



# Social identity, ethnicity and the gospel of reconciliation

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This article attends to the relationship between our ethnic, social and cultural identities, and the creation of the new communal identity embodied in the Christian community. Drawing upon six New Testament texts – Ephesians 2:11–22; Galatians 3:27–28, 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 and 10:17, 1 Peter 2:9–11 and Revelation 21:24–26 – it is argued that the creation of a new and prime identity in Christ does not abrogate other creaturely identities, even as it calls for the removal of such as boundary markers. Catholicity, in other words, is intrinsically related to the most radical particularity, and demands an ongoing work of discernment and of judgement *vis-à-vis* the gospel itself. Those baptised into Christ are now to live in the reality of Christ who is both the boundary and centre of their existence, a boundary which includes all humanity in its cultural, ethnic, gendered, social and historical particularities.

## Like wading into a minefield

### By way of an introduction

My ethnic blood is stronger than the Blood of Jesus Christ. The Water of Baptism is too thin to clean my thickly stained ethnic blood. (Basumatary 2010)

While you may belong to Christ, you first and foremost belong to your people, your iwi ... Your iwi is your church ... The marae is your church! (Te Kaawa 2013)

These two confessions, offered by a theologian from North East India and from New Zealand respectively, approach the heart of what this article is concerned to reflect on; namely, what is the relationship between our ethnic and/or social and/or cultural identities and the creation of the new communal identity announced in the gospel and embodied in what we call 'church'. Certainly, this is not a new question. It is, in fact, one of the most pressing concerns for the writers and communities of the New Testament. The question raised in Acts 15:1 – 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved' – is a question which most occupied the earliest Christian communities and the challenges which reverberate from it remain with us (see Kuecher 2008).

Our concern here is to enquire about the relationships that exist between social identity (or culture), ethnicity and the *kerygma*. Of course, the terms 'gospel' (or 'kerygma'), 'culture' and 'ethnicity' are notoriously ambiguous and evade easy clarification and definition. On the term 'culture', for example, Terry Eagleton has aptly commented, 'it is hard to resist the conclusion that the word "culture" is both too broad and too narrow to be greatly useful' (Eagleton 2000:32; cf. Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952; Geertz 1973:14; Tanner 1997:114). Notwithstanding his own misgivings about the concept, however, Eagleton (2000) provides the following helpful definition of the word:

Culture can be loosely summarized as the complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group ... Culture is just everything which is not genetically transmissible ... Culture is the implicit knowledge of the world by which people negotiate appropriate ways of acting in specific contexts. Like Aristotle's *phronesis*, it is more know-how than know-why, a set of tacit understandings or practical guidelines as opposed to a theoretical mapping of reality. (pp. 34–35)

'Social identity', 'ethnicity' and '*kerygma*' are also terms which have their own history, some quite brief. Ethnicity, for example, is a word that only came to be widely used in the 1970s to describe various social constructions of descent and culture and the meanings built around such, since which time its definition has been hotly debated<sup>1</sup> whilst increasingly playing a key role (both constructively and destructively) in the social imagination, and in the discourses of politics and policy. That debates continue around these constructed and ambiguous realities betray just how deeply invested we are in them, and how such realities have proved capable of birthing some of the most vexing and intractable cleavages in human society.

1. So Max Weber, for example, describes the concept of the 'ethnic' group as one filled with vex and emotional charge. See Weber (1978:395).

Certainly, any responsible employment of these words must avoid the temptation to essentialise or reify them, not least because there can be no dialogue between 'gospel' and 'culture' that is not first between 'actual people'. So Anthony Giddens (2012):

'Humanity' is a collective noun whose constituents are people, not generic but specific, individuated, culturally determined. So the legitimate universality to which the church aspires can *only* be realized in specific cultures and as a communion of local churches. Gospel must be 'translated' – carried over – into the lives and languages of actual people, a process that demands of its bearers familiarity both with the deep meanings of the gospel (text and context) and the deep needs and aspirations of people of particular cultures. (p. 164)

