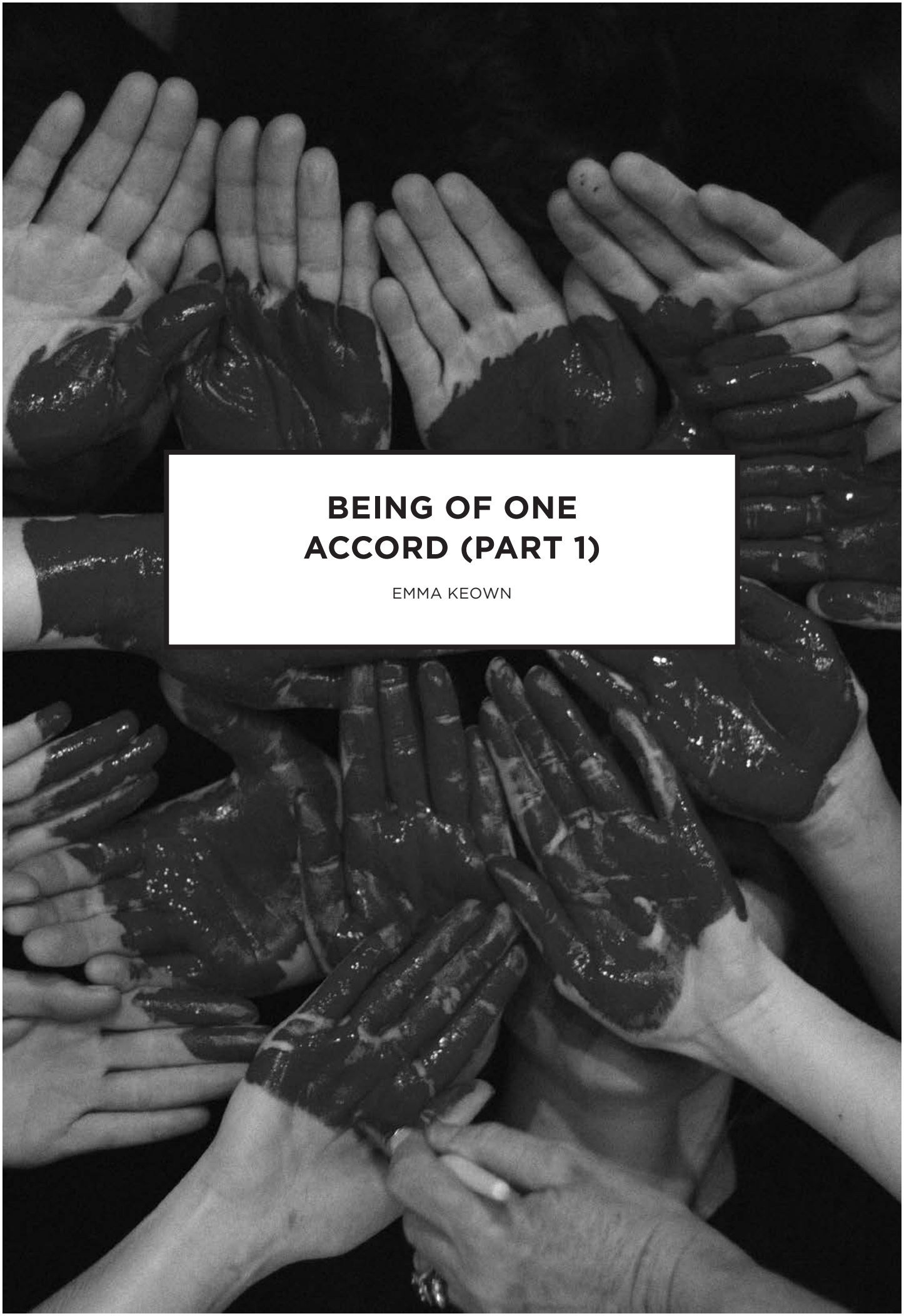

BEING OF ONE ACCORD (PART 1)

EMMA KEOWN

"God of Nations at Thy feet, in the bonds of love we meet…" The glorious words of New Zealand's National Anthem form a prayer that must first and foremost find expression in the Church. As God's people, this bond of love is richly expressed in our "oneness in Christ." Surely our new identity as brothers and sisters in Christ makes it possible for people from every nation to come together as one and worship the "God of Nations"?[1]

The questions are; how is this "oneness in Christ" and being of one accord achieved in the local church setting (made up of many nations and generations)? Is it even possible to genuinely live this out? Is it possible to worship together in one accord, without smoothing out our differences or paying token attention to cultural heritage or ethnic customs and practice?

