Evangelism in a Multicultural Context

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As we approach the subject, "evangelism in a multi-cultural context," the first thing to be said is that there is nothing new about this subject. It is important to point this out because there are many people who seem to think that multiculturalism is a fad that will simply go away. Indeed, I suppose that a number of your colleagues who decided not to take this course made that decision thinking that, after all, they do not belong to one of the many "minority" cultures among us and that this course is relevant only to those who are "into" multiculturalism.

But the fact is that multi-culturalism is as old as evangelism itself. Look at that great account of the outpouring and the action of the Holy Spirit in the early church, the story of Pentecost as it appears in Acts 2. There are many facets to that account, but the one I would like to underscore is the matter of languages and the role they play in the story.

Note that in that narrative the various people who hear the disciples can talk to each other in some common language—presumably Greek, although the text does not say so. Whatever that common language might have been, whether Greek or Aramaic, its commonality was the result of empire and conquest. But in the text the Spirit undercuts the unity of Empire. Empire leads to all these people being able to understand each other in a language that is not their own, whatever it might have been. But by the power of the Spirit, these people are able to hear, as they say, "each of us, in our own native language."

I do not know if there was a Hebrew-only movement in Palestine, as there had been in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. I do not know if there was an Aramaic-only movement. I do know that among the cultured elites there was a Greek-only movement. And I certainly do know that, whatever attempts there might have been at imposing uniformity, the Spirit did undercut it, for all these various people, from different parts of the world, were made to hear, not in the language of Empire, nor even in the language of the first disciples, but "each in their own native language."

From the very beginning, from the very day of Pentecost, Christian evangelism was multi-cultural. It was multi-cultural, not out of a strategy conceived by a church that was losing members, as a way to bolster its membership, but by the action of the Holy Spirit. And for that reason, it was multi-cultural, not in a centripetal way, as is much of our multicultural evangelism today, which seeks to bring people in to join *our* church and accept *our* traditions and *our* form of governance, but in a genuinely centrifugal way, in which each was able to hear and to respond in his or her own language and cultural tradition.

But enough of that for the time being. Of all the possible texts in the New Testament to deal with the issue at hand, there is none that is more explicit about the variety of peoples coming into the church, and specifically about the variety of their cultures, than the book of Revelation. Indeed, *seven* times do we find in the book, with slight variations, the theme of "every tribe and language and people and nation." And we do not find that listing always in similar

contexts—not even always in positive contexts. Therefore, as a way to begin the theological discussion on multicultural evangelism, I suggest we look at those seven passages, for they do not all say the same thing, and some say things that may surprise or even shock us.

Let's begin with Rev. 14:6-7.

> *Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."*

In some ways, this passage combines the elements of pluralism that we see in the Great Commission with those we see in Pentecost. The gospel is to be proclaimed to nations, as in Matthew, and to languages, as in Acts. And this is not just a missionary strategy, as for Paul in 1 Corinthians. It is not a strategy for church growth. It is not the church's response to growing pluralism in society. It is the very purpose of God, carried forth by an angel in midheaven.

This must have been a rather surprising vision for John. Since we do not know beyond any doubt exactly who John of Patmos was, he may or may not have been among the eleven who went to meet Jesus on a mountain in Galilee, there to receive the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." But no matter whether he was John the apostle or another John, he must have known of that Great Commission that Jesus gave, not only to those first eleven but also through them to the entire church. Whether directly or through others, he

had received from Jesus the commission to preach the gospel to all the nations, making disciples, and baptizing them.

But now it turns out that the mission of proclaiming the gospel throughout the world does not belong to the disciples alone, nor even to the entire church. It is so important that it has been entrusted also to an angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.

If John thought of himself as an evangelist the same way many of us today think of ourselves as evangelists, he might have been dismayed. We convince ourselves that, if we can somehow preach the gospel with more fervor, with more eloquence, with more conviction, people will necessarily listen. Some even go on television arguing that all that is needed is more money for better communication technologies, for more powerful transmitters, for more stations to carry their programs. Some professors of evangelism impress on us the importance of proper techniques as part of responsible evangelism. And that may all be partially true. But lest we take it too seriously, lest we take ourselves too seriously, it is helpful to remember that here we have no less an evangelist than an angel, and angel flying in midheaven, proclaiming the gospel "to every nation and tribe and language and people." This angel is proclaiming the gospel with the support of all sorts of portents that have come to confirm it. And even after this angel finishes his task, with far more resources than the most powerful television station, there are still enough who refuse to believe to keep the seven angels with the seven plagues busy! In a

way, this is a passage to cut every professional evangelist down to size. It is also the necessary framework within which we must put our own calling and commitment to multi-cultural evangelism: We must do it, yet we must always remember that it is not all up to us!