Put otherwise, the grammar of culture cannot refer to some idealised or catholic theory; it can only refer to what Clifford Geertz calls 'the informal logic of actual life' (Geertz 1973:17; cf. McFadyen 1990:10–11). This recalls the fact that ethnic identities are never static realities but are always negotiated and renegotiated phenomena. As the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Faith and Order Paper 201 avers:

Ethnic and national groups may believe themselves to be 'natural' – belonging in some way to the order of nature – and fixed in form. But in fact all such groups are (whether consciously or unconsciously) 'constructed', in the sense that they result from the interplay of historical and cultural factors. Such identities are therefore fluid, constantly being 'renegotiated'. Because these changes often result from interaction with other groups, ethnic identities are never pure; they involve multiple borrowings and adaptations, even when the sources of the changes have been lost in the mists of time. (World Council of Churches 2006:9; cf. Pauw 2007:12–22; Parekh 2006:163)

Similarly, the language of 'kerygma' or 'gospel' cannot refer to an ahistorical idea deracinated from cultural particularities. The gospel is always materialised within a particular cultural context, complete with particular modes of *praxis* and forms of lived existence. This recalls that it is the concern of the *Christian* theologian to approach the subject first and foremost in light of God's becoming human amongst us. Far from imposing limits on the subject, such a primary commitment is both the end of the docetic lie and offers, as Timothy Gorringer avers, 'a way of affirming both universal and particular in a non-alienating way, in a way that does not involve false particularism' (Gorringer 2004:101).

Here we will use the word 'kerygma' to refer to the unique content of the Christian faith that inhabits a particular cultural form but which is also distinguishable in principle from every cultural form and which resists reduction to any and all such forms. In this sense, 'kerygma' is different to 'theology'. The kerygma has an *excess* internal to it that precludes its reduction to any single formulation, however hybridised and impure. It identifies a concrete relationship that is both anterior and posterior to its conscious, reflective interpretation within a specific cultural context. In fact, it is precisely this excessive character of the kerygma which provides the condition for the possibility of its unanticipated migration to new contexts, making possible the kerygma's continual *inculturation*, even as it remains transcultural.<sup>2</sup>

2. I am grateful here to David Congdon (n.d.).

Of course, the notion of inculturation, championed by the Second Vatican Council, has a long history in the church and it recalls the theology of the second century Apologists – who discerned 'seeds of the Word' (*logoi spermatikoi*) in all human cultures – and, chiefly, the logic of incarnation itself. Gorringer (2004) notes that:

On this understanding the gospel not only converts other cultures but needs to be opened up to other cultures to attain fullness of meaning. Because the Logos is the ground of all creation whatever is true, good and beautiful derives from it. There is, as it were, a taking form of the divine Logos wherever these things are found. (p. 200)

Or, in the words of Vatican II's document *Gaudium et Spes*:

[*Human persons come*] to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. Wherever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected one with the other. (Pope Paul VI 1965:§53)

The logic here is powerfully at work, too, in Vincent Donovan's thinking, informed by his work amongst the Masai. Donovan (1982) writes:

God enables a people, any people, to reach salvation through their culture and tribal, racial customs and traditions ... I had no right to disrupt this body of customs, of traditions. It was the way of salvation for these people, their way to God ... An evangelist, a missionary must respect the culture of a people, not destroy it. The incarnation of the gospel, the flesh and blood which must grow on the gospel is up to the people of a culture. (p. 30)

As impressive as Donovan's missiological and theological instincts are, however, they are not altogether unproblematic. If, for example, Donovan's convictions here are equated with the cultural education of Jesus they may overlook the ongoing necessity of dialogue between gospel and culture. If, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the taking of human flesh, it may encourage a view of inculturation from above, rather than from below. It can also promote the 'culturalism' of which Aylward Shorter (1988:82) speaks when he describes the process of absorption of the gospel into the culture whereby the gospel's challenges to its adopted culture are underplayed or abandoned. We never arrive at a point wherein we can rest easy in our enculturated place. Inculturation, in other words, is always attended to with a certain restlessness, and cannot succeed without deep, interminable repentance (see Collet 1994:25–37). Or, as Gorringer (2004) has it:

