

MULTIETHNIC CHURCH PLANTING: THE BIBLICAL PATTERN FOR FULFILLING
GOD'S COVENANT PROMISES

0ST519 ECCLESIOLOGY AND SACRAMENTS

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Introduction

Within the last 20 years, there has been a growing emphasis on church planting throughout the United States of America. And most recently much attention has been given to the idea of multiethnic church planting. Is this a movement of God in causing repentance throughout our nation in light of our past racial sins?¹ Or is it the latest trend and church planting fad?² Is it motivated by the broader cultural trends toward multiculturalism or by our theology? If this is simply motivated by our broader cultural trends, I believe it will die. If however this is a genuine move of God's spirit and is motivated by our commitment to the mission God has set forth for his church, then nothing can stop it. Let us heed the counsel of Gamaliel, "if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38–39).³

I want to suggest in this paper that multiethnic church planting is not new or the latest fad, but is in the New Testament simply church planting. In the NT the church that was multiethnic was not the rare church as it is today, it was simply the church.⁴ However, we

¹ One example of this is the 44th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, which passed an overture dealing with the sins committed by our forefathers in the faith during the Civil Rights Movement and our commitment to racial reconciliation today. For more see "Overture 43: Pursuing Racial Reconciliation and the Advance of the Gospel," Presbyterian Church in America Administrative Committee, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Overture-43-Potomac-Pursuing-Racial-Reconciliation.pdf>.

² A google search for multiethnic church planting will yield hundreds of results of denominations, churches, and para-church ministries committed to multiethnic church planting and offering books, conferences, training, and the latest information on the topic.

³ Unless otherwise noted all Biblical Citations come from: *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001.

⁴ "Yet still, interracial churches remain the exception at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The typical church in America continues to be composed of just one racial group. That is, not a single person of a different race is in attendance. And interracial churches, where no racial group comprises more than 90% of a congregation, make up only 10% of churches in the United States. Therefore, while race relations have become increasingly relevant to religious bodies, the practice of racial integrations has not followed at the same pace." Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: the Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.

have lost sight of this reality, been seduced by homogenous church growth strategies⁵, and failed to take serious the historic racial sins committed by the church in America. We need to regain a biblical vision of the church in order to display the manifold wisdom of God. I believe that reformed ecclesiology in particular addresses these concerns with its commitment to covenant theology. In this paper, I will seek to show that: the mission of the church is to join God in his mission to create a people for Himself from every nation, tribe, people, and language in fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abraham. To accomplish this mission, we must follow the NT pattern and intentionally pursue the planting of multiethnic local churches.

The Foundation of the NT Church: God's Covenant to Abraham

How should we approach the question of the mission of the NT church? Should we begin with the marching orders given to the disciples in the Great Commission of Matthew 28? In order to properly understand these marching orders we must begin far earlier in our understanding of the nature of the church and her mission. We must begin with the covenant foundations of the church found in the OT and specifically in God's covenant with Abraham. Directly on the heels of God's judgement of the people at Babel (Gen. 11), the Lord

⁵ The Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) was popularized by Donald McGavran and the church growth movement and essentially taught that churches should not seek to make people cross barriers in order to come to faith in Jesus, but make churches that are comfortable so that the only barrier was the gospel itself. "In the church growth movement there is a special focus on the so-called homogeneous unit. A rather nebulous term, it refers to a body of people who form a cohesive unit because of a common denominator such as ancestry, language, or lifestyle. Nuclear and extended families, clans and castes, ethnic and linguistic groups qualify as homogeneous unites. Such units or groupings of people like to decide, work, play, and worship together. That being the case, Donald McGavran believed that church planters should focus on individual tribes, castes, and language groups, even though such a policy seems to be in conflict with the biblical principle that all Christians of all languages, classes, and colors are on in Christ." David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 196-197. Throughout this paper I will reference the HUP and argue against it, however, for a positive case for the HUP see Peter C. Wagner, "How ethical is the homogeneous unit principle." *Occasional Bulletin Of Missionary Research* 2, no. 1 (January 1978): 12-19. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost. And Wayne C. Zunkel, "Church growth: 'not another evangelistic fad'." *Brethren Life And Thought* 25, no. 4 (1980 1980): 223-236. *ATLASerials*, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost.

introduces the means by which he will bring about the redemption of the nations he has just created, the Abrahamic covenant.

