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## A New Kind of People

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# A New Kind of People

IRA JOLIVET, JR.

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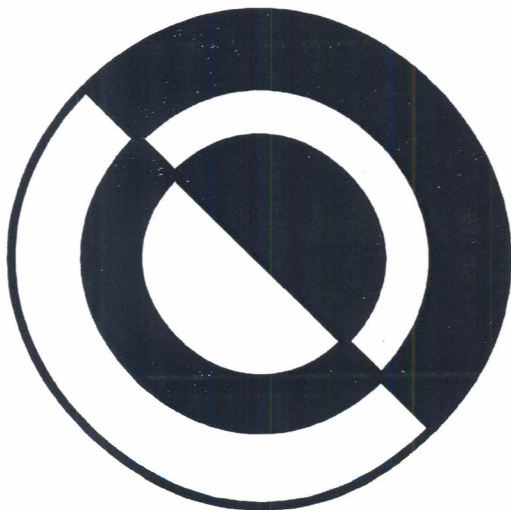
*Editor's note: The text of this article is from an address delivered at the Abilene Christian University Lectureship, February 2000.*

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It is good to be back in Texas where I was born and where I spent most of my life. I love Texas culture, and I miss it since I now live in California. In Texas in the fall, you can literally feel football in the air. That's a part of Texas culture. Intense feelings for the Dallas Cowboys are also a part of Texas culture. You either love them or you hate them. There is no in between. Good food is a part of Texas culture. By good food, I don't mean spinach quiche or fish tacos with shredded purple cabbage or In-N-Out hamburgers. I'm talking about chicken-fried steak with mashed potatoes and gravy, beef brisket and hot links smoked over mesquite, grits with "red-eye" gravy, fried catfish with hushpuppies, real "Tex-Mex" enchiladas, and hamburgers from Whataburger. Now that's what I mean by Texas culture.

Culture is probably more important than we realize. In 1871, anthropologist Edward B. Tyler defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Accepting this definition as accurate leads to the conclusion that culture plays a powerful role in shaping our identities. That is not to say that our identities were not shaped to some extent by genetic factors. My father was a medium-brown-skinned man of French and African descent from Baldwin, Louisiana. From him, I inherited my height, my stocky build, this characteristic pie-shaped face, and the family tendency to be diabetic. My mother was a light-skinned woman of French, Choctaw Indian, and African descent from Opelousas, Louisiana. From her, I inherited my complexion, my bowed-legs, my intellectual curiosity, and the scoliosis in my spine that's finally catching up with me. Thanks, Mama.

But who I am was not just determined by the sum total of the genetic factors that I inherited from Ira Sr. and Lola Marie Jolivet. Because from the time that I was born, strong cultural forces were being exerted in my family, in my neighborhood, in my city, and in the United States, which also helped shape my identity. Most of these forces were things that I learned directly or indirectly from my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, friends, and teachers as I grew up in the segregated section of Houston known as the Third Ward. From them, I learned how to think, how to dress, how to talk, how to work hard, and how to



play just as hard. From them, I learned how to combine a beautiful concoction of flour and oil with crabs, oysters, shrimp, sausage, chicken, vegetables, and herbs and spices to make a delicious feast in a pot called gumbo. From my teachers and coaches at the supposedly separate but equal schools that I attended, I learned academic skills and life lessons. From some, like family and friends, I learned how to love. And from others—like the white police officers who held me, my father, and my older brother at gunpoint while searching our car without explaining why, and the Naval petty officers who told “nigger” jokes when they didn’t see

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a dark face—I eventually learned how to hate. And I learned it well. I hated white people not just for what they did to me personally but also for torturing and lynching Emmitt Till because he whistled at a white girl in Mississippi, for blowing up the four little girls in the church in Birmingham, for shooting Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., and for sentencing my friend Leotis to thirty years in the

penitentiary for allegedly possessing one marijuana cigarette. Most of all, I hated white people because when I looked in the mirror I saw them, the enemy, reflected in my own light-skinned face. Eventually I grew to hate all white people so much that I participated in many acts of violence on the bases where I was stationed during my time in the Navy.