The gospel is, in a fundamental way, about metanoia and if the gospel enters culture and nothing changes then there is no effective inculturation. Cultures cannot pick and choose which parts of the gospel they want to hear and which parts they do not. (p. 201)

Inculturation is always a two-way process, and whenever cultural habits become occasions of resistance to the gospel, culture begins to function as an *idol* instead of as a *sign*. Donovan's 'bare message of Christianity, untied to any outside influence' (1982:24) appears, on the surface at least, to be a denial of the generally agreed claim that all stories are interpreted, and that all translation is interpretation. So whilst Donovan appears to be entirely sincere and hopeful

in his concern to allow only the scandal of the particularity announced in the incarnation itself to govern his missio-theological program, part of the 'scandal of particularity', as Gorringe helpfully reminds us, is that there is no escape from culture; that Christianity, just as Islam, is inescapably attached to a Semitic story. Nevertheless:

if there is a God, and if God has revealed Godself, then there must be a meaning which is not only universal, but in some sense transcendent to all human culture, and able to critique it. If it cannot do that, it is not clear that we have a revelation. The claim to revelation marks a limit to cultural relativism because ultimate truth relativizes all cultures, and because the destiny of all cultures is in God. If God exists then the truth of God has to be capable of being conceived beyond and through all cultural systems if it is to amount to anything more than ethnocentrism. (Gorringe 2004:210)

We turn now to consider just six New Testament texts germane to our study – Ephesians 2:11–22; Galatians 3:27–28, 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 and 10:17, 1 Peter 2:9–11 and Revelation 21:24–26. It is, we suppose, unsurprising that the focus from hereon shall be mainly upon the writings of St Paul (or, as in the case of Ephesians, words sometimes attributed to Paul) for as the leading 'apostle to the Gentiles' (ἐπὶ ἐθνῶν ἀπόστολος; Rm 11:13) he was, it seems, more than any other New Testament author, engaged most explicitly with the questions that we here are concerned with.

## The broken wall and the one new humanity (Eph 2:11–22)

The parallels between the world in which Christianity spread in the first few centuries and the ethnic pluralism that defines many contemporary societies has been well documented (see e.g. Sim 1996:171–195). Describing the situation in the 1st century, David Rhoads (1996) has noted:

The region around the Mediterranean Sea was multilingual, multiracial and multiethnic, with many different religions and philosophies. The Jewish groups and Gentile nations comprised the multiplicity of cultures that Christianity sought to address and to embrace. In this multicultural arena, the diversity of early Christianity took shape. (p. 2)

He continues:

The earliest Christian movements proclaimed the idea that 'community' was not based on uniformity but would cut across different social and cultural locations and embrace people very different from each other. Jesus proclaimed a vision of life in the future kingdom in which people would come from east and west, north and south, and sit at the banquet table together. In different ways, the New Testament writers believed that the one creator was now providing the reconciliation that enabled early followers of Jesus eagerly to reach the diverse humanity of all creation. Early Christian communities challenged and empowered people to live by the values that would make such universalism possible – the love of enemy, the commitment to reconciliation, the refusal to dominate, the willingness to forgive, the eagerness to value the gifts of others, the offer of unconditional love, and so on. (p. 2)

The creation of a radical unity in Christ from out of the warring factionalism that characterises fallen humanity is a

major theme throughout the New Testament, and particularly in the writings attributed to St Paul. Generally, we might summarise Paul as proclaiming that one of the principle fruits created by the act of divine interruption (Incarnation and Pentecost) is that a new community is being formed. This new community is the gift of the Spirit, and a foretaste or first fruit of the eschatological new humanity. It is one people made up from all different ethnicities and cultures and who, by account of their being recreated into Christ, count their ethnic or cultural identities now as secondary to that principle identity of being 'in Christ', an identity which finds sociological expression in what Karl Barth has called 'the one single being of the one single community', a community who even in its geographical, ethnic and cultural separation is constituted, ruled and kept by:

the Lord who attests Himself in the prophetic and apostolic word, who is active by His Spirit, [and] who as the Spirit has promised to be in the midst of every community gathered by Him and in His name. (Barth 1961:674–675; cf. Wright 2011:266; Haire 2001:51–55)

