

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: THE GOSPEL AND ETHNICITY

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These four young girls suddenly lost their lives one Sunday in a church bombing just down the street from where I have served as pastor. You may wonder, *Why was their church bombed?* And the answer has nothing to do with the kind of persecution that people face around the world for their faith in Christ. No, their church was bombed because they were black, and the men who bombed it were white supremacists.

Not long ago, I had the honor of preaching alongside the pastor at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in the very building that had been bombed fifty years before. I stood onstage with him and other pastors in the city before a room full of black and white Christians as together we remembered that horrible event, sadly one of many such atrocities that occurred across Birmingham

(at one point called “Bombingham”) during that time period, and we renewed our commitment to one another in Christ for the sake of the gospel in our city.

That gathering took place on Good Friday, the same day when, fifty years prior, Martin Luther King Jr. had led a peaceful march through downtown Birmingham, only to be thrown into jail. Facing harsh conditions in solitary confinement, someone delivered a published letter to him, penned by eight white Birmingham pastors, criticizing King for his methods and calling for him to maintain patience in promoting civil rights. King wrote a letter in response:

It is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing

pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” men and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice.¹

Then, following King’s explanation of his obligation to disobey an unjust law of the government in order to obey the just law of God, he piercingly indicted these pastors with the following words:

In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, “Those are social issues with which the Gospel has no real concern.”²

Then he pleaded for them to apply the gospel to such social issues, saying:

There was a time when the Church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. . . .

But the judgment of God is upon the Church as never before. If the Church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early Church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.³

I reread these words as I prepared to make my remarks on that Good Friday, and I was freshly grieved by the gospel-less actions of my white forefathers during those days.

But I had to be honest. As much as I wanted to distance myself from those eight pastors in 1960s Birmingham, I had to admit that I have the same gospel-denying tendencies that elicited their letter. For I am prone to prefer people who are like me—in color, culture, heritage, and history. If I walk into a room by myself and see two tables, one with a group of people ethnically like me and the other with a group of people ethnically unlike me, I instinctively move toward the group that is like me. I suppose something in me assumes that those who are like me are safer, more comfortable, and therefore better for me. Similarly, I'm prone to act as if those who are unlike me are less safe, less comfortable, and less beneficial. It seems to me, then, only a

short walk from such simple preference to the kind of sinful prejudice that marked my pastoral predecessors. The difference between them and me is more one of degree than of kind.⁴

So when I preached my sermon that Good Friday, I had to confess the sinful tendency of my own heart to prefer one person over another based on particular commonalities. Furthermore, even as I write these words on this day, I have to admit that I have not resisted this tendency in my own heart and in my own church with the fierceness with which I ought to fight it. I feel inadequate to write this book on so many levels, but that inadequacy may be felt most in this chapter, for even as I have sought to develop friendships, foster partnerships, and forge initiatives that promote unity across ethnic lines, I know there is so much more that needs to be done in my own life and in the church of which I am a part.

This is all the more evident when it comes to the related issue of immigration in our culture. I have lived and worked in a state where lawmakers have sought to enact the toughest immigration legislation in the country. Fiery debate over Alabama laws has reflected fervent discussion across the United States regarding how to address the twelve to fifteen million undocumented immigrants currently living in our country. These men, women, and children live in my community (and yours), representing various ethnicities, speaking different languages, and coming from different cultural backgrounds. The church has taken small steps to reach out to them in specific ministries, but we desperately need to consider how we can—we *must*—avoid the sins of those who went before us in the Civil Rights era. Majority oppression of migrant people is certainly no better than white segregation of black people.

The gospel compels such action. By the grace of God, we must work to overcome prejudicial pride in our lives, families, and churches, a process that I'm convinced begins with changing

the conversation about race altogether. Moreover, with the wisdom of God, we must labor to respect immigration laws in our country as responsible citizens while loving immigrant souls in our community as compassionate Christians. In a context where minorities will become the majority over the next thirty years, we must consider how to apply the gospel across a multiplicity of colors and cultures for the glory of Christ.