BEING OF ONE ACCORD: A BIBLICAL MANDATE

There is a strong biblical and theological case for a church that visibly and intentionally demonstrates its oneness in Christ. The biblical story from start to finish embodies a message of hope; it paints a picture where people from every nation can come together as one people, united by faith. It holds out a vision where barriers that have traditionally divided people no longer have a stronghold. Issues such as race, gender, educational background and socio-economic status should no longer separate us because we are one in Christ.[2]

ISSUE SUCH AS RACE, GENDER, EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS SHOULD NO LONGER SEPARATE US BECAUSE WE ARE ON IN CHRIST.

In Genesis, we are *all* described as image bearers (Gen 1:26), descending from the same parents (Gen 3:20), sharing the same consequences of the fall – separation from God, alienation from one another and the same human tendency to sin (Gen 2:17; 3:23). These commonalities continue in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, which stresses the common origin of nations, points to the common humanity of all peoples and shares in the failures and hopes of a common ancestry. This is ultimately seen in our common creation in the image of God. Right from the outset, human identity is not measured in terms of race or ethnicity, it is assessed in terms of our relationship to God and to one another as human beings.[3]

Because of human disobedience, things get messy and in Genesis 11:1–9 the Tower of Babel story underlines the breaking down of human relationships, as humanity is divided into different people groups with different languages. On the one hand, Genesis highlights our unity and commonality as human beings; one people under God's blessing. On the other hand, it highlights our diversity and multiplicity as human beings; many peoples under God's wrath. This disastrous state of affairs leads us to Genesis 12 and the promise of Abraham.

If Genesis chapters 1–11 describe who we are and what our problem is, then Genesis 12:1–3 presents the great redemptive plan of God, providing the theological framework for how we understand the rest of the Bible. The promise of Abraham is the answer to the sin and the scattering of humanity in Genesis 3–11 and this is ultimately addressed by Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection make intimacy with God *and* with one another possible once again. In him, Christians have a new identity, a new homogeneity that breaks all barriers, between people and God and between each other. Luke sees Jesus as the fulfilment of the promise of Abraham and following Jesus' death and resurrection, the work of the Spirit at Pentecost is a key moment in history that reversed the effects of sin, manifest in the Tower of Babel story. While the ultimate picture of the unity of the people of God is finally fulfilled in Revelation, its fulfilment can be traced directly back to the promise made to Abraham and it is a hope that runs throughout Scripture.[4]

We as God's people in Christ are: baptised into one body (1 Cor 12:13), called to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19–20), declared one in him (Gal 3:28), approved as one new humanity (Eph 2:14–15, 19), accredited a new self (Col 3:9–11), recognised as one body having received one Spirit (Eph 4:4) and are mandated to love one another (1 John 4:7). This new humanity, this oneness, is envisioned by Christ

1 For full translation of God Defend New Zealand see http://www.nz.com/new-zealand/guide-book/music/.

2 1 Cor 1:26–29; Gal 3:28; Acts 11:18, 15:14, 19–20.

3 "Human identity cannot be grounded in race, the human being is essentially constituted by its relationship to God as the creature, reconciled sinner and glorified child of God. Who we are is determined in and through this relationship, and on the basis of this identity we are called to relate to others as those who also belong to God in this three-fold way." G. Deddo, "Persons in Racial Reconciliation: The Contributions of a Trinitarian Theological Anthropology," in *The Gospel in Black and White*, ed. D. L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1997), 65.