The New Testament's ecclesiology is perhaps most fully developed, at least in its dogmatic form, in the Epistle to the Ephesians, 'the key and high point' of which is 2:11–22 (Barth 1974:275). The argument here appears to be that all those who were once 'foreigners and aliens' to God's covenant community are now, in Christ, included as full members of 'God's household'. Moreover, all former religious and cultural markers – expressed in shorthand form in the identity-forming marker of circumcision – have now been 'destroyed' insofar as they function as 'barriers' and 'dividing walls of hostility' between the different ethnic groups that Christ, the new identity marker, has gathered into himself in his cross. Whatever practices or attitudes may have defined our previous relationships with others have been radically re-altered in Christ who is now our primary identity, all other identities being secondary. As the WCC's Faith and Order Paper 199 (2005) on Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology, in its section on human disability (§42), has it:

A crucial insight of the Christian faith is that all such identity markers are as nothing beside our new identity in Christ (Gal. 3:28): that no human identity markers, however positive and precious, can deny our primal belonging to Christ; and that no human distinctions, however pervasive and pernicious, can be allowed to separate us from our sisters and brothers in Christ. (p. 7; cf. Bonhoeffer 1970:72–73)

So too Markus Barth (1960):

To confess Jesus Christ is to affirm the abolition and end of division and hostility, the end of separation and segregation, the end of enmity and contempt, and the end of every sort of ghetto! Jesus Christ does not bring victory to the [person] who is on either this or that side of the fence ... Christ's victory is for both; it cannot be divided. (p. 37)

It is often suggested that one implication of such a confession may be to insist that ecclesiology that takes seriously the parameters and implications of the New Testament compels us to work for multi-ethnic rather than homogenous churches in our current ethnically and culturally diverse contexts. And here the church's traditional four marks – and especially

its 'oneness' and 'catholicity' – are highlighted, and their christological and trinitarian correlations often noted. Daniel Migliore, for example, helpfully recalls that the 'distinctive unity' of the ecclesia is 'rooted in new fellowship with God through Christ in the Spirit. The unity of the church', he insists, 'is a fragmentary and provisional participation in the costly love of the triune God' (Migliore 2004:201; cf. Torrance 2009:380–381). And those committed to articulating a lexicon of the good news grounded in some form of social trinitarianism have been eager to draw attention to ways in which the gospel embraces both diversity (though 'differentiation' may be a better word) and unity. So Jürgen Moltmann, for example, argues that the triune life is a kind of community which creates 'unity in diversity, while at the same time differentiating and making diversity in unity possible ... We call this *the trinitarian fellowship of the Spirit*' (Moltmann 1992:220). This raises a challenge for the Reformed (and others too), for whilst the magisterial Reformers, following Augustine and for good reasons, located the unity of the *communio sanctorum* in the invisible rather than the visible church (see Luther 1970:222; Zwingli 1905:538; Calvin 1977:1011–1022; Bullinger 1849–1852:17), such consideration has been used, tragically, as a way of enabling churches to do little about working to see concrete unity – including unity across ethnic and cultural lines – as a visible mark of the church in its present reality. Insofar as this has been the case, the Reformed have contributed more than their fair share towards the sin of docetic ecclesiology, a sin sponsored in no small part by, and contributing in no small part to, the propagation of a docetic Christ. The foundation of the church's historical existence in the trinitarian life demands that its very shape and structures communicate not only that the unity of the Body of Christ is more than a mere 'spiritual' unity but also that they communicate the nature of that unity in the hypostatic union itself.