THE HUMAN RACE

We live in a culture where we are constantly submerged in discussions about race and racism. We have conversations and host forums, sponsor debates and foster dialogues, write articles and give speeches about how to solve racial tension in our culture. But could it be that we're grasping for solutions to a problem we've grossly misdefined? And could it be that the gospel not only counters culture on this issue, but reshapes the conversation about race altogether?

Consider the starting point in the gospel for so many of the social issues we have addressed: the creation of man and woman in the image of God with equal dignity before God. As we've seen, this means that no human being is more or less human than another. All are made in God's image. It is a lack of trust in this gospel truth that has led to indescribable horrors in human history. Slavery in America, the Holocaust in Germany, the Armenian massacre in Turkey, the genocide in Rwanda, and the Japanese slaughter of six million Koreans, Chinese, Indo-Chinese, Indonesians, and Filipinos all derived from the satanic deception of leaders and citizens who believed that they were intrinsically superior to other types of people. From the first chapter of the Bible, however, this much is clear: all men and women are made in the very likeness of God.

Genesis 1 lays this foundation, but Genesis 10 expands on it, telling us that after the fall of man and the flood of the world, people were divided according to “their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations” (Genesis 10:31). All of these divisions, however, trace their human ancestry back to one family—Noah and his sons—who trace their ancestry back to one couple, Adam and Eve. This is precisely what Paul references in the New Testament when he tells a crowd of philosophers in Athens, “From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26, NIV).

The Bible’s storyline thus depicts a basic unity behind worldly diversity. From the beginning, God designed a human family that would originate from one father and one mother. From that common ancestry would come a diverse litany of clans dwelling in distant lands and developing new nations. Before long in the Bible, you see people with various skin colors with distinct cultural patterns dotting the human landscape.

Contemplating this may cause us to wonder, “Then what race were Adam and Eve?” The answer is both obvious and simple: the human race.

“No,” we might say, “I mean what color was their skin?”

And as soon as we ask the question, we realize the problem with it—on two levels. First, we don’t know the answer to that question because the Bible doesn’t tell us. Now in most picture Bibles in the West we’ve painted a portrait of a white Adam and Eve, but we have no basis for this assumption whatsoever. For all we know, this first couple could have been any color, or different colors, for that matter. Maybe Eve’s skin was the shade of dirt or bone. If anything, genetics points to the greater probability that our first parents had darker skin, which is the dominant gene

in skin color. Regardless, we find ourselves thinking and talking about people in terms the Bible doesn't even use.

Second, and more important, God's Word doesn't tell us what color Adam and Eve were because God doesn't equate membership in the human race with skin tone. Whatever color Adam and Eve (and their children) were, they contained in them a DNA designed by God that would eventually develop into a multi-colored family across a multicultural world.

In this way, God's Word reminds us that regardless of the color of our skin, we all have the same roots. Fundamentally, we are all part of the same race. That's why we all need the same gospel.

A GOSPEL-LESS STARTING POINT

When we come to understand this, we realize that most discussions in our culture about race and racism are beginning from a gospel-less starting point. For in the process of discussing our diversity in terms of different "races," we are undercutting our unity in the human race. And this is not merely an issue of semantics. In our conversations, we're creating categories for defining each other that are not only woefully unhelpful; they're eventually impossible.

The category of "race" as we commonly use it is unhelpful because it locates identity in physical appearance. You are black; I am white. These statements seem simple, but they are more than mere indicators of skin color. They carry with them a whole host of stereotypes and assumptions that are based squarely upon biological attributes. Simply because skin tone or hair texture is a certain way, we instinctively assume certain characteristics about others, either positively or negatively (most often negatively).

In addition, the category of "race" as we commonly use it becomes impossible when we meet someone who doesn't neatly

fit into color classifications. I think of a good friend of mine named Deric. When Deric's mom was seventeen years old, living in a rural town in northwest Alabama, she found out she was pregnant. She was white, and the child's father was black. She panicked, not knowing what to do, and after initial deliberations with some friends, she decided to have an abortion. After all, what would people in the community think? Even interracial marriage had been illegal in Alabama until 1967. (It wasn't until 2000 that lawmakers removed the following words from the state constitution: "The Legislature shall never pass any law to authorize or legalize any marriage between any white person and a Negro, or a descendant of a Negro.")