In Genesis 12:1-3 the Lord calls Abraham and promises to make him into a great nation. He promises to bless him so that he will be a blessing. And he promises that in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3).⁶ The word translated families (מִשְׁפָּחָתָא) means races, or subdivisions of ethnic & national groups.⁷ The ethno-linguistic divisions created in Genesis 11 are here included in the great promise for Abraham and the soon to be nation of Israel. And as Christopher Wright notes:

This is not just randomly sprinkled blessing. It is a deliberate act that will activate God's promise of blessing for them. The nations will indeed be blessed as Abraham was, but only because they will have turned to the only source of blessing, Abraham's God, and identified themselves with the story of Abraham's people. They will know the God of Abraham.⁸

It is important to notice that this promise of the full inclusion of the nations *as the people of God* comes at the very beginning of the creation of Israel. It is not plan B, but has been the very heartbeat of God's redemption from the moment he called Abraham to "Go" (12:1). And just as Paul views Abraham as foundational and exemplary for justification by faith (Romans 4), we should also see God's covenant with Abraham as foundational for God's mission as realized through the church. This is expressly laid forth in Galatians 3, where Paul declares that the offspring of Abraham are those who have faith like Abraham. And that in the promise

⁶ Whether it is translated "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" or "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" the point remains that the nations will receive blessing as they connect themselves to Abraham, and more specifically the God of Abraham and his covenant promises. See Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 216-218.

⁷ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 222.

⁸ Wright, 219.

of Genesis 12:3, "the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'" (Gal. 3:8). The radical interpretation of this promise to Abraham in the context of Galatians means that Gentiles are accepted as the covenant people not by becoming ethnically Jewish (through circumcision) but through faith in Christ.⁹ The people of God would be defined not by ethnic markers but by faith, as was the intention from the beginning.

This emphasizes that "the covenant structure of Scripture manifests a marvelous unity. God in binding a people to himself, never changes. For this reason, the covenants of God relate organically to one another."¹⁰ This unity is found in the way in which God covenants himself to his people (namely through Christ) and in the people to whom God covenants himself (the whole world). However, both of these remain as promise, shadow and prophecy until the coming of Christ which brings fulfillment, reality and realization.¹¹

The Great Commission within the Covenant Framework of Scripture

With this framework in place we are able to understand the marching orders given by Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. Both passages include the expansion of the Kingdom in number and in scope "to the ends of the earth" (1:8). This is accomplished by "witnessing" (Acts 1:8), "making disciples of all nations," "baptizing" and

⁹ Radical not in terms of the scope of biblical theology but in terms of the Jewish thought of the day. Paul is perfectly consistent with the unfolding and expanding nature of the covenant of grace, however, the Jews of his day were opposed to the Gentiles and particularly the Judiazers (with whom Paul debated) displayed an assimilation approach to Jew-Gentile relations, requiring circumcision and full law-keeping for inclusion within the covenant community. Jarvis Williams notes "Simply put, in their mindset the Jews hated and despised Gentiles because they were not God's people and did not honor Yahweh with their lives. Similarly, Gentiles hated Jews since they thought that the Jews had odd religious customs and a misanthropic attitude toward other nations." Jarvis Williams, *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), under "3220," Amazon Kindle edition.

¹⁰ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Downers Grove: P & R Publishing, 1987), 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

"teaching" (Matt. 28:19-20). Could these passages simply mean that God desires to expand the Kingdom into each of these spheres independently of one another? Wagner argues such and contends that those who oppose the idea of the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) by requiring new converts to Christ to cross a racial or ethnic barrier in entering a local church could be damaging the witness of the gospel.

They may be guilty of raising artificial and non-biblical barriers to salvation. They may unwittingly be loading the Gospel with their own culturally biased interpretations of ethical forms and thus make the *kerygma* irrelevant to the ethical issues being faced by those who hear the Gospel. They may be using the keys of the Kingdom to lock the door rather than to open it.¹²

Opposing the HUP model of church growth is not introducing an 'ethical form' to use the words of Wagner, but a defense of the nature of the church and her catholicity, and indeed a defense of the gospel itself. In Acts 22, Paul finds himself before an angry crowd of Jews and he is given an opportunity to give a defense of the gospel. Does Paul avoid the reality of the full inclusion of the Gentiles, knowing that this is certainly offensive to the crowd as he has learned throughout his missionary journeys? Does he just call them to faith and leave the ethical teaching of racial animosity for another day? No. He declares as part of his defense that God sent him to the Gentiles. "Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live'" (22:22). For Paul indeed, "the breaking down of the barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as *an essential aspect of the gospel*, not merely as a result of it."¹³ If the church is the covenant assembly of God's people and God's people is defined as those

¹² Wagner, 16.