4 See Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 14:6. J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, ed. D. A. Carson (NSBT 14; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), 62.

as a witness to the world (John 17). It is described by Luke as the primary model for the church (Acts 11:21–26) and it is given to us as a vision of our future; a vivid picture of heaven itself (Rev 5:9–10). Here a new community gathers before the throne of God in worship, people from every tribe, language and nation. This stunning picture of the church expresses the very heart of God and anticipates our involvement in bringing it about on earth as it is in heaven (Rev 7:9–12).

Despite this biblical mandate, the church has often struggled to flesh this out. Martin Luther King once said that 10 am on Sunday morning is the most segregated times of the week;[5] a shameful admission that might well apply to the church here in New Zealand. Our failure to reach across ethnic divides stands in stark contrast to the vision of the future kingdom, where collectively every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Isa 45:22–25; Phil 2:9–11).

It seems to me that the church must ask itself: "if the kingdom of heaven is not segregated, why on earth is the church?"[6] With this all-inclusive biblical mandate in mind we look to Jesus and the example he set.

BEING OF ONE ACCORD: THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Jesus' life from beginning to end epitomised a worldview that is inclusive. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, he preached in synagogues and temples, he included the poor and the oppressed, he reached out to his enemies, he broke many cultural protocols and he extended an invitation to be part of this kingdom community to both Jews and Gentiles alike. Ortiz says it well:

> Into an ethno-orientated world that isolated one from another, came a new kind of gathering place, at the centre of which was the God of heaven and earth, who made all flesh one and who revealed himself in the face of Jesus Christ."[7]

At a personal level, Jesus knew what it was to be the outsider. Even the events of his birth – an unwed mother, a grubby stable, poor shepherds and a journey to Africa as a refugee – anticipate a future of rejection and exclusion from those on the inside.

In Matthew 1, Jesus' genealogy is recorded and surprisingly, it includes four women of Gentile origins, all of which have some ignominy associated with them. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites and were of dubious morality, while Ruth was a Moabitess. Bethsheba was initially married to a Hittite and committed adultery with Israel's king. Rather than trying to establish racial purity, Matthew is shocking his audience by implicitly saying that the Messiah himself came from a genetic pool that included and embraced Gentiles.

Growing up in Galilee, Jesus would have rubbed shoulders with people from diverse backgrounds, as this was an area that reflected the wide-ranging demographics of the whole Roman Empire.[8] For Jesus, his home was not the sacred temple city, Jerusalem, the world centre for the rabbinic academies, but Nazareth in Galilee, a region surrounded by Greek states and permeated by Hellenism. It is appropriate that a message that was to be taken to the Gentile world should be centred on one who was nurtured and raised in 'Galilee of the Gentiles'.[9]

JESUS' LIFE FROM BEGINNING TO END EPITOMISED A WORLDVIEW THAT IS INCLUSIVE

It seems that Jesus' earthly life began and ended with a worldview that was all-embracing and a mission that was all encompassing – an African named Simon of Cyrene carried his cross, a Roman Centurion declared him to be the Son of God and members of the Jewish ruling council (Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus) made arrangements for his burial. Even the stories he told about the kingdom he was inaugurating championed this message. For example, in the Good Samaritan, the "hero" is actually the "enemy" (Luke 10:25–37). Similarly, in the Great Banquet, the guests who accept the invitation are from far afield – the unlikely, the unpopular and the unwanted – and they are all welcomed in (Luke 14:15–24). Clearly, as far as Jesus was concerned, "loving your neighbour" transcended racial, cultural and social boundaries and as far as we his followers are concerned, so it must too.

This upside-down kingdom continues to break down barriers, indicating that salvation, wholeness and healing are for all peoples. The healing of the Roman Centurion's servant in Capernaum (Matt 8:5–13), where Jesus specifically refers to the validity of the Roman Centurion's faith, points to a kingdom

5 George Yancey, *One Body, One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 14.

6 Mark Deymaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 19.

7 Manuel Ortiz, *One New People; Models for Developing Multiethnic Churches* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 9.

8 This "Gentile" population would have been made up of Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Macedonians, Persians, Romans, Syrians and indigenous Canaanites.

9 Curtiss Paul De Young, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15. See Matthew 4:15–16.

in which boundaries based on geography, DNA or ritual rightness have no place.