So her friends accompanied her to the clinic, where she was taken back to lie down on a table. After sedating her, the doctor began asking her questions. He checked off box after box until he came to the last question: "Do you still want to have this procedure done?" She thought for a moment. Then, although sedated and to the surprise of both the doctor and her friends, she stood up and said, "No." She walked out of the clinic, and months later Deric was born.

So what "race" is Deric? Is he black? Or is he white? Is he both somehow? In what category are we to place Deric, and with what assumptions should we approach him?

Such categorization becomes all the more impossible with the globalization of our communities. Thabiti Anyabwile, a friend of mine and a pastor who has written extensively on this subject, lived in Grand Cayman for many years. As a "black" man, he explains the hopelessness of using "race" to distinguish men and women:

My barber in the Caribbean looks just like me. You'd think he was an African-American until he opens his

mouth. When he speaks, he speaks Jamaican patois so it is clear that he's not an African-American. My administrative assistant is also proudly Jamaican—very white-skinned. The lady in my barbershop looks a lot like my wife. You might think she is African-American or even Caymanian. She is Honduran. This notion of artificially imposing categories on people according to color—biology—is sheer folly. It's an impossibility. This is why much of the field on race and ethnicity has largely abandoned the attempt to identify men based on biological categories of race.⁵

I think of the same reality when I preach in a place like Dubai. I have never been in another setting on earth that felt more like heaven than when I have stood before a gospel-driven church pastored by a friend of mine in Dubai. Imagine looking out over a crowd of people and seeing at least seventy different nationalities represented in one room. When I stayed around to talk with church members after the gathering, I don't think I met more than one person from the same ethnicity. They were different colors from different cultures with different accents and different attributes. But as I stood among them, I was strangely aware that they (or, better put, *we*) were all alike. Every single one of us had roots that went back to Adam, and every single one of us bore the image of God himself.

This starting point fundamentally counters the starting point that currently exists for understanding and approaching this social issue in our culture. And this is not merely a matter of semantics disconnected from our everyday lives. Even as I write this, I am watching riots unfold in Ferguson, Missouri, where a “black” teenage boy was recently shot dead in the street by a “white” police officer, seemingly without warrant. By the

time this book is published, more facts will have come out concerning this case, and for that matter, other tragic cases like it may have occurred. Regardless, the reality in our culture is clear: conversations about events like those in Ferguson or in Florida with Trayvon Martin begin from a point of division. Because we unhelpfully categorize one another in terms of different races, and because we inevitably call one another different colors with all sorts of assumptions and stereotypes associated with “black” and “white” labels, from the start we undercut our ability to discuss and address serious tension over this social issue. And until that starting point changes, then labels like these will continue to prove deadly. Literally, deadly.

Now obviously, I am not attempting to deny the clear differences that exist between diverse people. That much is based not just upon biblical foundations but upon practical observation. Instead, what I’m advocating for is a gospel-rich confession that we are one race, for when that reality is clear, we are at a much better starting point in our culture for discussing our differences.

ETHNICITY

This leads us right to where the Bible grounds our understanding of human diversity: in human ethnicity. To use the language of Genesis 10, we comprise “clans” in separate “nations” that speak different “languages” in diverse “lands.” And with the globalization of the world and the migration of men and women across continents and into cities, these clans from separate nations and with different languages now often live in the same land.