¹³ Padilla, 29.

who have faith in Christ from all nations then "racism also denies catholicity."¹⁴ However practical or noble the motivations, "Churches that begin with a strategy of evangelistic approach to a targeted population may end as a sect, defined not by the gospel but by society."¹⁵

Therefore, when viewed through the framework of the Abrahamic covenant the Great Commission shows itself as "the extension of covenant membership to the nations, which was the underlying purpose of the missionary work of the church."¹⁶ If that is the case, then one cannot claim to come under the covenant head without becoming part of the global and multiethnic covenant people. The idea that one's ethnic preferences or blatant racism should be tolerated or even utilized for mission in greater conversion numbers is counter to the covenant framework in which the gospel is situated. "Whether a person likes it or not, 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."¹⁷

Paul makes this even more inescapable in Ephesians 2 and 3, where he declares that Jesus "has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace" (2:14-15). And that "the mystery of Christ" (3:4) is "that the Gentiles

¹⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 97.

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶ Wright, 353.

¹⁷ René C. Padilla, "The unity of the church and the homogeneous unit principle." *International Bulletin Of Missionary Research* 6, no. 1 (January 1982): 23-30. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 20, 2016), 24.

are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6). The Gentiles who once were "strangers to the covenants of promise" (2:12) are now "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (2:19). Paul's language is dripping with references to the Abrahamic covenant, boldly declaring its fulfillment not simply in the coming of Christ Jesus, but in his coming to redeem the whole world into a new unified and multiethnic (Jew-Gentile) family. "The gospel that Paul preached was so powerful and beautiful that it fulfilled God's covenant promise to Abraham and produced multiethnic local churches."¹⁸

All of these realities are confirmed in the picture of the new heavens and new earth as given to us in the book of Revelation. Here we see that gathered together is "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9). "This is the omega point of the long sweep of covenantal history through the Bible. The covenants proclaim the mission of God as his committed promise to the nations and the whole of creation. The book of Revelation is the covenantal declaration 'Mission accomplished.'"¹⁹

The NT Pattern: Multiethnic Local Churches

Everyone agrees that the church triumphant in glory is a multiethnic people united perfectly together in Christ Jesus. However, much debate, as has already been touched upon, surrounds the strategy and means by which the church gets to that place. Should the church intentionally pursue homogeneous churches today even though its advocates admit "such a

¹⁸ Derwin L. Gray, *The High Definition Leader: Building Multiethnic Churches in a Multiethnic World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 148.

¹⁹ Wright, 356.

policy seems to be in conflict with the biblical principle that all Christians of all languages, classes, and colors are one in Christ"?²⁰ Or should churches intentionally pursue the eschatological reality of the multiethnic church today in local congregations? I have argued that the gospel message and the marching orders of the church laid upon the foundation of the Abrahamic covenant demand the pursuit of the multiethnic church. Now, I will seek to briefly show the NT pattern which confirms that this is in fact how the Apostles understood those marching orders.

Jesus gives the apostles clear instructions to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Although they start slow and struggle to fully embrace this mission at first, the Apostles eventually embrace not only this mission but the people to whom this mission sends them, bringing the Gentiles fully into the church. A full exposition of the NT church planting pattern is beyond the scope of this paper, but a few samplings will suffice to show that the norm was multiethnic local churches.

One of the best indications of normal patterns in the church, a gathering of sinners redeemed by grace and elected as saints, is to look at the conflicts that arise. When consistent conflicts arise it reflects consistent patterns. The first conflict dealt with in the book of Acts is along ethnic divisions. In Acts 6, the Greek-speaking Jews complain of their widows being overlooked in the daily distribution of food while the Hebrew widows were being preferred. Instead of creating two distinct churches that would cater to the needs of each culture, the

²⁰ Hesselgrave, 197.

Apostles instructed the congregation to select deacons to serve the whole body and "the unity of the church across cultural barriers was thus preserved."²¹

The church in Antioch, one of the most powerful NT churches, is a perfect example of the multiethnic church. The church begins in Acts 11 when some of those fleeing persecution spoke the word of the Lord to both Jews and Greeks in Antioch. The Lord adds greatly to their number and in Acts 13:1, Luke gives a list of the leadership of this local church. "What is most obvious is the ethnic diversity of the leadership of this church."²²

The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is obviously of crucial importance to the question of the multiethnic church. Because of the influx of Gentile believers and the opposition to their full inclusion without circumcision by the Judiazers, the church had to come to a formal decision. The church upheld the free grace of the gospel and the covenant promises of God to redeem the nations and did not require the Gentiles to be circumcised (Acts 15:19, 28). But often overlooked in the analysis of the Jerusalem council is the requirements given to the Gentiles.