In Mark 7–8, Jesus enters the Gentile region of Tyre. Here, a Greek woman encounters Jesus and pleads for her child to be healed, something which Jesus willingly grants to this culturally surprising role model of faith. Moving on to the region of Decapolis, he heals a deaf/mute man and then proceeds to feed 4000 people. Breaking every convention, he heals the very ones considered outsiders and unclean even feeding hordes of Gentiles. Then, rubbing salt into the wound, he sits down and eats with them! Giving thanks and breaking bread, this was a subversive act that symbolised the inclusion of Gentiles at God's communion table.

Repeatedly Jesus uses "table fellowship" as a living, breathing example and as a political act to advocate for something radically different from the current status quo that condoned exclusion and practised separation.[10] Who you ate with and who you did not was a statement and while the Pharisees used it to maintain the exclusive ethnocentric identity of Israel, Jesus did not. His whole life was a pictorial display that threatened the authority of the religious leaders and they could not understand it, much less condone it (Mark 2:15–16).

CULTIC OBSERVANCE AND RITUAL RIGHTNESS ARE SUPERSEDED AND ALL ARE INVITED TO THE TABLE; THE BROKEN AND THE WHOLE, THE GENTILE AND THE JEWS AND THE CLEAN AND THE UNCLEAN.

Jesus challenged the prevailing worldview that sought to exclude certain people with a radical inclusivity that embraced the poor, the disabled, the ostracised, the untouchable, the outcast, the isolated, the undeserving, the lost, the nameless, the stranger, the other, etc. Codes of purity and holiness would no longer define the people of God. Internal and external boundaries that separated the clean from the unclean and determined who was in and who was out would no longer apply. Cultic observance and ritual rightness are superseded and all are invited to the table; the broken and the whole, the Gentile and the Jew and the clean and the unclean.[11]

Making sure there was no mistake, as he moved inexorably to his death, Jesus made his move against the very bastion of Israelite holiness, purity and exclusivity; the Jerusalem temple itself. In Mark 11:12–21, Jesus compares the temple to a withered and dying fig tree that bears no fruit and is, therefore, cursed. Rather than a house of prayer for *all* the nations where all were welcome, the temple had become a sham; a "den of robbers" both physically and spiritually.[12] Bearing no fruit, the temple would suffer the same fate as the cursed fig tree.[13] The temple was supposed to be a place of worship for all peoples. Instead, it stood firmly opposed to the many. As such, this temple would be destroyed and another temple would be raised up, one that would gather its elect from everywhere (Mark 13:27; 14:58; 15:29).

In John 4, we have a cross-cultural encounter between the Samaritan woman and Jesus. This encounter results in many Samaritans placing their faith in Jesus and declaring him, "Saviour of the world" (John 4:39–42). Clearly, Jesus' vision had room for all and in this example, he crossed the barriers of both gender and race.

Not only this, but Jesus clearly expected that his vision would not die with him. Jesus anticipated that those who followed him would stand against any form of exclusivity related to ethnicity, commissioning his followers to go and make disciples of *all nations*; no one was to be left out (Matt 28:19).[14] This was a vision of a united kingdom where barriers that once divided peoples no longer had the power to separate and this vision was to shape the future of the church. In this new community, a new identity is found in Jesus and all those that follow him are called to create a world where homogeneity gives way to a house of prayer for *all* the nations. Rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, clearly articulated and demonstrated in Jesus' life and carried on in the lives of those that followed him, the doors of God's temple are to remain open to all. As Rene Padilla says,

10 Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, New Ed., 1998), 97.

11 Brian K. Blount, "The Apocalypse of Worship, a House of Prayer for ALL Nations" in *Making Room at the Table. An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. Brian K. Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 17–25. For example, in Mark 1:21–28 Jesus enters the repository of the holy and clean, the Capernaum synagogue and cleanses what is allegedly already clean. See also Mark 1:40–45; 2:13–17; 7:1–23 in which Jesus risks "contamination" from leprosy and sinners and sees purity as something of the heart rather than kosher food.