Here the concept of ethnicity is immensely helpful, for it includes all of these considerations and more. Instead of being strictly tied to biology, ethnicity is much more fluid, factoring in social, cultural, lingual, historical, and even religious

characteristics. While we commonly recognize approximately two hundred nations in the world today, anthropological scholars have identified thousands (some say over eleven thousand; others say over sixteen thousand) of distinct ethnolinguistic groups in the world. These groups, often called people groups, possess a common self-identity with common history, customs, patterns, and practices based upon those two primary characteristics: ethnicity and language.⁶

But these categories are not narrowly limiting. Some people groups may speak multiple languages yet consider themselves one ethnic group. The Dinka I have been around in South Sudan are one example. They speak a range of dialects comprising five separate languages, but they self-identify clearly as one people. Similarly, other people groups may speak the same language yet consider themselves different ethnic groups. The Tutsi and Hutu of East Central Africa are one example. They possess both a common language and a common culture, but they have maintained distinct social identities for the last two thousand years.⁷

Applied to our setting in the United States, it makes no sense, then, to categorize our own country as a nation of black, white, brown, or other “races.” Instead, we are a nation of increasingly diverse people groups. We are Anglo Americans, African Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, and more. These categories can be subdivided further based upon other ethnolinguistic factors, leading us to realize that we are a nation of unique people groups with diverse histories from different lands with distinct customs and even languages.

Just last weekend, a small group of members from our church spent an afternoon intentionally meeting men and women from different people groups in our city. As they went to international restaurants and markets, community centers and

college campuses, they met Thai, Filipino, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Gujarati, Colombian, Salvadoran, Palestinian Arab, Jordanian Arab, Northern Yemeni Arab, and Moroccan Arab people, just to name a few of the ethnolinguistic groups they encountered in only a few short hours. Surely this rich diversity of people cannot be defined by skin tone, hair texture, or eye color alone.

Some might say that in abandoning categories of black and white in discussions of race and racism, we're trying to sweep under the rug centuries of history and oppression as if they never happened. By no means! Instead, by basing our dialogue more meaningfully on ethnolinguistic characteristics, we're acknowledging those real centuries of history and oppression, combined with a host of other fluid factors that can't be reduced to basic biology. Moreover, in removing race and racism from the discussion altogether, we're paving the way for us as one race to call racism what it actually is: sin borne in a heart of pride and prejudice. And in doing this, we are now setting the stage for understanding how the gospel is uniquely able to foster powerful unity in the middle of pervasive diversity.

WHAT THE GOSPEL MAKES POSSIBLE

Just as soon as God's Word introduces diverse clans, languages, lands, and nations, God's Word indicts people for their propensity to selfish pride and ethnic prejudice. Such pride is evident even in the first family as Cain, a son of Adam and Eve, kills his brother, Abel. Soon after that, "the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Within chapters of the Bible, that wickedness spills over into wars among nations and conflicts among clans. The more different peoples mix together, the more they mistreat one another.

The pages of the Bible and human history are thus filled with an evil affinity for ethnic animosity.

These same pages reveal a God with a passion for all people groups. After the nations rebel against him at Babel in Genesis 11, God calls one group of people to become his own in Genesis 12. God promises to bless these ethnic Israelites, but the purpose of his blessing extends far beyond them. “In you,” God says, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). This promise is reiterated over and over in the Old Testament as God declares his desire for all nations to behold his greatness and experience his grace (see Psalm 96).

Moreover, God gives laws to his people, the ethnic Israelites, regarding their treatment of diverse people in their midst.⁸ After the Israelites spend centuries of exile in Egypt, God commands them, “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). In language that follows on the heels of what we already examined in chapter 4 regarding justice for the orphan and the widow, God declares that he “loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing,” and he consequently calls his people to love the sojourner (Deuteronomy 10:18). Through the prophets, God accuses his people of extortion and robbery. “They have oppressed the poor and needy,” God says, “and have extorted from the sojourner without justice” (Ezekiel 22:29; see also Jeremiah 7:6; Zechariah 7:10).

The Hebrew word for “sojourner” in these passages can be translated basically and understood practically as “immigrant.” Such foreigners who had been separated from their families and land found themselves in precarious positions, in need of help from the people among whom they lived. As a result, God views them with particular compassion, and the Bible often groups the sojourner, or immigrant, alongside the orphan and the widow.

The pages of the Old Testament present God as “the LORD [who] watches over the sojourners” (Psalm 146:9).