Likewise, signs of the church's catholicity have too often been abstracted from the church's christological moorings and from the particularities of culture and history. Avery Dulles contends that catholicity 'is not the accomplished fact of having many members or a wide geographical distribution, but rather the dynamic catholicity of a love reaching out to all and excluding no one' (Dulles 1974:122). This is the new situation which the Epistle to the Ephesians is concerned to trumpet. Moreover, the ecclesio-political implications of this new situation recall 'it is not the Church's business to be the bulwark of the old order; rather is it her business to throw the whole into ferment and upheaval' (Torrance 2012:76; cf. Moltmann 1985:30–31). And here we might simply note that not a few voices in the tradition have conceived of the church as an *alterum genus*, as a new ethnos or 'third race', in which all old ethnic markers are discarded and a new situation brought about in which, for example, allegiance to the new community sets its members fully in competition with or over against all other communities, whether those defined by blood, geography, religion, or the counter- and pseudo-community of the state (e.g. Horrell 2011:123–143). Claims that the new community formed around Jesus constitutes a 'third race' or 'third entity' are deeply problematic. That the

power of the fence has been razed does not repeal ethnic and cultural distinctives. To be sure, one of the fruits – and gifts to the world – that arises from the gospel is a new community in which ethnic barriers are finally overcome *as barriers*. But the new community is not simply another group. To conceive of it as such would be to deny its fundamentally apocalyptic character and encourage its definition solely by use of the language and imagination of the old economy. The Holy Spirit who forms a new social identity and who both chastens and 'transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries' (Uniting Church in Australia 1992:5) – insofar as these represent a counterword to the gospel – does so whilst still affirming all ethnic identities. These remain, but they ought no longer represent or function as barriers. Catholicity does not mean uniformity; neither does it equate with the flattening of ethnic and/or cultural realities, a blending or hybridisation of such to the extent that all that remains is theo-cultural soup. Catholicity is intrinsically related to the most radical particularity, the *sui generis* movement of the God who suckled on Mary's breast. Responsible Christian theology will want to insist that both true unity and catholicity are possible only in the man Jesus Christ, the Son of the catholic God in whom particularism does not cancel out the universal horizon of love's creative movement. It is the church's claim, in other words, that the only reality that makes the church both catholic and one is not any particular form or set of practices but its catholic Lord who in his very person – that is, in the hypostatic union – is the reconciliation between God and the warring factions that characterise the history of human cultures and relations, and who is the undoing of Babel's achievement. In Christ, we learn to tell the truth not only about ourselves but also about our 'others', the recognition of which leads to what Miroslav Volf calls 'double vision' (the ability to view not only 'from here' but also 'from there') and thereby make possible the embrace of the other in such a way that both 'our' otherness and 'their' otherness is affirmed and blessed, made porous without loss of distinctives, and individual limitations transcended. Presupposing that we can both *stand with a given tradition* and *learn from other traditions*, and drawing upon Hannah Arendt's notion of an 'enlarged way of thinking [*which*] needs the presence of others "in whose place" it must think, [*and*] whose perspective it must take into consideration' (Arendt 1961:220), Volf (1996) describes the process by which 'double vision' is able to take place. It happens, he says:

by letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from *their* perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives. Nothing can guarantee in advance that the perspectives will ultimately merge and agreement be reached. We may find that we must reject the perspective of the other. Yet we should seek to see things from their perspective in the hope that competing justices may become converging justices and eventually issue in agreement. (p. 213; cf. Smith 2009)

Responsible Christian theology will want to be explicit in grounding such talk of 'double vision' in trinitarian terms; that is, in imitation of and participation in the triune

dialogue. There are important implications here too for interfaith engagement – that such be informed by a vision of the triune Life who is both host and guest – and for the kinds of behaviour that might characterise local and international politics.