Later, when I was thirty years old, other cultural forces came into my life that were so strong that they changed my identity completely. After almost hitting rock-bottom because of alcohol, drugs, and the impending failure of my marriage, I finally opened the Bible a coworker at the post office had given me six months earlier. I read about God and about his son, Jesus Christ, and I wanted to know more. A neighbor invited me to services at the Fifth Ward Church of Christ, where I heard Tom Foster preaching the gospel in its simplicity and power, and I knew I had to respond to it. On a June evening in 1979, both my wife and I were baptized into Christ. I didn’t realize it at the time, but when God called me through the gospel into his kingdom, he was also calling me to overcome many of the strong cultural forces that had helped shape my very identity. In the first place, I knew that when I was baptized by immersion I was effectively leaving the church which I had not even attended since I was a child, but which nevertheless was a big part of my family’s cultural heritage. As far as my mother was concerned, my wife and I had died and were going to hell, and we were taking our three children with us. I had to decide whether I was going to yield to cultural forces and please my family or obey what I read in the Bible. I chose the latter, and I have never regretted it. I also came to realize that I had to overcome the cultural forces that had caused me to become a hateful and resentful and prejudiced person. Because when I really understood that my baptism was just the beginning of the process by which I was being conformed to the likeness of the one whose very nature is love, I had no choice but to start letting go of all hatred and resentment. Now the dominant cultural forces that were shaping my new identity were God’s Spirit and his holy word and his new covenant people.

My experience was not unique. In fact, in every age, God calls people to overcome the cultural forces that define and perhaps also confine them so that they might reflect his true character. In the early years of the church, God called the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah to reflect his sovereign nature, that is, his rule over, his concern for and his justice toward all human beings. But to do this they had to overcome many of the strong cultural forces that shaped their collective identity as the elect people of God. We see this in Luke’s account of the conversion of Cornelius and his household in the tenth chapter of Acts and the aftermath of that event in chapters 11 and 15.

The account begins with a description of Cornelius as a devout Roman centurion who had not yet taken the crucial and defining step of circumcision. God sends an angel to him in a vision telling him to send for Simon Peter who is staying in the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa. The next day, Peter is on the roof of

the house when he falls into a trance and sees something like a huge sheet being let down from heaven by its corners. Inside the sheet are all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds. Then Peter hears a voice that says: "Get up Peter, kill and eat." Peter's response reflects how a lifetime of Torah observance had shaped his identity when he objects, on the grounds that he had never eaten any unclean animal. The voice then tells Peter: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happens three times and then the sheet disappears into heaven.

While Peter ponders the meaning of the vision, the Spirit speaks directly to him and tells him that three men are looking for him and that he should go with them without hesitation. As a result of this direct intervention of the Spirit, when the men arrive Peter overcomes his extreme aversion to intimate contact with Gentiles and invites them into the house. The next day, he travels with them to Caesarea where Cornelius welcomes him into his home. Peter responds by explaining why he did not hesitate to accompany the men to Caesarea. "You yourselves know," he proclaims in Acts 10:28, "that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" Here, in a great economy of words, Peter indicates that God has revealed that he must make a radical break with his cultural past and behave in a new way.

After Cornelius describes the vision of the angel who had appeared to him, Peter goes on to reveal the motivational force behind the drastic change in his own attitude and behavior. As he begins his speech to Cornelius and his household he states: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (v. 34-35) This is an extremely important and heretofore unknown aspect about God's very nature that he had revealed to Peter through the events that had occurred in the last few days. God is not just the God of the Jews but of all people everywhere. God is sovereign over all people. He created all people. He cares equally for all people. He has provided the same means of salvation for all people in Christ. And he will reward and punish all people on the same basis of the grace extended through faith in Jesus Christ. As Peter concludes: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (43)

Reading Acts today, we probably don't think about the cultural forces, more specifically the deep-rooted theological and ethnic prejudices, that defined Peter as a Jew and also confined him to associations with people in his own group. As mentioned earlier, many of these cultural forces are found in the Torah. In Deut 7:1-6, for example, before the ancient Israelites take possession of Canaan, God instructs them to show the dispossessed nations no mercy and to utterly destroy them. The Lord tells the Israelites that they are to treat the former inhabitants of the land in this manner because God had chosen them out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

But we see in the later historical and prophetic writings that the Israelites did not heed the words in Deuteronomy. As a result, they suffered through devastating invasions by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The Assyrian invasion wiped

out the northern kingdom of Israel, and the conquest of Judah by the Babylonians left Solomon's Temple and Jerusalem in shambles and thousands of Jews dead or enslaved. Later, when the Persians defeated the Babylonians and King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, their spiritual leader Ezra commanded the remnant who remained in the land to separate themselves from any corrupting influences of foreigners, even if these foreigners were their own wives and children. After domination by the Greeks under Alexander, the Jews learned another hard lesson about keeping themselves separate from the cultural influences of other people. In the Second Century B.C., the Syrian king Antiochus IV decreed that all of his sub-

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jects, including the Jews, would immediately forsake their peculiar traditions and become assimilated into the dominant Hellenistic culture. While some Jews willingly ceased to observe Torah and adopted Greek ways, others chose persecution and death over assimilation. These “righteous ones,” the Hasidim, were held up as examples of faith to the Jewish people. Later, in the Roman period, the Pharisees, whose name comes from the word meaning “to separate,” became the spiritual descendants of the Hasidim and constantly reminded the people of the consequences of the corrupting influences of associating with the Gentiles.