When Jesus comes to the earth in the New Testament, we are quickly introduced to him as an immigrant. Fleeing a brutal political situation in Bethlehem after he is born, Jesus’ family travels to Egypt, where they live for years as sojourners in a foreign land. Upon Jesus’ return to Israel and from the start of his ministry, he subtly subverts the national pride of ethnic Israelites who were anticipating a Jewish Messiah who would overthrow Rome and reestablish Israel. Though Jesus’ primary focus is on “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 15:24, NIV), he nevertheless reaches beyond national boundaries at critical moments to love, serve, teach, heal, and save Canaanites and Samaritans, Greeks and Romans.⁹ Then Jesus shocks the preconceived systems of his Jewish disciples not only by dying on a cross and rising from the grave, but also by commanding them to proclaim “repentance and forgiveness of sins . . . in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). Jesus came not just as Savior and Lord of Israel; he came as Savior and Lord over all.

This realization became the foundation for the call to ethnic unity in the establishment of the church. The cultural division between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) was deep during the first century. Yet as the story of the church unfolds, we read how, to many Jews’ surprise, Gentiles began believing in Jesus. At first, Jewish Christians didn’t know how to respond. Should they even accept Gentile Christians? If so, did they need to impose Jewish customs upon them? Though Gentiles were finally accepted into the church, they felt at best like second-class Christians.

Into this atmosphere, Paul speaks to Gentile believers, saying,

You were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the

covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. EPHESIANS 2:12-14

Then he exhorts them, saying, “Through [Jesus] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:18-19).

These words beautifully describe the unique power of the gospel to reunite people from (and, for that matter, within) different ethnic groups. And it makes sense, doesn't it? For in the beginning, sin separated man and woman from God and also from one another. This sin stood (and stands) at the root of ethnic pride and prejudice. When Christ went to the cross, he conquered sin, making the way for people to be free from its hold and restored to God. In so doing, he paved the way for all people to be reconciled to one another. Followers of Christ thus have one “Father” as one “family” in one “household,” with no “dividing wall of hostility” based upon ethnic diversity.

This, then, was the glorious reality expressed in that Good Friday gathering at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. There I stood in a room of diverse people, some of whom had even been in that building on the day it was bombed. When they looked at my white face, they could have seen the same type of person who killed those children. But by the grace of God, they didn't. Instead, they saw a brother in Christ whose character is gratefully not bound by a haunted history and whose identity is thankfully not confined to a certain color. This is the picture that the gospel makes possible.

ONE IN CHRIST

But don't be mistaken. It's not that the men and women in that Good Friday gathering who were different from me needed to ignore the history of what my people group had done to them or to overlook the ways I am different from them. In his most famous speech during the March on Washington, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and shouted, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."¹⁰ Ever since that day, some in our culture have advocated for a color-blind society that pretends our differences don't exist.

This, however, is not what the gospel compels. For the gospel doesn't deny the obvious ethnic, cultural, and historical differences that distinguish us from one another. Nor does the gospel suppose that these differences are merely superficial. Instead, the gospel begins with a God who creates all men and women in his image and then diversifies humanity according to clans and lands as a creative reflection of his grace and glory in distinct groups of people. In highlighting the beauty of such diversity, the gospel thus counters the mistaken cultural illusion that the path to unity is paved by minimizing what makes us unique. Instead, the gospel compels us to celebrate our ethnic distinctions, value our cultural differences, and acknowledge our historical diversity, even forgiving the ways such history may have been dreadfully harmful.

I have experienced particular joy by joining in friendship and partnering in ministry with pastors and members of churches who are ethnically different from me—specifically those who have historical reasons to possess animosity toward me. We have worked together when tornadoes ravaged communities in our

city. We have prayed together when tragedies and crises have gripped our nation. We have preached together in churches, conferences, and city events. We have served together in specific efforts to meet the needs of the poor, the widow, and the orphan around us. In all of this, I have learned so much from my brothers and sisters who are unlike me. And the more these friendships flourish and partnerships expand, the more I am thankful to God that they are not like me.