Before proceeding, we ought to pause before a question that is left unresolved by the close of the New Testament canon. Any responsible ‘Christian’ theology attending to the universality of humanity in the one human being Jesus of Nazareth must attend to the ongoing (and, for many, the vexed) question of the two-fold form of the people of God – namely, the Jewish and Gentile *ekklesias* (see Barth 1954:195–201, 2006; Keith 1997; Levenson 1996:43–69; Torrance 2011; Torrance 1950:164–173). Whilst some Christian theologians have argued for a kind of ethnic supercessionism in which ethnic distinctives, and particularly divisive aspects of ethnic identity, are essentially flattened or discarded (e.g. Marti 2008:11–16), others have argued – typically on the basis of the irrefutability of the divine promise (e.g. Kinzer 2005), or on the basis that, despite some of St Paul’s most radical statements *vis-à-vis* Judaism and the dawning of God’s new community in Jesus Christ, the Apostle to the Gentiles ‘remained within the bounds of pluriform Second Temple Judaism’ (Rudolph 2011:211) – for a two-fold form of the one people of God sharing together an unabrogated life. The unresolved nature of this question presses further questions about the apocalyptic identity of God’s reconciled and reconciling community.

## Apocalyptic identity

### How ‘new’ is the new identity? (Gal 3:27–28 and 1 Cor 7:17–24)

In his essay on ‘The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians’, J. Louis Martyn insists that St Paul’s apocalyptic theology – particularly in Galatians – is ‘focused on the motif of invasive movement from beyond’ (Martyn 2000:254). In other words, the Apostle is concerned to track the shape of God’s ‘fundamental and determining line of movement’ and its ecclesial and missional implications. He writes:

Since the antidote to what is wrong in the world does not lie in the world, the point of departure – on the apocalyptic landscape – from which there can be movement to set things right cannot be found in the world, or in any of its ideas of bad news and good news.

In short, it is not as though, provided with a good religious foundation for a good religious ladder, one could ascend from the wrong to the right. Things are the other way around. God has elected to invade the realm of the wrong – ‘the present evil age’ (1:4) – by sending God’s Son and the Spirit of the Son into it from outside it (4:4–6). And it is in this apocalyptic invasion that God has liberated us from the powers of the present evil age (note again *exagorazō*, ‘to deliver from slavery,’ in 4:5). Galatians is a particularly clear witness to one of Paul’s basic convictions: the gospel is not about human movement into blessedness (religion); it is about God’s liberating invasion of the cosmos (theology). (Martyn 2000:255)

The incarnation is the divine ‘No’ to all human questing for meaning in existence and for the attendant groping for

justification via the service of the principalities and powers. The divine movement in Jesus Christ and specifically in his cross, Martyn avers, is set against the ‘community-destroying effect of Sin as a cosmic power’ (Martyn 2000:257) and the creation of an embodied new community characterised by mutual service in the world and by the putting to death of religion and the boundaries – ethnic and otherwise – that religion is concerned to preserve, often taking up the tools of violence in order to do so. He writes:

The Christ who is confessed in the formula *solus Christus* is the Christ in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile. Instead of being the holy community that stands apart from the profane orb of the world, then, the church of this Christ is the active beachhead God is planting in a war of liberation from all religious differentiations. In short, it is in the birth and life of the church that Paul perceives the polarity between human religion and God’s apocalypse. Thus, a significant commentary on Paul’s letters can be found in the remark of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that ‘God has founded his church beyond religion ... (Martyn 2000:248, n. 4)

Such a claim immediately raises the question about just how ‘new’ is this ‘active beachhead’ that God has created and/or is creating. Certainly there ought to be no (over-realised) talk of the community being anything other than truly worldly. And although we must go on, as we shall see below, to say something about the fact that the community resides in the world as ‘aliens and strangers’ (1 Pt 2:11), it is, in fact the most worldly of communities, called and given over by the Word for a vocation entirely in this world but dependent on resources from outwith it. We might even say that apart from the church there is no world; that is, that election precedes creation. This need not, of course, be to claim any more than Barth (1959) is hinting at when he reminds us that:

the only advantage of the Church over against the world is that the Church knows the real situation of the world. Christians know what non-Christians do not ... It belongs to the Church to witness to the dominion of Christ clearly, explicitly, and consciously. (p. 145)