These are just some of the historical and theological factors that produced the cultural forces which shaped the collective identity of Jews like Peter in the First Century A.D. and which caused them to cast a suspicious and disdainful eye at people of other nationalities and ethnicities. It is not surprising, then, that Peter objected when he was told to kill and eat animals that he and his family and all other devout Jews had intentionally avoided because they were designated as unclean by the dietary laws of the Torah. And it is also not surprising that the Holy Spirit had to speak directly to Peter so that he would not hesitate to go into the home of a Gentile and preach the saving message of Jesus to Cornelius and his household. But just in case Peter and the circumcised believers still missed the point, God gave them another unmistakable sign, which we read about in Acts 10:44-48. Here, Luke states that

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

While the last statement might seem like a mere afterthought or a convenient way to end the episode, by implying that Peter accepted the invitation, Luke also implicitly shows how Peter overcame the cultural forces which shaped his identity and reflected the newly revealed character of God as sovereign over people of all nationalities and ethnicities.

Luke begins the next chapter by describing the reaction of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem to the news that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. In light of what we have seen about the cultural forces which shaped Jewish identity, it is not surprising that they do not initially react to this amazing news with joy but instead ask Peter, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” However, when Peter explains to them about the vision of the sheet and how the Spirit had communicated with him directly and had also fallen upon Cornelius and his family as he spoke to them, they praise God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” Like Peter before them, these Jewish believers had to overcome strong cultural forces in order to come to this conclusion.

As we see in Acts 15, however, not all the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah would overcome these forces so easily. In 15:1, for example, we see that after Paul and Barnabas told the church in Antioch of their successful missionary activities among the Gentiles, “certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” And after Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders there, “some believers who were of the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.’” After much debate, Peter gives a speech which reflects the drastic change in identity he had undergone as a result of the divine occurrences which led to the conversion of Cornelius. “Now therefore,” he concludes, “why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Peter’s speech brings about a similar change in James, the brother of Jesus, whose decision that the Gentiles need not observe the law indicates that he, like Peter and the Jewish believers mentioned in chapter 11, has also

overcome the cultural forces which had shaped his identity so that he might reflect the sovereignty of God over all people.

The exclusionary forces that these Jewish believers had to overcome were not present in the larger Hellenistic culture. Because, at least since the time of Alexander the Great in the Fourth Century B.C., the idea that all people were citizens of the cosmos and the offspring of the One God had permeated Greek thought and had broken down most particularistic tendencies. Also, Stoic philosophy, which eventually emerged as was one of the major forces that shaped the Hellenistic worldview, had further developed these ideas by teaching that all people, whether kings or slaves, shared in the divine reason, the Logos, which permeated the universe, and were therefore equals in the great cosmic hierarchy.

In spite of these civilizing advances in thought, many of the Greeks to whom Paul spoke also had to overcome strong cultural forces in order to become the new people who would reflect God's true nature. We see this in Acts 17 where Paul is called a proclaimer of foreign divinities because he spoke of the resurrection of Jesus. Even though Paul's listeners were open-minded enough to inquire further into his teaching, some, who held either the epicurean view that the soul is material and disintegrates after death or the more popular stoic belief that only the soul is eternal, scoffed at the mention of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. As was the case with the Jewish believers, however, some Greeks, like Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris, were indeed able to overcome their deeply entrenched intellectual prejudices and become a part of the new people of God.

Today, God is still calling his people to overcome the dominant forces which have shaped their personal and group identities so that they will reflect his universal sovereignty to the rest of the world. At this point, let me stop and ask you, how are we, the Churches of Christ, doing? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the observation that Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week in America. Or maybe the answer lies in the demographics of our church-supported schools, which even today seem to reflect exclusion rather than inclusion. Or perhaps the answer lies in our insistence upon identifying ourselves as the "white church" or the "black church" or the "Spanish-speaking church." Could it be that cultural forces that we are not even aware of are preventing us from reflecting the true character of God? Could it also be that we are so confined by the cultural forces that define us that we subconsciously, or in some cases consciously, only associate with and fellowship with and worship with people who look like us and talk like us and dress like us and sing like us and vote like us?