On a broader scale, I can't help but picture Steve Saint standing beside Mincaye on a stage as together they testified to the grace of God in the gospel. Mincaye, a Huaorani man from the jungles of Ecuador, years before had killed Steve's father, Nate, when Nate tried to share the gospel with Mincaye and his people. Mincaye has now become a follower of Jesus and a friend to Steve. Joining arms, one wearing Western clothes and the other wearing tribal dress, one speaking English and the other speaking his native language, one whose father had been killed and the other who had speared that father dead, they portray the power of the gospel not to eliminate differences as if they don't exist but to transcend differences as one in Christ.

This is what the Bible means when it says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, NIV). Some people misconstrue this verse much as they misconstrue King's words to say that our differences don't matter. But they do. Our peculiarities are important. We have much to learn and much to celebrate in our gender, cultural, and ethnic distinctions.

When I consider people who have profoundly influenced my life, I am grateful that many of them are from different ethnicities. I think of Jeffries, a South Sudanese friend who first introduced me to the plight of the persecuted church. Jeffries has given me an entirely new perspective on joy amid suffering, and

through his desire to share the gospel with his persecutors, he has taught me how to love enemies across ethnic lines. I think of Fatima, a Middle Eastern woman who has exemplified biblical hospitality in the way she and her family have welcomed me and others into their home. As a follower of Christ in a country where it was illegal for Fatima to become a Christian, she has modeled what it means to exalt Christ humbly, boldly, and wisely in the culture around her. Similarly, I think of Jian and Lin, an Asian couple whom I first met over a meal of hot pot, a spicy stew consisting of an entire chicken (and I mean an *entire* chicken). As I have shared life with Jian and Lin, God has used their simple lives and sacrificial leadership in the church to uncover cultural blind spots in my life and leadership.

I could go on and on, listing names of men and women from different ethnicities who have made indelible marks on my life. When I consider their collective impact upon me, I realize that they have shaped me not *in spite of* our differences, but *because of* our differences. All of this ultimately points to the goodness of God in the gospel, for according to Galatians 3, in Christ we are able to experience the full beauty of God's design for mankind's diversity.

THE SOJOURNER IN OUR MIDST

The gospel not only affects the ways Anglo Americans and African Americans view each other in our culture, or the way we may view people in different countries, but this gospel also affects the way followers of Christ view migrant men and women who are living right around us in our country. A cursory reading of the Old Testament, combined with a clear understanding of Christ's cross in the New Testament, calls into question the contemporary approach to immigration among many Christians

in our culture. In addition to practical ignorance on this issue in the political sphere, our personal lives often reflect little concern for the sojourner in our midst. Russell Moore writes that the Christian response to immigrant neighbors has been akin to saying, “You kids get off my lawn,” in Spanish.¹¹ But if the God of the Bible possesses particular compassion for the immigrant, even equating him or her with the orphan and the widow, and if the cross of Christ is designed to compel outreach across ethnic divisions, then how much more should we as the people of God care for immigrants from other countries in our midst?

Consider the story of Sam and Lucas. Sam and Lucas live in Mexico in the midst of desperate poverty, unable to provide for their wives’ and children’s basic needs. One day, a friend tells them that he has found a way for Sam and Lucas to get jobs in the United States. There they can make money and send it back to sustain their families. Sam and Lucas see no other option and agree to go. They say good-bye to their wives and children, and they leave with their friend.

Weeks later, they find themselves lying down in the back of an old SUV, covered completely by a blanket as the truck bounces down the road. Finally, they arrive at a back entrance behind a popular restaurant, where the proud owner steps out. After speaking to the driver in a foreign language, the owner gives him some cash, then opens the back door of the SUV. He uncovers the men and tells Sam and Lucas to get out quickly.

They go inside the back of the restaurant, where the owner sits them down and serves them a quick meal. As they eat, the owner introduces Sam and Lucas to what will be their job: bus-ing tables and washing dishes. After they’re finished eating, the owner escorts them by van to a decaying, shuttered, split-level home that they will share with a host of other workers like them. “I’ll pick you and the others up at ten o’clock in the morning.”

the owner says, and off he goes. Sam and Lucas have arrived at their new home.

