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Ethnocentrism and the Holy Spirit

CHRIS DEWELT

It is my conviction that two of the greatest barriers to the church in the accomplishment of *missio Dei* in today's world are the twin issues of unhealthy ethnocentrism and radical individualism. My purpose in this article is to offer a few thoughts on the subject of ethnocentrism, though the two matters are closely related. Concerning the second subject, we in the West find ourselves at the individualistic end of the cultural continuum, while scripture advocates a perspective that is more toward the community end of the spectrum. Whether this merely reflects the culture of the New Testament context, or is in fact a pattern for true disciples of Jesus Christ, I will leave to the pen of other more capable writers. Instead, I wish to focus briefly on the subject of unhealthy ethnocentrism and its effects on the body of Christ.

Ethnocentrism is typically defined in pejorative terms. The secondary definition in Webster puts it this way, "a tendency toward viewing alien culture with disfavor and a resulting sense of inherent superiority."¹ "Belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group"² is a commonly used phrase that implies a lack of understanding or interest in other cultures. However, as Ken Barger points out:

To address the deeper issues involved in ethnocentrism calls for a more explicit definition. In this sense, ethnocentrism can be defined as: making false assumptions about others' ways based on our own limited experience. The key word is assumptions, because we are not even aware that we are being ethnocentric...we don't understand that we don't understand.³

Barger goes on to state that, in his view, it is impossible to be anything but ethnocentric. In travels among various countries and cultures, I have observed that every culture visited is, in fact, deeply ethnocentric. My years of missionary service in the country of Chile confirmed this strongly.⁴ This should not be too surprising and my own response of discovery to this fact betrays my own limited viewpoint. The scenario presented of every culture thinking too highly of itself, though a very serious one, is not without humor. One might imagine two severely myopic individuals viewing one another from a distance. The conclusions drawn regarding each other are somewhat less than trustworthy or clear.

Instead of believing ourselves to be objective concerning other cultures, perhaps it would be better to say that we are in need of compensating for our ethnocentric tendencies. It is manifestly naive to think that we have no context in viewing the world. It is nothing less than arrogant to think that our own cultural viewpoint is perfectly synchronous with that of our Creator. An important measure of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer is in the area of how we see the peoples of the world.

1. Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G&C Merriam Company, 1967).

2. Typing in this isolated phrase produced 299 hits on Google.

3. From an article entitled "Ethnocentrism" by Ken Barger, Professor of Anthropology, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, December 2004, <http://www.iupui.edu/~anthkb/ethnocen.htm>.

4. My wife and I served as missionaries in the 70s and early 80s in Santiago, Chile, working in church planting and leadership training.

Too often we have approached this subject of ethnocentrism, seen the problem, decried it, and mistakenly thought that we have fixed something. There is more to this than deciding that “we” are not like “that.” The fact is that our viewpoint is determined by our context. The challenge is in realigning our context rather than changing our opinion about ourselves. That realignment must take place through the submission of the heart, eyes, and mind to the moving of the Spirit in the church through the Word and through the life of the body of Christ in the world.

In the New Testament’s narrative of the establishing of the church on planet earth, we read on repeated occasions of the destruction of ethnocentrism as a work of the Holy Spirit. This crushing of provincial thinking continues to be an important aspect of the Spirit’s work in the church today.

In the book of Acts, one of the strongest accounts concerning the difficulties of seeing other cultures on a level field with one’s own is reflected in the story of the house of Cornelius; there is an obvious movement of the Spirit throughout that story (Acts 10–11). Peter was propelled by the Holy Spirit toward some difficult conclusions concerning how he viewed who was worthy of receiving the witness-testimony which Jesus had directly commanded him to give. Bob Garrett describes eight factors that led Peter to such groundbreaking behavior:

1. Peter had learned from Jesus that ritual cleanliness was not important (Mark 7.1–15).
2. The cultural distance between Peter and his hearer was reduced because of the fact that Cornelius was a “God-fearer.”
3. The Holy Spirit arranged some significant issues of timing in the unfolding of the events in convincing Peter that he needed to bear witness to this Gentile.
4. The sheet full of animals of all kinds, along with the voice that commanded him to kill and eat, forced Peter to carefully consider his attitude in the matter.
5. Peter discovered that fairness as well as God’s revelation meant that “God makes no distinction among persons” (Acts 10.34).
6. Peter recognized that he and his hearer shared a common belief in the one true God.
7. The fact that Jesus never excluded Gentiles could well have been recalled by Peter.
8. Peter was nothing less than astonished to see that the Holy Spirit had been poured out in the very same way upon these Gentiles as He had been upon Peter himself.⁵