One of the clearest expressions of this witness (made explicit in the Galatian letter) is when the Christian community resists the temptation to define itself along lines determined by the old creation and instead is defined by the apocalyptic reality dawned in Christ’s resurrection from the old order, a movement wherein the community:

in the gratuity of Pentecost, is enabled to witness to God’s authority over the principalities [*such as religion*] in his victory over death by its knowledge of death, its discernment of the powers of death, and by unveiling and laying bare the works of death in this world. (Stringfellow 2006a:102; cf. 2006b:63–65).

St Paul gives expression to this in Galatians 3:27–28:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

The baptismal liturgy drawn upon here presupposes that clothes are removed, an act which signifies a departure from ‘the old self with its practices and [*being*] clothed ... with the new self’ (Col 3:9–10); that is, with Christ who is himself both ‘the “place” in which the baptized now find their corporate

life' (Martyn 1997:376) and the announcement of the old cosmos' end. In this new situation, 'there is no longer Jew *or* Greek, there is no longer slave *or* free, there is no longer male *and* female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gl 3:28). Martyn suggests that whilst in the Epistle to the Galatians Paul is only interested in the first pair of opposites (i.e. the relationship between 'Jew' and 'Gentile'), the text here presents a table in which certain pairs of opposites were identified as the elements that, it was believed, give to the cosmos its dependable structure. To therefore 'pronounce the nonexistence of these opposites is to announce nothing less than the end of the cosmos' (Martyn 1997:376):

Religious, social, and sexual pairs of opposites are not replaced by equality, but rather by a newly created unity ... so fundamentally and irreducibly identified with Christ himself as to cause Paul to use the masculine form of the word 'one'. Members of the church are not one *thing*; they are one *person*, having been taken into the corpus of the One New Man. (Martyn 1997:377)

St Paul was unwavering in his conviction that 'God was making a new creation by drawing into one church both Jews and Gentiles' (Martyn 1997:236), believing that it was not enough simply to maintain a spiritual unity in the church catholic; the unity created in the second – or last – Adam needed to be seen and experienced in a concrete and local social reality as well. The break in sharing meals together would end the social unity of the church against the divisive forces of human recalcitrance.

Whilst the author of the Epistle to the Galatians is uninterested in attending to the distinction between 'male *and* female', our attendance to such can serve to sharpen our appreciation of the Apostle's overall argument in this passage and to highlight how it exemplifies the apocalyptic nature of the Gospel that he was intent on proclaiming. In Galatians 3:28, the words 'male *and* female' seem to refer back to the Genesis narrative as if to say the distinction and differentiation was important then but in Christ those created distinctions cease to be relevant to God's purposes; that is, they are superseded by participation in Christ, in the new creation.

The Synoptics, of course, reveal an astonishing tension on matters of sexual differentiation and family. On the one hand – say the example of Jesus' response to the question about divorce – Jesus is content to employ the ancient and widespread assumptions based on the fact of how things were (or were perceived to be) 'from the beginning of creation' (Mk 10:6), suggesting an ethic grounded in (at least) the abiding functional goodness of creation. On the other hand, when informed that his biological mother and brothers were waiting for him, Jesus' response indicates a re-evaluation of family relationships based not on the logic of the old creation but of the radical newness of the new eschatological family defined around himself (Mk 3:33–35). He is, it would seem, the new creation *in nuce*.

There is clearly a discernible tension here between theological arguments offered on the basis of creation in itself and those made on the basis of the divine promise about a new reality

announced in the gospel. We see this tension not only in the Gospels but also in Paul's writing itself. So, for example, in Romans 1:18–32, the apostle employs an argument explicitly based on creation and draws certain conclusions from 'the things [God] has made' in 'the creation of the cosmos' (Rm 1:20). In Galatians 3 and 6, however, Paul employs an entirely different – we might even say 'opposite' – logic when he argues that the church is to take her theological and ethical cues not from the old creation but from 'the new creation in which the building blocks of the old creation are declared to be nonexistent' (Martyn 1997:381).