There are, however, other passages that are not so positive in their evaluation of the many tribes, nations, peoples, and languages. It is important to recall these, for otherwise we are in danger of romanticizing cultures and multiculturalism, and of forgetting that they, too, have their demonic dimensions.

In Revelation 11, John offers us the vision of the two witnesses. It is not necessary for our purposes here to enter into the discussion as to whom these two witnesses might represent. What is important is that, after the two witnesses have completed their testimony and are killed,

> *for three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth* (Rev. 11:9-10).

In other words, if the glory of heaven is to be shared by a great multitude out of every tribe and nation and people and language, so are the Lamb and its witnesses to be opposed by others out of every people, and tribe, and language, and nation. Multiculturalism may be an important trait in the very nature of the church, but it is also an important trait in the powers of evil.

Revelation 13 makes that point even clearer. There John is speaking of the beast from the sea, which appears all-powerful, and is therefore worshiped by the whole earth, and he says:

> *It* [the beast] *was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered* (Rev. 13:7-8).

Thirdly and finally, look at Revelation 17. This is the vision of the great harlot. As in every such vision, the details are confusing and not always consistent with each other. In any case, the angel tells John that the woman is "the great whore who is seated on many waters." This is obviously an allusion to Jeremiah 51:13, in which the prophet is speaking against Babylon: 'You who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your end has come." It is also a reference to a theme that appears repeatedly in ancient iconography, in which a city is often depicted as a goddess enthroned by a river. The reason for this is that in ancient times most long-distance transportation took place by water rather than by land, and therefore rich empires such as Babylon's or Rome's were made possible by the shipping that came to their capital cities. Thus, to depict the great harlot as "seated on many waters" was another way of saying that it was a rich city; a city to which, as in ancient Babylon, all the riches of the world flowed.

There follows the description of the great harlot, with which we are all familiar, and then the angel explains the meaning of the vision to John. "The waters that you saw," says the angel, "where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev. 17:15). In other words, the great harlot is rich, but she is rich because she sits on all these

various nations and cultures, exploiting them and having their wealth flow to her like many waters.

What do we learn from all of this for our theme—multicultural evangelism? We certainly learn that we must not romanticize culture and multiculturalism.

There are at least three ways in which we are often inclined to such romanticization.
The first is by claiming for cultures—for our culture, or for any other culture—a purity that cultures by nature do not have. Cultures, and languages, and nations, and peoples, are historical phenomena. They are part of this fallen creation. And, as part of fallen creation, they carry in their very being the sign of sin.

I love my culture. Yet, when I stop to think about it, I realize that my culture, and this language of which I am so proud and which I so love, are in many ways the result and the distillation of many an oppression. If I speak Spanish, it is because my Spanish ancestors invaded the lands of my Indian ancestors, suppressing their language and traditions, and trying to erase their culture, as if it had never existed. And, if the Spanish I speak still includes some native words that would have sounded strange to sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors, it is because, even after five hundred years, the culture of my Indian ancestors has refused to let itself be entirely obliterated. But I can go further back. The reason why I call a church "*iglesia*" is because, even before the advent of the church, my Roman ancestors conquered my Celt-Iberian ancestors.

And the reason why I call cheese "*queso*," and not something like "*fromaggio*," is that my Visigothic ancestors conquered my Roman ancestors. And the reason why, when I wish to say, "may God will it," I say "*Ojalá*," is that my Moorish ancestors conquered my Visigothic ancestors.

I love my culture. I love my language. I am enthralled by the richness and the fluidity with which it can express the most varied tones and moods. But I must remember: This language and this culture that I so love are the result of many a pain and many an oppression.