We might add here, especially concerning the last point, that God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, was stating in unambiguous terms that there was no room in his plan for an ethnocentric message. The Gentiles were to hear the message and when they responded in faith, they were to be welcomed with arms wide open with no vestiges of implied inferiority. It must be observed that even with a very clear word from on high through the circumstances and revelation surrounding the Cornelius event, the church still had to deal with it, yet again, in the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Ethnocentrism is a deeply rooted issue that takes time to change. In our own contemporary context, it affects the life and growth of the church today; when it comes to missions, the problem stands out in bold relief. Missionaries must be ever vigilant concerning unintended cultural bias. The best way to accomplish this is to actively listen to members of the host culture in what they communicate (verbally or otherwise) in response to the growth and development of the body of Christ. Although this kind of reflection is best when it comes from a local, any perspective other than one’s own is helpful.

Simon Peter’s willingness to go to the house of Cornelius was a turning point in the development of the international church of our Lord (Acts 10). One of many paradoxes in this text is that of all the apostles, the

5. Bob Garrett, “The Gospel and Acts: Jesus the Missionary and His Missionary Followers,” *Introduction to Missiology*, eds. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith and Justice Anderson (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 218.

Holy Spirit would choose Peter to be the first messenger to the Gentiles. Regardless of one's view concerning Jesus' words to him concerning the keys to the kingdom,⁶ Peter would seem to be an unlikely candidate to herald the good news to Cornelius. Peter will later be referred to by Paul as one who had been entrusted by God with the task of preaching the gospel to the Jews.⁷ The "Greeks" who came to see Jesus (John 12.20–22) did not come to Peter, but rather to the only two disciples with Greek names,⁸ Philip and Andrew. Peter also seemed to be subject to some strong emotional swings, given his attack on Malchus in the arrest scene of Jesus (John 18.10), his subsequent denial of his master (Luke 22.55–62), and his very strong language with the Sanhedrin while under arrest (Acts 4.8–20, 5.29–33). Such behavior might give one second thoughts regarding the likelihood of entrusting him with such an important communication.

A few observations can be made from the Acts 10 text:

1. Cornelius was a Gentile. Not only was Cornelius a Gentile, he was a Gentile with a capital "G." He was the very epitome of offensiveness to a Jew. Not only was he a Roman, he was a Roman (Italian) Centurion.⁹ He was a member of the occupying army, in fact, he was a commanding officer. It is very likely that in Peter's mind, he would have been a worshipper of pagan deities. To put this in our context, let's say that the United States were taken over by a radical foreign army and, after decades of occupation, including multiple skirmishes and attacks, you were then told by the Holy Spirit to go to a certain house and when the door was opened you found yourself facing the local commander of the occupying troops.
2. The author of the text was a Gentile. The only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament is informing us, by the Holy Spirit, concerning this historic encounter. Luke uses a significant amount of text as he tells the story three times. One account is from the authorial perspective, the second is as Cornelius retells the angel sequence to Peter, and then the third is found in chapter 11, when Peter is called on by the church in Jerusalem to explain why he was eating with Gentiles. When the Holy Spirit devotes so much text to an event, we do well to take heed.
3. Cornelius is a surprisingly gracious Gentile. Luke refers to him as a "God-fearing Gentile" and, much like the centurion of Luke 7.1–10 (Luke, again) he demonstrates his piety by the generosity with which he handles his personal economics. God will often surprise us with what is going on behind the mask of culture and foreign behavior; frequently, good soil can be found.
4. Cornelius demonstrated a greater understanding of the circumstance than Peter. He, as a Roman commander, could have ordered Peter to his home. This would have been shameful to Peter (or anyone else in that culture). Instead, this Roman soldier received a very uncomfortable Jew into his home. He showed Peter great (too much—in Peter's view) respect. This sort of thing often happens when we enter another culture outside the West. It is humbling to experience being treated with such graciousness, as if your hosts are actually glad to see you. Note especially in Acts 10.33, "it was good of you to come." There is much that is said in just a few words, something along the lines of: "we do understand that you do not like us...we do know that you won't sit at the same table with us and if we sit

6. There is the traditional view of Catholic theology that associates those keys with divine apostolic authority, and the specification of Peter by Jesus as the eventual holder of that authority. Whereas evangelical and Protestant scholars do not agree with that interpretation, many believe that Peter did have a special role in opening the gate for entry to the kingdom first to the Jews (Acts 2), then in association with the work of Philip, to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and finally to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius here in Acts 10. See John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 184.