Sam and Lucas now have a new life. Every day they are shuttled back and forth between the place where they sleep and the restaurant where they work. It is a well-known restaurant, getting all sorts of great reviews and attracting all kinds of different people—people like you and me. But amid all the crowds that surround Sam and Lucas, absolutely no one knows them. No one even notices them. They are destitute, sending as much money as they can back to their families while resorting to alcohol and prostitution to curb their loneliness.¹²

It is not my aim here to stereotype migrant workers—although this story is true, it obviously doesn't mean that all Latino dishwashers in restaurants have the same story. It is also not my aim to oversimplify either the plight of immigrants in our country or the predicament of how to provide for them. Finally, it's not my aim here to propose comprehensive political answers for the practical legislative quagmire that illegal immigration presents in our country.

It *is*, however, my aim to show that the gospel message has implications for the issue of immigration, and particularly for illegal immigrants like Sam and Lucas. Amid necessary political discussions and inevitable personal disagreements, first and foremost the gospel reminds us that when we are talking about immigrants (legal *or* illegal), we are talking about men and women made in God's image and pursued by his grace. Consequently, followers of Christ must see immigrants not as problems to be solved but as people to be loved. The gospel compels us in our culture to decry any and all forms of oppression, exploitation, bigotry, or harassment of immigrants, regardless of their legal status. These are men and women for whom Christ died, and their dignity is no greater or lesser than our own.

Likewise, their families are no less important than our own. Many illegal immigrants, like Sam and Lucas, are in the United States for understandable reasons, fleeing brutal economic and political situations in their own countries as they fight for the survival of their own families. Others came to the United States years ago and have now begun families here. I think of Ricardo, a follower of Christ and the father of five children, three of whom are US citizens. Ricardo entered the country illegally more than twenty years ago, and for the last twenty years he has worked to support his family while serving in his community. However, if Ricardo were to go back to his village in Mexico now, he would be resigning himself and his family to abject poverty. His other option would be to split up his family, leaving his three “legal” children behind with a neighbor.¹³ Surely, just as the gospel compels us to respect the personal dignity of immigrants regardless of their legal status, it also compels us to protect their familial unity regardless of legal status.

All of this is obviously complicated by out-of-date legislation that is out of sync with the current labor market in our country. Add to this our selective enforcement of immigration laws, and it becomes clear to us all, regardless of personal political persuasion, that our system needs reform. And the gospel is not silent even here, for much as we saw in chapter 3, the Bible clearly teaches that government exists under God to establish and enforce laws for the good of people (see Romans 13:1-7). We have a responsibility before God as citizens under a government to work together to establish and enforce just laws that address immigration. Among other things, such laws should involve securing our borders, holding business owners accountable for hiring practices, and taking essential steps that ensure fairness to taxpaying citizens of our country. Likewise, we have a responsibility before God as citizens under a government to work together to refute

and remove unjust laws that oppress immigrants.¹⁴ Failing to act in either of these ways would be to settle for injustice, which would put us out of sync with the gospel.

I don't presume easy answers to any of the above, but I am proposing that the gospel requires Christians to wrestle with these questions. Regardless of personal or political views, none of us can escape the reality that we're talking about our neighbors, and Jesus' command regarding our neighbors is clear. As long as immigrants, legal and illegal, live around us by God's sovereign design (see Acts 17:26-27), we're compelled to consider how to love them as we love ourselves (see Luke 10:25-37).

OFF THE SIDELINES

I think of a friend of mine named Tyler, who pastors in Arizona. Amid the massive influx of immigrants into his community (many of whom are illegal) and surrounded by the milieu of legislative discussions in his state, Tyler and the church he leads have decided to engage this issue with gospel perspective and to serve these people with gospel compassion. Together they began providing food and clothing to migrant workers through a variety of different ministries. These ministries paved the way for personal relationships to develop with migrant men, women, and children, opening other doors for members of the church not just to love but to learn from these workers and their families. This has obviously involved more time and resources, but in Tyler's words, "It wasn't long before our people began donating more than food—they started to donate their lives." This eventually led to the construction of a community center in a Latino neighborhood that is now filled weekly with English classes, after-school programs, life-skills training, and Bible studies. In addition, the church Tyler pastors began partnering

with a Latino church to start a center that protects people who in the past would end up either abused by employers or working without compensation.