If the Jerusalem "Council," having set out to deal with the question of circumcision, ended with regulations related to table fellowship, the obvious explanation is that, once the matter of principle was settled, the effort was made to provide a *modus vivendi* for churches in which Jews and Gentiles would continue to have table fellowship together.²³

The council did not only address the gospel issue defending justification by faith alone, but also the gospel issue of table fellowship across ethnic lines in the local church.

²¹ Padilla, 25.

²² David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 375.

²³ Padilla, 27.

From here, the book of Acts turns to focus on Paul's Gentile mission. Acts 17 shows that Paul's "custom" (2) was to go to the synagogue and proclaim first to the Jews, and then go to preach to the Gentiles (4). And it is also clear that these were not two separate congregations but one congregation gathered together in Christ. This pattern is repeated throughout the book of Acts in every place to which Paul traveled.²⁴ Taking this pattern along with the hortatory sections of Paul's letters that address Jew-Gentile relationships²⁵, it is clear that "Paul faces the unprecedented challenge of establishing a harmonious community not only among ethnic groups but also among people from different social levels."²⁶ The Apostles did not take the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant promise to bless all the families of the earth simply as an eschatological reality to be fulfilled in the future. They understood that in the coming of Christ, the eschatological fulfillment had broken into this present age and was *being fulfilled* in their midst as Jew and Gentile came together into local multiethnic churches, as they awaited the final consummation.

Conclusion: Multiethnic Church Planting in America Today

It is clear from our survey of covenant theology and the NT pattern that the multiethnic church is not only the final end goal of God's promise to Abraham, but also the means by which he would accomplish that promise. If this is the case, why does the church in America not reflect this reality? Soong-Chan Rah offers this analysis: "For most of its history (but particularly in the last fifty years), American evangelicalism has more accurately

²⁴ See also Acts 13:43-48; 14:1-6; 17:12; 18:4; 19:8-10; 20:21; 22:21; 28:23-30.

²⁵ See Romans 14-15; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Galatians 2:11-21, 3:28-29; Ephesians 4:1-7

²⁶ James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 148.

reflected the values, culture and ethos of Western, white American culture than the values of Scripture."²⁷ This stinging critique is helpful and clarifying, given the almost universal appropriation of the HUP, whether consciously or subconsciously. We must be willing to admit the failure of the HUP in displaying the purity and catholicity of the church. "Because of its failure to take biblical theology seriously, it has become a missiology tailor-made for churches and institutions whose main function in society is to reinforce the status quo."²⁸ We must also be willing to admit our own blind spots in appropriating cultural expressions as biblical principles.

What then is the way forward? A commitment to reformed ecclesiology, covenant theology and the biblical portrayal of the church will lead towards the intentional planting of multiethnic local churches. But to do so effectively in our context (US) we must start with repentance of past racial sins and a commitment to genuine racial reconciliation. This commitment will lead to the inevitability of uncomfortable and difficult cultural challenges surrounding table fellowship, just like Paul addressed in his letters. However, this is the vision for the church as laid out in the Scriptures:

Indeed, Paul's vision of the church would become a challenge to the church in all ages, for it would extend to the separation between ethnic and socioeconomic groups that live in isolation from each other. While the immediate concern is the unity of Jews and gentiles in Christ, Paul points with the phrases "there is no longer slave or free" and "there is no longer male and female" (3:28) to the greater significance of the new definition of the people of God. All are one because they are incorporated into the founder of the new humanity.²⁹

²⁷ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 20.

²⁸ Padilla, 30.

²⁹ Thompson, 65.

Beginning with these biblical-theological convictions and an attitude of repentance, we can then move forward in establishing worshipping communities that avoid false unity. Avoiding a 'unity' by assimilation, where multiple cultures/ ethnicities are in a single church yet it is dominated and directed by the majority culture and others are forced to embrace this culture. And avoiding a 'unity' by segregation, in which multiple cultures/ ethnicities segregate into multiple congregations, even without overt hostility, in order to avoid the difficult work of being one body. Instead, planting churches that embrace unity in diversity and are bound together by love and their union as the one body of our Lord Jesus Christ. If God has destined the church for this reality, let us strive, pray, and work for it. Lord, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

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