It is important for us to remember this, for otherwise love of language and culture runs the risk of becoming demonic. It is when we forget this that love of language and culture results in ethnic cleansing, in theories of supremacy, and in racial and cultural exclusivism. It is important to remember this, for language and culture properly understood are to be represented in the great throng singing the praises of the Lamb, but language and culture turned into objects of idolatry are among the most insidious tools of the beast and the dragon.

Secondly, we tend to romanticize cultures by claiming for them a stability that they do not have. I do not have the time tonight to expand on this subject, but it is important for us to realize that culture is by definition a living thing; and a living thing is always changing. Cultures are by nature permeable, just as skin is permeable. They influence each other. They evolve as the

world and society evolves. A culture that cannot evolve is dead and is no longer a real culture but the relic of a culture.

But enough about that. I must move to the third way in which we tend to romanticize culture. That is by forgetting that culture always exists in a political and economic context. John of Patmos seems to be well aware of that: "The waters where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages."

If we accept the most common interpretation—that the great harlot is the city of Rome and its imperial power--, it follows that John of Patmos has a very realistic understanding of the wealth of Rome. Rome is wealthy, not because it is particularly productive, and certainly not because its people work harder than the many peoples, tribes, nations, and languages it has subjected, but rather because it has devised a system whereby the wealth of all these nations flows to Rome, as so many rivers.

We all know that the first century was a time of great mixing of cultures. And nowhere was this mixture more evident than in Rome itself, where people from all over the Empire converged. We also know that the more aristocratic and traditional Romans bemoaned the fact that their city was being overrun by all these people of various tribes, and nations, and languages. Actually, at approximately the same time that John was at Patmos, or shortly thereafter, Tacitus complained that Rome was a receptacle to which flowed everything that was sordid and

degrading from every quarter of the globe (*Annals* 15.44). Others took the opposite tack, accepting quite wholeheartedly at least some of the elements of foreign culture that were invading even the most traditional quarters of Rome. But, as far as I know, it was John of Patmos who most clearly saw that the nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages were present in Rome, not simply out of cultural exchange but also because Rome was the great harlot sitting on many waters, and the many waters were the "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages" who actually produced the wealth that made the harlot great.

It is important for us to realize this, for the cultural encounters of our day do not take place in abstraction of economic and political systems. It is not just that world travel has become easier, and therefore people of different cultures meet more often than they used to. It is also that the world order—or rather, the world disorder—is such that people are forced to leave their traditional homes and move to new lands in search of safety, security, freedom, and work. All other things being equal, most people would rather live where they grew up, in their own homelands, and in the context of their own cultures. But all things are not equal, and therefore people cross borders and even oceans seeking the safety and the opportunities that are often denied them in their own homelands. When the rivers of wealth flow in one direction, it is only natural for population to flow in the same direction.

Let me give you an example. In the last twenty years, thousands and thousands of acres in Mexico have been turned from corn and beans and other such staples for local consumption, to

vegetables and flowers for export to the United States. As vegetables flow from Mexico across the border, growers north of the border find it difficult to compete and must seek cheaper labor. That labor is then provided by Mexican workers, probably the same workers who until recently were growing beans in Mexico but have now been displaced by export crops and are looking for work. Thus, while the newspapers carry all sorts of reports about people crossing illegally under the bridge, those people are in a sense following the tomatoes that are crossing legally over the bridge.

Where the rivers of wealth flow, there, too, flow the rivers of population.

John of Patmos had it right. The multicultural society of the Roman Empire was not just the result of cultural exchange. It was also the result of economic exchange supported by military might. And, in some ways, the same is true of the multicultural society of the twentieth century. It is the result of European conquest and westward expansion. It is the result of Black slavery and the trade that supported it. It is the result of colonialism in the nineteenth century and of economic neocolonialism in the twentieth.

Keeping all of this in mind, let us look at Revelation 10:

> *And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He held a little scroll open in his hand. Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, he gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded. And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up*

> *what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it: "There will be no more delay, but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets." Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. Then they said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings"* (Rev. 10:1-11).

If we now compare this passage with its literary background in Ezekiel 2 and 3, the parallelisms are obvious. There is no need to dwell on them. What is more striking, however, are two significant differences. The first is that, while Ezekiel says, "I ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey," John says: "it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter." Ezekiel speaks of a sweet word of God. For John, the word he is to proclaim is bittersweet.