12 "Den of robbers" refers to Jeremiah 7:11; a bitter attack against those who use their ritual righteousness to disguise their sinful behaviour. "Since the Temple has become an institutional symbol of nationalist exclusivism, it must be destroyed before the inclusive kingdom vision that Jesus preaches in Mark can take root and bear fruit." Blount, *Making Room at the Table*, 25.

13 Ibid., 22. Mark 11:17 refers back to Isaiah 56:7 which depicts a vision of an inclusive Israel. As conflict erupts between those returning from exile and those who never left the issue of identity takes centre stage. Just who are the "people of God"? Isaiah clearly articulates that even a foreigner could be; God's house was everyone's house.

14 We no longer need to travel overseas to do this, the nations have come to our doorstep.

> The same act that reconciles one to God simultaneously introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another. The unifier is Jesus Christ and the unifying principle is the gospel.[15]

The biblical mandate and the example of Jesus give us a strong foundation that affirms what it means for us to be of one accord and this continues in the early church.

BEING OF ONE ACCORD: THE PARADIGM OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Functioning for us as a paradigm, the early church is a visible expression of the struggle it is to live together within the Body of Christ. It was a challenge for these early Jewish Christians, steeped in exclusivism, to live lives that reflected the unity and oneness Jesus called for. However, with Pentecost as the catalyst, the ethnocentric church in Jerusalem was transformed into the multi-ethnic church in Antioch (Acts 2–13).

FUNCTIONING FOR US AS A PARADIGM, THE EARLY CHURCH IS A VISIBLE EXPRESSION OF THE STRUGGLE IT IS TO LIVE TOGETHER WITHIN THE BODY OF CHRIST.

From the beginning of the story, Luke connects the coming of Christ to the promise of Abraham and the pivotal event of Pentecost is a reversal of the Tower of Babel.[16] The Pentecost event could not have demonstrated more clearly the multiracial, multinational and multilingual nature of the kingdom of Christ. Acts 2 connects us back to Genesis 10–12[17] and at the same time, points us forward to the scene depicted in Revelation 7:9 where the redeemed will come from every nation, tribe, people and language.[18]

Although the Jerusalem congregation began as a struggling group of 120 Galilean Jews, it soon grew into a multitude of over 3000 Jews shaped by divergent cultures from all over the empire (Acts 2:41, 4:4, 5:14, 6:7). As such, from the first moment of its existence, the church was both multilingual and multicultural.[19]

The transformation was, of course, ongoing, as the church was forced to move outside its comfort zone both theologically and geographically. Moving beyond Judaism and Jerusalem, intercultural communities of faith sprang up, raising implications both missiologically and ecclesiologically. "God's plan was not just that the gospel would go to all peoples, but that all peoples would be brought together through the gospel to form one people in Christ."[20] This metamorphosis, however, was a process and it did not eventuate without some real struggles that threatened the unity and mission of the church.

In Acts 6, we see the signs of change as ethnically based tensions rise. To address these issues, leaders were needed to care for some neglected Greek speaking widows. Seven men were appointed by the Twelve to lead this ministry. All seven had Greek names and included in their number was a proselyte who came from Antioch. This was significant in that this was the first Gentile Jewish convert appointed into a leadership position within the church.

With the martyrdom of another of the seven, Stephen, persecution gained momentum and the church was scattered far and wide. Another of the seven appointed Greek-speaking leaders, Philip, left Jerusalem and evangelised Samaria. He then gave witness to an Ethiopian finance minister (Acts 8:26–40). The Holy Spirit played a major role in the remarkable event, clearly directing and prompting Philip. As Hays says here:

> A Greek speaking Semitic Jew led a black African eunuch to Christ in one of the first evangelistic encounters recorded in Christian history, thus setting the stage for the explosion of the gospel into the world that took place over the next thirty years, and giving a foretaste of the mixed composition of the new people of God that would fill the Kingdom of Christ.[21]

After leaving Jerusalem, Peter entered the home of a Gentile; a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. In this context, Peter's deeply ingrained ethnocentric attitudes were starkly confronted in a vision in Acts 10. Three times Peter questions God, unable to make the jump that would include both Jews and Gentiles equally in the kingdom of God. His eyes were

15 C. Rene Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle" in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983), 287.

