

A THEOLOGY OF MULTI-ETHNIC CHURCH AND WORSHIP

FROM GLOBAL CHURCH TO LOCAL CHURCH

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Looking back on one year of the pandemic, one First World freedom I have missed is the liberty to travel around the world. As a travel enthusiast, I have visited 26 countries, seven Canadian provinces, and 39 American states. When I visit a country, I try not only to take in the culture, but also to get a sense of how God is speaking to people and how people are singing about God. I ask myself, *What is the heart song of these people?* This pandemic has reminded me that I do not have to necessarily travel the world in order to understand that we are part of a global church and that the face of the PAOC is becoming increasingly multi-ethnic.

As a result of immigration, congregations in urban cities like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver can be described as mosaics. We celebrate the PAOC's mono-ethnic churches that were planted across our nation by first-generation immigrants in order to preserve culture-specific traditions, language, and expressions of worship and to pass on these values to the next generation. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that people from the nations of

the world are at our doorstep. Our PAOC churches must embrace diverse peoples and discover together what it means to be a multi-ethnic church. This requires us to move from our current practice of representation into the future practice of integration.

The only way to be fully convinced of this direction is to evaluate a biblical theology of multi-ethnic churches and the call to global worship. When it comes to biblical foundations, we have typically looked to Revelation 5:9 and Revelation 7:9. The Apostle John's revelation vividly described those in the "great multitude" as representatives "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). These Scriptures provide us with a glimpse into the nature of heavenly worship that takes place before the throne of God. While this scene provides believers with the ultimate vision for worship, this passage unfortunately does not offer us instruction about how to lead and pastor multi-ethnic churches and facilitate global worship in the here and now. We must move beyond the exclusive use of the Book of Revelation and embrace the whole counsel

of God's Word for informing multi-ethnic church realities.

If we are to take a sample of Old Testament Scriptures, let us begin with the Book of Psalms, the hymn book of the Bible. Despite its brevity, Psalm 117 is a geographically expansive and culturally inclusive call to the nations of the world to come and worship the one true God. *"Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord"* (Psalm 117:1-2). True worship does not neglect the use of our heart language or the expressions of our culture. This psalm is addressed to the entire human race, which is the widest category possible. It is for believers and unbelievers alike. When this invitation is given, how do these nations respond? This psalm seems to assert that the ultimate purpose for which God created humans was to offer Him multi-ethnic, multilingual and multinational praise.

Let us continue with the Book of Isaiah. We discover something profound about multi-ethnic worship in relation to our neighbours and our enemies. *The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance"* (Isaiah 19:25). We tend to read the Old Testament with an exclusionist mentality—that God has a plan only for Israel, but not for Egypt or Assyria; however, this Scripture thwarts that

faulty view. Once considered the enemies of Israel and against whom prophecies of divine wrath were given, these foreign people have redemptive potential in God's eyes. We see God's personal possession of these nations by His use of the pronoun "my." Both Egypt and Assyria could experience spiritual transformation from a lifestyle of persecution to a lifestyle of praise and worship. This passage envisions three nations worshipping together without any hostility against each other, modelling multi-ethnic worship to the world.

Multi-ethnic worship is one of the unexplored themes in the Book of Daniel. Babylon represented a physical location where people from every known nation, tribe and language had come by imperial succession and force. Consider the third doxology found in the Book of Daniel, spoken by King Darius, who offered to his empire his own call to worship.

Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:

"May you prosper greatly!"

"I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

"For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will

Photo courtesy Waterloo Pentecostal Assembly.



Worship service in progress before the pandemic.

never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions" (Daniel 6:25-27).

Exile might be disciplinary, but it is also missional. We see the far-reaching influence of the Babylonian kings throughout their empire whenever they used royal edict. Multi-ethnic worship of the God of Daniel became the law of the land. While the praise of the Babylonian kings was only temporary and we may question their conversion, each doxology showed how foreign nations became convinced that the God of Israel and Judah is the one true God.

If we are to take a sampling of New Testament Scriptures, let us begin with the first epistle to the Corinthians. We often forget that the church in Corinth was truly a multi-ethnic house church. The disunity in this church led Paul to write about unity in 1 Corinthians and reconciliation in 2 Corinthians. There is a wide distribution of spiritual gifts but a spiritual unity in identity. *"For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink"* (1 Corinthians 12:13). Many urban churches today are multi-ethnic but lack participation. What happens in the spiritual realm must translate into the physical realm.

When it comes to the church, we must turn to the epistle to the Ephesians. The term "gentiles" refers to everyone who is non-Israelite. Beginning in the Book of Acts, the hostility continues to brew at an apostolic level with the ministries of Peter and Paul and at a social level with the interactions between Jews, God-fearers, proselytes, gentile Christians and Judaizers.

"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Ephesians 2:14-16).

For too long, the Israelites' self-identity was based on their sense of peculiarity as God's chosen. Jesus' redemptive work redefined Israelite and gentile identities, and Paul

describes the emergence of a new multi-ethnic identity called a "new humanity."

We see this reflected in the Christology¹ of the epistle to the Colossians. When believers are unified with God and with one another, multi-ethnic praise and worship is the natural overflow in the life of the congregation. Paul removes a series of labels that once defined the former life. *Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all* (Colossians 3:11). These distinctions of ethnicity, tradition, language, and social class can no longer impinge on a person's acceptance into the worshipping community. We must see the multi-ethnic congregation as the Christ community in which no hierarchy or privilege exists.

As you read this article, you travelled from Israel, to Egypt, to Iraq, to Greece, and to Turkey. What did you learn? What did you see? I believe that the Bible is filled with multi-ethnic worship. How much more should our PAOC churches be filled with multi-ethnic worship, seeing that the nations of the world are filling our churches? In my church, not only do we celebrate the fact that we have 45 nations and languages represented, but we have also started to sing global songs on a regular basis. This has created a learning posture in our congregation and reminds us that we are part of something bigger. Our local church is part of a global church.

1. "Christology" is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "The branch of Christian theology relating to the person, nature, and role of Christ." Accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/christology>.

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