The second difference has to do with the scope of the message of each of the two prophets. Ezekiel is told: "Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them. For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel—not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand." In contrast, the mighty angel tells John: "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

There are a number of theories as to why John says that the scroll made his stomach bitter. One possibility is that the word he receives is a word of judgment. Although it is sweet because it is the word of God, it is bitter because it is a word of destruction and death. This is an attractive theory, although the truth is that Ezekiel's word is equally of judgment, for he says that in the scroll that he ate were written "words of lamentation and mourning and woe." Thus, if John's scroll was bitter for that reason, so should Ezekiel's have been. Another theory is that the scroll is bitter in John's stomach because it contains words about the persecution and suffering that Christians are to undergo. That, too, is an attractive theory.

I prefer, however, to see a connection between the two particular traits in John's vision vis-à-vis Ezekiel's: the bitterness in the stomach and the wide scope of the message.

If any writer of the New Testament was a Jew and steeped in Jewish culture and traditions, that was John of Patmos. It has been pointed out that there is hardly a verse in his book that does not have an allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures. His Greek is full of Hebraisms, perhaps due in part to his greater familiarity with Hebrew and with Aramaic, and perhaps as a result of his constant literary dependence on the Hebrew Bible. And he quotes that Bible, not from the Septuagint that all the other New Testament authors employed, but either from an unknown translation or from his own, which he does as he goes along.

He is well aware of the mission given to the prophet Ezekiel when he ate his scroll: Ezekiel was to speak only to the house of Israel, and they would not believe him. Now he, John, is not told to whom he is to speak but about whom. (With the preposition *epi*, a genitive case would have meant that John was to prophesy to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. An accusative case would have meant that he was to prophesy against them. But the dative case, used here, means that he is to prophesy *about* them, as the NRSV correctly translates.) The difference between Ezekiel's vision and John's is not that Ezekiel is to go to Israel, to a people who understand his language, and John is to go throughout the world, to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. The difference is rather that John is to go back to his audience, presumably the seven churches and other similar communities in Asia, and speak to them *about* the many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings. And that is why the word of God, the little scroll that will be John's message, although sweet to the taste, is hard to stomach.

John the Jew; John who can quote the Hebrew Scriptures back and forth, apparently without even bothering to think about it, is given a message to proclaim to his congregations. His congregations are probably also mostly Jewish. Otherwise, they will hardly be able to understand this book he is writing to them, so full of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures and even to more recent Jewish traditions. And now he is told that he is to speak to these congregations, not just the word they expect—that those who are faithful until death will receive the crown of life, or that everyone who conquers will receive some of the hidden

manna, and a white stone with a secret name—but he is to speak to them about "many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings." He is to speak to them, not only about how important it is that they be faithful in the impending tribulations and persecution, but also about "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation," whom the Lamb has made "to be a kingdom and priests serving God, and who will reign on earth" (Rev. 5:9-10).

I submit to you that this is the most difficult aspect of becoming a multicultural church in a multicultural world. Bringing people in from other nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages is not difficult, as long as they are brought into the same church, dominated by the same nation, and tribe, and people, and language. Throughout its history, whenever the church has taken the Great Commission seriously, it has been willing, and even eager, to prophesy to many nations, tribes, and peoples. It has also been willing to prophesy in many languages, and to that end missionaries have translated the Bible into thousands of languages and have even devised methods for reducing hundreds of languages to writing. We have certainly taken to heart the task of going throughout the world and preaching the gospel to every creature. To that task many of our great missionaries have devoted their entire lives and even sacrificed them. For that task, we continually collect offerings in our churches. And there are many in our congregations right now who complain that we are not doing enough of it and argue that we should try to recover our first love for missions.

Be that as it may, that is not what John is told to do. He is not told to go and speak to many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. He is told rather to speak to his congregations *about* many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. And he finds that bitter to his stomach.

The difficult task facing the North American church today, as we seek to be faithful in today's world, is not, as some might imagine, creating and sustaining ethnic minority churches. The difficult part is telling our more traditional congregations about the many peoples, and nations, and languages, who are also called to be part of the great multitude that worships the Lamb. And telling them in such a way that they realize that, no matter what they may have thought, their own people, and tribe, and nation, and language is no more in God's plan than *one* of the many peoples, and tribes, and nations, and languages whom God is calling to make, as Revelation would say, ”a kingdom of priests serving God."