16 Abraham's name occurs twenty-two times in Luke-Acts (e.g. Luke 1:54–55, 1:72–73, 2:30–32, 24:47). The theme of blessing through the gospel of Christ on all nations continues with even more intensity in the book of Acts. See e.g. Acts 1:8. The list of nations in Acts 2 and Genesis 10 add to this sense of connection.

17 Luke clearly connects the coming of Christ to the promise made to Abraham that he would be a blessing to all nations (see Luke 24:47, cf. Acts 1:8, Acts 3:25).

18 John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The message of Acts* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1990), 68.

19 De Young, *United by Faith*, 22.

20 Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 157.

21 Ibid., 176.

eventually opened, but it took a dramatic personal encounter with God, the spontaneous outpouring of the Spirit on a Gentile household and a monumental paradigm shift for it to happen.

The events of Pentecost and the persecution that followed led to the gospel spreading. However, it is not until we get to Antioch of Syria that we see a genuine model of interculturality in the church established. Culturally diverse, cosmopolitan and with a high population density of half a million people, Antioch had its fair share of ethnic tensions and strife and "in the midst of this, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity."[22]

As the church was established in Antioch and a diverse leadership team was recognised and appointed, the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to check out what was happening. Subsequently, he recruited Saul of Tarsus/Paul the Apostle to join the work and the mission to the Gentiles gained momentum. Others in the Antiochian church leadership included with Simeon called Niger and Lucius from North Africa along with a Jewish member of the court of Herod (Acts 11:25–26; 13:1). This was a culturally and ethnically diverse mix of leaders reflecting the multicultural nature of the church. This was a church where Jews and Gentiles were one in Christ and this took precedence over any cultural norms; unity in Christ was the priority.

As a result, these "followers of Christ" were no longer able to be labelled as one particular ethnic group. Their diversity was a puzzle, they were a new category altogether and so the descriptor "Christian" or Christ-followers was introduced and used for the first time to describe this new social phenomenon (Acts 11:26). Antioch was soon to become the headquarters of the forthcoming Gentile missionary effort and the pattern for the extension and growth of the church in the first century.

Although the issue was formally resolved at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 the difficulty of Jews and Gentiles living together as "one in Christ" would prove a challenge for a long time. Despite the struggles, the gospel continued to spread and it was really at this point, that the truly multi-ethnic church was born.

Here, the outsider was welcomed in, the excluded were included and made to feel at home and space was made for people from every nation. As such, "it is the multi ethnic church at Antioch, then, and not the homogeneous church at Jerusalem that should serve as our primary model for local church development in the twenty first century."[23] Although it could be argued that the genesis for an intercultural church was evident in the Jerusalem church at Pentecost, it was not fully realised until Antioch and beyond as the gospel extended into the Gentiles of the Roman world.

Amid a society that was diverse and varied and where ethnic tensions were a reality, Christianity offered a new basis for social cohesion and harmony. Seen first in Jerusalem at Pentecost, recognised in Antioch as persecution forced the gospel out, it becomes manifest as more and more churches are established in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and all the earth.

Unsurprisingly, these new churches were not without their struggles. Although Peter had had a change of heart earlier on, when it was tested in Antioch he crumbled. Under pressure he reverted to his entrenched ethnocentric attitudes, he refusing to eat with Gentiles and Barnabas followed suit (Gal 2:11–14). Paul stood up to Peter and opposed him, publicly rebuked him for compromising the truth of the gospel. To Paul's credit, he refused to take the pragmatic option of establishing a separate and exclusive Gentile church. Had he done so, it would have emptied the gospel of its power to bring reconciliation, made the church look weak and insipid and rendered its message hypocritical and void.[24] There was a lot on the line in this encounter and thankfully Peter listened to Paul. Following this, the decision at the Jerusalem Council preserved not only the unity of the Antioch congregation but the church at large as well.