In an article entitled "An Angry Peace: Race and Religion," which was published in the Spring 2000 issue of ACU Today, Douglas Foster surveys the history of the relationship between black and white members of the Church of Christ. In describing the preconditions of the 1960s and 1970s that set the stage for the present state of the relationship, he writes: "While the Churches of Christ were comparatively interracial as far as numbers of black members and congregations, segregation was virtually absolute. Attitudes among white members reflected the full range of racist assumptions seen in the larger culture. From race hatred and Negrophobia and paternalism, whites in Churches of Christ were firmly in the grips of the prevailing American mindset" (p. 13). The attitudes of the white members eventually led to several events which engendered resentment and suspicion on the part of many black members of the Church of Christ. Foster describes the consequences of these events when he states that

The years 1967 and 1968 were pivotal in the history of relations between black and white Churches of Christ. Four events took place that would effectively end the paternalism of the past and seal the pattern of virtual total separation that continues largely to this day. These events were not meant to seal the division—just the opposite. Nevertheless, the result was the final creation of two separate churches divided by race. (p. 15)

Foster goes on to state that “the die was cast for another generation, and the two fellowships went their separate ways. The hurts and the suspicions and the anger remained because the sin remained. An angry peace existed between the two churches” (p. 18).

Foster’s historical survey is not totally devoid of hope, however, since he interprets Dr. Money’s recent confession of the sin of discrimination on behalf of ACU at Southwestern Christian College and the “One in Christ” conference as positive signs of the fruit of the Spirit. And he concludes with the hopeful exhortation, “We must pray for wisdom and spiritual discernment to see the sins to which we are *now* blinded so they do not become a part of our identity” (p. 39). But in light of what we have seen in our discussion of the conversion of Cornelius, the major problem is not that sin becomes a part of the cultural norm, but that the cultural

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norms which shape our identity become sin if they prevent us from reflecting the character of God. So it is not just the “angry peace” between the black church and the white church that requires repentance and atonement but the toleration and perpetuation of two churches instead of one.

The question then becomes, can we really overcome our old cultural identities and reflect God’s sovereignty? I say, we can and we must. If we think about it, God is not asking any more of us than he did of Peter and James and the other Jewish believ-

ers and also of Dionysius and Damaris and the Greek converts. To illustrate why I am convinced that this is what God would have us to do and why I am optimistic that it can be done, let me return to the personal narrative which I began earlier.

As I mentioned before, I grew up in the Third Ward section of Houston when it was totally segregated. What I didn’t tell you was that after graduating from all-black Jack Yates High school in 1965, I enrolled at the University of Houston, where I was one of about fifty blacks out of a total population of about 48,000 students. The shock of being immersed in an alien culture, which really didn’t welcome us with open arms, was more than most of us could endure, so we either dropped out or transferred to Texas Southern University, which was the all-black state school two blocks down the street from the University of Houston. Those of us who went there came in contact with black activists such as James Farmer, Stokely Carmichael, and H. Rap Brown. My education was interrupted by the war in Vietnam. During the whole four years that I spent in the Navy, which at that time had the well-deserved reputation of being the most racist of the four branches of the U.S. military, all of my social interactions were with other black people. Upon leaving the service, I returned to Houston, where I worked with mostly all black people at the U.S. Post Office and lived in a neighborhood which was all black because the phenomenon of “white flight” effectively resulted in *de facto* segregation. When I finally obeyed the gospel, it was at one of the largest black congregations in the brotherhood. Eventually, I would attend the Institute for Christian Studies, the University of Texas at Austin, and Baylor University. For the whole thirteen years that I attended these schools, I was preaching for the Wheless Lane Church of Christ, an all-black congregation in Austin, Texas.