It is easy to speak the word of a multicultural church in a multicultural society in such a way that it is sweet as honey in our mouth. And it should be. There is beauty, and joy, and fullness in many people coming together, out of every tribe and nation, and people, and language. But if we remain there; if somehow we avoid that part of the same word that is bitter to the stomach, we are not faithful to John's vision. The vision that John the Jew has is a vision of a Gentile church; a church in which the Gentiles, the nations, *ta ethne*, the *goyim*, would come and take their place right next to the tribes of Israel, and all together would claim the ancient promise made to the people of Israel, that they would be a kingdom of priests. That is a vision sweet as

honey, for it shows the fullness of the mercy of God; but it is also a vision bitter to the stomach, because it shows that no people, no tribe, no language, no nation, can claim a place of particular honor in that fullness. And it is bittersweet, because it involves radical change in the very congregations where John has served and that he loves.

And so it is with us today. The multicultural vision is sweet. But there is also a bitter side to it. There is the bitter side of having to declare that the vision of many peoples, many tribes, many nations, and many languages involves much more than bringing in a bit of color and folklore into worship services. It involves radical changes in the way the church understands itself and in the way it runs its business.

John of Patmos, who apparently cannot speak without quoting the ancient literature of his people, can understand both the joy and the pain of a vision where "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation have been made a kingdom of priests serving God" (Rev. 5:9-10). What we need today, if we are to become a truly multicultural church, is a Jane Smith of Delaware, who is deeply rooted in her Anglo culture, who shares and claims both the glories and the horrors of her tradition. And we need her to work with John Smith of Columbus, who shares and claims the glories and the horrors of his African-American ancestry. And we need them to work with Juana Pérez of Cincinnati, and with John Silverfox of Cleveland, and with Jung Young Kim of Dayton, all of whom share and claim the glories and the horrors of their respective traditions. And together, and separately, we must each and all take the little scroll,

that portion of God's message entrusted to us, and eat it, and digest it, and rejoice at the sweetness in our mouths, and wonder at the bitterness in our stomachs, for we, like John, are called to go and "prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings." Finally, we turn to two rather different passages in which the phrase that we have been following appears. They are different in that they are set in heaven, at the end of time, in the feast of the Lamb.

In Revelation 5:8-10, we read that

> *the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, singing: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth."*

And in Revelation 7:9:

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

Because these two passages are future-oriented—because they take place in heaven—we tend to think that they have little to do with what we are experiencing here today or with how we are to understand our present situation. They are pretty words of comfort and inspiration, and that is about all they are. But I submit to you that, far from that, this vision of the future is crucial if we are to understand how John of Patmos understands his own situation vis-à-vis the many tribes, and peoples, and nations, and languages that worship the beast and on whom the

great harlot is seated. And I submit to you also that, if we are to understand today's multicultural pressures and opportunities as John of Patmos would have us understand them, we, too, need a vision of the future similar to his.

This is why I find the book of Revelation so enthralling. We think that the book is mysterious because it speaks a language and uses symbols that are difficult to understand. We think that the book is mysterious because it speaks of bowls of wrath, and angels with trumpets, and seven seals, and four strange living creatures. But the book is mysterious in a deeper sense than that. The book is mysterious, paradoxically enough, because it declares what the early church announced openly: that when the final trumpet sounds, loud voices in heaven will proclaim: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever" (11:15). And not only the Lamb but also its servants, who are now brought low and persecuted, they too "will reign forever and ever" (22:5).

John's message, and our message, is not ultimately about a beast whose number is 666 nor about seven bowls of wrath. John's message is about the goal and end of history, about the purpose of the world, about the final cause of all that exists, about the fact that, even in spite of beasts coming out of the land and of the sea, and in spite of the great harlot sitting on many waters, and in spite of people from all nations, and tribes, and languages being willing to serve the beast, in spite of all this, God and God's Messiah, the Lamb who was slain, will reign forever and ever.

And John's message is also that in that everlasting reign of God, "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" will be made “a kingdom of priests serving our God" (5:9-10).

That these will be

> *a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands* [crying] *out in a loud voice saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"* (7:9-10).