AMID A SOCIETY THAT WAS DIVERSE AND VARIED AND WHERE ETHNIC TENSIONS WERE A REALITY, CHRISTIANITY OFFERED A NEW BASIS FOR SOCIAL COHESION AND HARMONY.

Of course, the struggle was not only in Jerusalem and Antioch. In Galatians, written to churches to the west of Syria, Paul addresses the church about the issue of "justification by faith." In so doing, he tackles both a theological as well as a social problem; misunderstanding had arisen to such a degree that the gospel was now "supplemented" and faith alone was not enough. Countering this teaching, Paul argued that *all* are saved and included on the same basis by faith alone. So, therefore, each one of us, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, have equal standing before God based on faith and faith alone;

22 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 161. See Acts 11:19–21.

23 Deymaz and Li, *Ethnic Blends*, 42.

24 De Young, *United by Faith*, 35–36.

no supplementary action required (Gal 2:16; 3:28). There must be no status differentiation in God's people of faith whether on the basis of gender, race or social class. It is grace that saves us, grace that unites us and grace that declares us all equal in the eyes of God. So, why not in the eyes of humanity and particularly in the eyes of the church?

Continuing his argument in Galatians 3, Paul strikes out against all that had divided humanity since the Fall, where divisions based on ethnicity, economic capacity and gender have torn humanity apart (Gal 3:26–29, also Col 3:1–11). In this radically reshaped world promised to Abraham and delivered in Jesus, the hope is that it is lived out in the church. Then as now, "if the church does not defend in practice the equality and unity of all in Christ, it implicitly communicates that justification is not by faith alone but by race, social status or some other standard."[25] Jesus did not tolerate this, Paul did not tolerate this and neither should we.

Although Paul's vision for the church was "a community of differents," unity rather than uniformity was the key. Instead of simply eliminating difference Paul understood that any associated value and status applied to these differences came under the Lordship of Christ first of all – he argued for Christ over culture. Without blurring the differences, the truth of the Gospel must reign; that God is forming a new creation, drawing into one church Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, Greek and barbarian and black and white.[26]

GOD IS FORMING A NEW CREATION, DRAWING INTO ONE CHURCH JEWS AND GENTILES, MEN AND WOMEN, SLAVE AND FREE ...

As a result, the multi-ethnic church, initiated and exemplified by Jesus, found its feet in the earliest days of the church. It was not always easy, but as the body of Christ, they learned what it meant to live as one people despite being culturally and ethnically diverse; so, it should be in today's church. As Padilla says:

> The breaking down of barriers between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, and between male and female could no more be taken for granted in the first century than the breaking down of barriers between black and white, between rich and poor and between male and female today. But all the New Testament evidence points to an apostolic practice consistent with the aim of forming churches in which God's purpose would become a concrete reality.[27]

BEING OF ONE ACCORD: THE CHURCH TODAY

Revelation 7:9–12 sets out a vision of what the church will be like:

> After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!'

Despite the biblical evidence, the example of Jesus and the paradigm of the early church, the church today has at best, failed to recognise and understand or at worst, ignored and flouted the biblical imperative to love one's neighbour. What a witness we could be if the church could once again model for the world what unity in diversity looks like.

Whilst the biblical imperative is clear it must be recognised that applying this in our own context is not always easy. Growing a multi-ethnic church that reflects our oneness in Christ sounds great, but in reality, it is a process fraught with difficulties.

This article (part one) has concentrated on the biblical mandate that runs throughout the Scriptures presenting us with a comprehensive vision for oneness in Christ. The second article (part two – which will be in the next issue) will discuss the implications for us as the church in any given local setting. Reflecting on my own context and the society within which we operate here in New Zealand, I will discuss the various models of the multi-ethnic church. From this, we will be able to recognise some commonalities that can be applied

25 G. W. Hansen, *Galatians* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1994), 25.

26 David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 2. "The region around the Mediterranean Sea was multilingual, multiracial and multi-ethnic... comprising the multiplicity of cultures that Christianity sought to address and to embrace. In this multicultural arena, the diversity of early Christianity took shape."

27 Padilla, *Exploring Church Growth*, 288.

as we intentionally embrace this opportunity and bring to life the prayer of our National Anthem.

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