When Pepperdine hired me to teach in their religion division in 1993, my wife, Marcy, and I began to visit different congregations in Los Angeles and the surrounding area. At that time, we just assumed that we would eventually settle in and begin working with one of the predominantly black churches—as we had in the past. But that didn’t happen. I was invited to speak at a relatively small, predominantly white congregation in suburban Woodland Hills, about thirty miles north of L.A. A few months later, the elders of that congregation asked me if I would be willing to speak on a more permanent basis. Marcy and I discussed the matter and decided that I would accept the position. Naturally, the leaders and the members asked me from

time to time what my vision for the church was and where I saw the church going. I usually answered quite frankly that in the past when I tried to plan the future of God's church, I always turned out to be wrong. I also said, let's trust God to show us what our goals should be. In the six years or so that we have been at Woodland Hills, the complexion of the congregation has literally changed. Our white members didn't run away as the demographics of the congregation began to reflect the ethnic makeup of the surrounding community, and as a consequence, we have become one of the most culturally diverse congregations among the Churches of Christ. As a further consequence of everyone's determination to love one another in spite of our cultural differences, we have grown in ways we never would have had we stayed in our own comfort zones.

I believe this will happen everywhere among sincere, committed Christians of all races if we humbly submit to God's word. If we do this, I believe the Holy Spirit will convict us that the existence of two churches, a white church and a black church, sends distorted messages to the world about the true character of God and about the purpose of the death of his Son on the cross. Listen to Paul as he describes that purpose in Eph 2:13-16:

But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Did Christ die to tear down the wall between Jew and Gentile just to have us erect a new wall constructed of the bricks of cultural differences and the mortar of hatred and resentment which now separate white Christians from black Christians?

Sometimes we read the Bible selectively, that is, we focus on books or chapters or verses which prove our points or support beliefs we already hold. Or sometimes we even unconsciously pick and choose which principles we will live by and which commands we will obey. Many slaveholders justified owning other human beings by quoting Paul's admonitions to slaves to obey their masters. Missionaries who intentionally taught these same verses to slaves and avoided passages in which Paul spoke about freedom and equality in Christ, in hopes that they would become more docile and less inclined to rebellion, often supported these slaveholders. But once we admit that even our understanding of the Scriptures is often clouded by the cultural forces that shape our human identities, then the Spirit of God begins to shed new light on passages that we have previously ignored, misinterpreted, or treated as pertaining only to Paul's original audience and therefore as having no relevance to our modern situation. For example, in Rom 15:1-6 Paul states:

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here, Paul is dealing with the serious problem of division within the church at Rome that arose from the judgmental attitudes and boastful claims of the Jews, who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah but who still observed Torah, and the resentful reactions of their Gentile brothers and sisters, who were the objects of these thoughts and actions. In light of our earlier analysis of the events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius, we can see that this problem was a result of the Jewish converts' failure to overcome completely



the cultural forces that had shaped their identities as Jews. To their credit, they had already overcome these forces to a great extent by being baptized into the same body as the Gentiles. Nevertheless, they were still strong enough to cause the ripples of disharmony which threatened the unity of the body of Christ.

We should have the humility to see that the problem that the church at Rome faced 2,000 years ago is very similar to the one which the Church of Christ faces today—except that their problem arose from different cultural forces and they at least were physically together in the church. Today, we have separate buildings, separate worship services; we describe ourselves as “the white church” and “the black church,” and to be quite honest, we rarely have anything to do with each other. Shame on all of us! How will we ever come to understand our differences and see that they are the result of cultural forces of which we’re probably not even aware? I really think that God is going to call all of us to account for the divisions which our predecessors started but which we perpetuate because we refuse to let go of our old cultural identities. You know how Ricky used to say “Lucy, you got some ’splaining to do”? I believe that if we don’t take active measures to reflect God’s sovereignty to the world, that one day he is going to say to us, “Church, you’ve got some explaining to do.”

To end on a positive note, I want first of all to congratulate and encourage those who have worked so hard for reconciliation here at ACU and at Southwestern Christian College and in congregations throughout our fellowship. And I also want to leave you with a few comments on the vision of heaven that John describes in the seventh chapter of Revelation, beginning with verse 9. After he sees “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,” one of the twenty-four elders seated before the throne of God asks John, “Who are these in white, and where have they come from?” If you look closely at this question, you will see that it is one of identity. And notice carefully how the elder answered this self-posed question. “These,” he proclaims in verse 14, “are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” The elder’s answer tells us that those who one day stand victoriously before the throne of God will not be there because of any human cultural forces that shaped their earthly identities but because their robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their earthly tastes in food and clothes and music are not going to matter. Nor will the socioeconomic strata or political parties or ethnic groups or even nationalities to which they previously belonged count for anything. The only identity markers that will last into eternity are those blood-washed robes. Because the elder goes on to say that

For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
And they worship him day and night within his temple,  
And the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.  
They will hunger no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;  
For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

1 John 1:7 reads: “But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Thank you for inviting me and listening to me. May God bless his new people, the church.

IRA JOLIVET, JR.

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