context of the 3rd chapter of Philippians is verse 3: "... those truly consecrated to God, who serve and minister in the Spirit of God and **take pride in and boast in Christ Jesus, and are not persuaded by nor have confidence in nationalities**". Then, Paul ends – and I believe summarizes – the chapter with verse 20: "Our commonwealth is in heaven...." (RSV) Or – "Our homeland is in heaven...." (NCV)⁴⁷

James Moffett translated Philippians 3:20 in this way: "**We are a colony of heaven....**"⁴⁸. Gordon D. Fee explains: "*As Philippi was a colony of Rome in Macedonia, so the church was a 'colony of heaven' in Philippi....*"⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Greek: *politeuma*: The administration of civil affairs or a commonwealth.

⁴⁸ A New Translation of the Bible by James Moffett (1926)

⁴⁹ Paul's Letter to the Philippians: New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans (1995)

Why Multi-Ethnic?

That is the plan and purpose of God.⁵⁰ The gospel of the kingdom is to be preached to, and disciples are to be made of all ethnicities.⁵¹ I would like to add the following: After more than 40 years in multi-cultural ministry, this is my observation: **Christ and His kingdom can be expressed to and through every culture, but cannot be fully expressed through any one culture. If we want a full experience of the kingdom of God, we must experience it with “people from every tribe and language and people and nation”.**⁵²

Also, **Christ and His kingdom are above and beyond all cultures.** Therefore, at various points of intersection, **Christ and His kingdom will go against every culture.** For example, in America, hot dogs may be O.K. with God, but materialism definitely is not.

Every culture has its peculiar weaknesses, iniquities from The Fall. **And every culture has its unique strengths, God-given graces of the manifold grace of God – facets of the multi-faceted mystery of Christ and His kingdom.** As with Isaiah’s trees, the variety of ethnicities planted **“together”** will “beautify the place of

⁵⁰ As revealed in the scriptures: Isaiah 42:1, 6, 9-10, 43:18-19, 21, Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18, Acts 13:1, Ephesians 2:11-3:11, Colossians 1:17-19, Revelation 5:9.

⁵¹ Matthew 24:14, 28:18-20

⁵² Revelation 5:9

His sanctuary... and make the place of His feet glorious”⁵³, as they **“together”** consider and understand that this is **“the planting of the Lord”**.⁵⁴

Paul prayed that “their fellowship would bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which they have in their life in union with Christ.”⁵⁵ Jesus prayed “that they may be one, even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.”⁵⁶ Indeed, it is this fellowship “hidden with Christ in God”⁵⁷ – not in an earthly nationality – that is **the Christian’s true identity and heavenly citizenship.**

⁵³ Isaiah 60:13

⁵⁴ Isaiah 61:3

⁵⁵ Philemon 6 *Good News Translation*

⁵⁶ John 17:21

⁵⁷ Colossians 3:1-3

Culture

Thus far, I have used the term “ethnic” here as almost synonymous with “cultural”, inferring that “multi-ethnic” is synonymous with “multi-cultural”. But I would now like to offer that **culture is a larger category than ethnicity.**

Let me give an example of what I mean – namely, the Latino culture of Texas, USA: While the Latino ethnicity may be seen as primary in that culture, there are other factors in the mix - such as, the influences of the American culture on the Latino culture, as well as multi-lingualism, etc. I think this is evidenced in the fact that those living in Texas who are identified as *Tejano Mexicano*, have historically struggled with the fact that they are not recognized and accepted as being either fully American by those in the land in which they live, nor fully Mexican by those in the land of their ancestry.⁵⁸ So, the Latino ethnicity is only part of the larger cultural context. **Culture is a larger category than ethnicity.**

I also realize that **culture is more fundamental than ethnicity.** An example would be what is known as the “*Youth Culture*”. This is a global phenomenon which

⁵⁸ Documentary: *Songs of the Homeland* (1995); Documentary: *Lalo Guerrero the Original Chicano* (2006).

spans across ethnicities yet is very much a “culture” in its own right. So, again, **ethnicity is just part of the more fundamental culture.** In fact, in comparison with the *Tejano Culture*, ethnicity in the *Youth Culture* plays an even less definitive role in that culture. Again, **culture is a larger category than ethnicity.**

Now, after years of research and study⁵⁹, I see the topic of “Culture” being larger and more fundamental than the topic of “Multi-ethnicity”, and therefore the former should precede the latter, and the latter should find its place in the context of the former. Indeed, “Culture” is what Niebuhr referred to as “The Enduring Problem”⁶⁰ throughout Church History – specifically, the Church trying to figure out how to “be in the world, but not of it”.⁶¹

⁵⁹ **A partial Bibliography:** The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, Ernest Troeltsch (1931/1992), Christ and Culture, H. Richard Niebuhr (1951); The Total Image, Virginia Stem Owens (1980); What Is the Meaning of “The Medium Is the Message”, Mark Federman (2004), The Ontology of the Church, Simon Chan (2006), as well as articles on the thought of Simon Chan by Mark Galli: Stopping Cultural Drift (2006), More Than Saving Souls (2006), and The Mission of the Trinity (2007).

⁶⁰ *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr (1951), Chapter 1.

⁶¹ John 17:6-19

Postscript

The “United” States of America, as well as many other nations in the world, continue to fail in the struggle against racism. People ask: *“Why, after all that has been tried for so many years, has there been no apparent success in solving the problem?”* The answer is this: Racism is sin; and human society will never overcome any sin without being “born again” – “born from above” - receiving “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”.⁶²

Has the Church (the Ekklesia) - the Body of Christ - manifested victory over the sin of racism? The answer is: “No”. And the reason is this: Churches have been built on (shifting) foundations of ethnicity and culture - not on the Foundation of Christ.⁶³

The churches of the New Testament were confronted with the ethnic and cultural issues associated with racism but found their way onto “the Firm Foundation of God which (still) stands”.⁶⁴

I believe G.K. Chesterton was referring to that authentic biblical Christianity we see in the New Testament scriptures when he said: *“Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”*

⁶² Romans 8:2

⁶³ 1 Corinthians 3:11

⁶⁴ 2 Timothy 2:19

The Lord has called His Ekklesia out of the cultures of the world and gathered them together for the purpose of being a witness representing the Kingdom of Heaven to the nations – **“A Colony of Heaven”**. Will we walk in that calling?

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Bill Furioso and his wife, Frances, have been married for more than 40 years, and have two children, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Bill and Frances served as missionaries in South Africa for thirteen years making disciples, establishing churches, and training church leaders. Over a span of 40 years, they also traveled extensively in an itinerant Bible teaching ministry which took them to hundreds of gatherings on four continents ministering in churches, conferences, spiritual formation seminars, and home gatherings. They have shepherded several churches, disciplined many to Christ, and mentored church leaders in the USA and abroad.

Being an avid student by nature, Bill has done both formal and informal study in various fields including Education, Music, Philosophy and Theology. As a writer, he has authored many publications which are distributed worldwide. Because of Bill's disabilities resulting from a spinal cord injury, he can no longer travel, so their ministries of writing, recording, distributing, mentoring, and correspondence are now shared primarily via the Internet... www.AtChristsTable.org

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