The church's work among Latinos then carried over into an awareness of Somali Bantu and Uzbek refugees living in the surrounding community. Consequently, hundreds of church members now serve these refugees, welcoming them at the airport, tutoring them, teaching life and business skills, and organizing ways to financially support refugee-owned restaurants.

In all of this, Tyler says, "We have enjoyed hundreds of opportunities to engage in conversations about Jesus . . . , and we've seen God change lives." But it hasn't been easy. Tyler comments, "Our work has been affirmed by many but has also been met with criticism from both inside and outside the church. . . . Because of our support of these communities, we've been accused of contributing to the breakdown of and economic drain on our educational and medical systems, and even to violent crimes like rape and murder by undocumented immigrants." One of the things I appreciate most about Tyler is his willingness to both listen to and learn from such criticism. In his words, "We've found that it's important to pause and listen to the critiques of respectable people with legitimate concerns. We especially need to listen to those who challenge us on the grounds that our work counteracts the common good. If their concern is valid, we should respond and adjust accordingly. If, however, they are misguided, we should clarify our intentions and continue the work to which we have been called."¹⁵

No one can expect to engage in ministry like this in our culture and experience anything less than challenges like these. What I admire most about Tyler and his church is the way they are not afraid to step off the sidelines, at great cost and in the face of certain criticism, to apply the gospel to this pressing

social need in our day. The members of this church are clearly not perfect in their response to immigration. At the same time, multitudes of men, women, and children made in the image of God are grateful that the members of this church aren't passive, either.

A BETTER COUNTRY

In the end, we are all immigrants ourselves. I'm not merely referring to our ancestors who may have migrated to America many years ago. I'm referencing the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. The Bible calls believers in Christ "sojourners and exiles" who "desire a better country" and are "seeking a homeland," a "city that is to come" (1 Peter 2:11; Hebrews 11:13-14, 16; 13:14). In other words, Christians are migrants on this earth, and the more we get involved in the lives of immigrants, the better we will understand the gospel.

Unfortunately, throughout history Christians have failed to understand how the gospel affects the way we view and love people of different ethnicities. My hope and prayer is that this would not be what historians write concerning the church in our day. The body of Christ is a multicultural citizenry of an otherworldly kingdom, and this alters the way we live in this ever-changing country. By the sheer grace of God in the gospel, we are compelled to counter selfish pride and ethnic prejudice both in our hearts and our culture. For after all, this is not the culture to which we ultimately belong. Instead, we are looking forward to the day when "a great multitude that no one [can] number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9) will stand as one redeemed race to give glory to the Father who calls us not sojourners or exiles, but sons and daughters.

FIRST STEPS TO COUNTER CULTURE

Pray

Ask God to:

- Open the eyes of all believers (including your own) to selfish pride and sinful prejudice and to grant repentance.
- Protect and provide for immigrants and their families and to put believers in their paths to minister to them.
- Give the leadership of the United States (and other governments) wisdom in addressing the issue of immigration.

Participate

Prayerfully consider taking these steps:

- Talk with the leadership of your church about partnering in ministry with a church whose members are of a different ethnicity from yours.
- Open your home to an international student or someone from a different people group, as the vast majority of these individuals never have an opportunity to go inside the home of an American family.
- Begin a ministry to immigrants in need in your local area. Provide food, shelter, and help with the language. Most important, proclaim the gospel to them.

Proclaim

Consider the following truths from Scripture:

- Acts 17:26: “He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.”

THE GOSPEL AND ETHNICITY

- Deuteronomy 10:19: “Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”
- Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

For more (and more specific) suggestions, visit CounterCultureBook.com/Ethnicity.