7. The text in Galatians 2.7–9 speaks to this clearly. Interestingly, Paul's words are in the context of Peter's later unwillingness to fellowship (eat) with Gentile background believers!

8. Beauford H. Bryant and Mark Krause, *The College Press NIV Commentary Series: John* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1998), 273.

9. Some might argue that Cornelius was not necessarily Italian, though the name of his cohort was. In either case, he was a Gentile, as Luke will tell us in Acts 11. See F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 252.

ARROGANCE VERSUS ANGUISH

What should characterize the church concerning her view of the peoples of the world, whether they be at the end of the earth or the end of the street? In simple terms, it should first be anguish over the lost souls imprisoned by cultural identities rather than an arrogant attitude of cultural superiority.

Let us be careful with the attitudes we take toward the deep beliefs of other peoples of the earth. Too often we show arrogance rather than anguish over falsehood; the very people whom Jesus loves who are trapped in systems that will destroy them spiritually. Paul was not arrogant when he addressed the Athenians.¹³ It is true that it may seem to be ridiculous to worship rats or to spin a prayer wheel, but when we openly smirk about what others hold as polar to their lives, we make communication extremely unlikely. When we openly mock other people and make it clear that we think they are stupid for believing such “idiocies,” we irredeemably shoot ourselves in the foot and make a relationship virtually impossible. Indeed, if we have a heart of compassion for people, rather than looking upon them as “targets” or “objectives,” we will inevitably be moved as Jesus was moved when he looked upon the multitudes (Matt 9.30–38). Besides, who wants to befriend someone who essentially calls them a fool? Perhaps that has something to do with calling someone: “Raca!” (Matt 5.22). It is indeed possible to speak the truth with love, sometimes with the very expression on one’s face. Duane Elmer identifies the critical role of openness, acceptance and trust in approaching anyone from another cultural perspective.¹⁴

HOSTILITY VERSUS HOSPITALITY

Our approach to members of another culture should be one that is hospitable rather than hostile. The word for “stranger” in the New Testament is the word *xenos*. We find it in the English word “xenophobic” which means a fear of, if not an open hostility toward, other cultures. Xenophobia is a significant component of ethnocentrism. Interestingly, the New Testament nearly always uses the word *xenos* to refer to the idea of foreign rather than the simple idea of someone or something not known.¹⁵ The idea of a foreign culture is also found in the word for “hospitality,” *philoxenia*, or “one who loves strangers.” It is a simple corollary therefore, that to be hospitable in the New Testament sense is to be one who welcomes, not simply strangers from our own culture, but also strangers from other cultures—that is, foreigners. In fact *philoxenia* is the word that is used to describe a necessary quality for an elder in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In our previous illustration from Acts 10–11, curiously it is Cornelius who demonstrates *philoxenia* toward Peter. I am not prepared to pronounce Peter as xenophobic, though the tendencies are present, as they are in us all.

Why does the Spirit of God demonstrate such a high interest in crushing ethnocentrism? The church of Jesus Christ must be a place where the foreigner is welcomed, first of all by the elders and leaders of that congregation. If the church of Jesus Christ is serious about the task in which the Holy Spirit is actively engaged, bringing the *ethne* (nations) to the throne, then it will be equally interested in what the Spirit chooses to do with us as God’s people among the peoples of the world. The bride will respect the Spirit’s work among the nations to produce a church that is truly culturally appropriate rather than one that simply represents our Western, American culture.

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13. The apostle Paul demonstrated great restraint and graciousness after being introduced as a babler or “seed-picker,” loosely translated as “bird brain” (Acts 17.18).

14. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 37-88.

15. Thirteen of the fourteen uses directly refer to a foreign context, the other usage is as “guest.” See Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.) 486.