The divine affirmation recorded in Genesis 2:18 – 'It is not good that the man should be alone' – is now brought under the scrutiny of the inbreaking of a new reality in the resurrection resulting in a different answer to Adam's problem:

Now the answer to loneliness is not marriage, but rather the new-creational community that God is calling into being in Christ, the church marked by mutual love, as it is led by the Spirit of Christ (Gal 3:28b; 5:6,13, 22; 6:15). (Martyn 1997:381)

Of course, in a different context, Paul's polemic takes different shape. So in the Corinthian correspondence, for example, the severe dichotomy between old and new is not so strictly championed and the pastor-missionary-theologian will 'negotiate the relation between new creation and creation by advising married people to be married as though not being married (1 Cor 7:20)' (Martyn 1997:381). The apocalyptic realism underscored so heavily in Galatians cannot – if Paul is to be our theological guide – be simply employed to create a template to be placed on all and every situation. Rather, the theologian's task calls for considerably more discernment than that, and requires equal attention to the particularities of context lest we 'rob scripture of its power to speak to different situations' (Dunn 1987:126).

Whilst 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, words which appear in an epistle addressed to a 'multi-ethnic community' (Witherington 1995:96) existing in an ethnically and religiously diverse population, is principally concerned with social rather than ethnic realities, it is possible that we might observe here a general principle – 'to remain as you are' – that is germane to both. In a recent study, J. Brian Tucker surveys and assesses ways in which the Apostle Paul negotiates and transforms existing social identities of the Christ-followers in Corinth in order to extend his gentile mission. He notes that the apostle is concerned to form a Christ-movement identity in the diaspora churches in such a way that previous ethno-social identities are not abrogated but are genuinely transformed 'in Christ'. Rejecting the view that the church is a community in which such identities are so radically relativised as to be rendered meaningless, Tucker argues (on the basis of 1 Cor 7:17, 20, 24) that Paul's 'primary ideological perspective' is that Christ-followers should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. 'The result of this interpretive move', he suggests, 'is that Paul, rather [*than*] seeking to obliterate existing social identities, is seen as one drawing from these to form diverse expressions of Christ-movement identity' (Tucker 2011:227). He concludes that for Paul, the

continuation of various social and ethnic identities remains an open question and is always situationally determined. We might here wish to follow Gordon Fee and insist that such situational determination is determined first and foremost by God's call rather than by the situation itself, and that the challenge posed to us in 1 Corinthians 7 is that believers need to learn to live out their calling before God in whatever situation they are found, letting the call of God itself 'sanctify to oneself the situation' (Fee 1987:322).

This is indeed consistent with what we observe throughout the Pauline corpus; namely, that the retention of one's particularity in Christ is a basic characteristic in our understanding of the process of identity construction as Christ-followers. Such work demands ongoing discernment and judgement wherein we discover that 'despite our enormous potential for identity construction, not all structures are feasible or available to us' as identity builders (Campbell 2008:57). And with fitting realism, Philip Esler (2003) rightfully reminds us too that:

in any particular case ... we need to be open to the possible stubbornness of ethnic affiliation, while not underestimating the power of individuals and groups to modify ethnic identity for particular social, political or religious ends. (p. 48)

It is important to note also, particularly if St Paul is to be our guide here, that the construction of identity in Christ occurs within a complex of layers of significant sub-identities (so Rm 11:1; Phlp 3:5–6) all of which are important although not equally so and none of which ought to dethrone the primacy of baptismal identity in Christ. So William Campbell (2008):

Paul shares with gentiles in Christ the primary identity-marker which is faith in Christ. He shares with gentiles a special bond as apostle to the gentiles but he differs from them in that he is both Jewish and, by divine commission, apostle to the gentiles. So whilst Paul shares the primary identification of being in Christ, this is accompanied by a differentiation in terms of ethnic and cultural affiliation. He is an Israelite but they are not Israelites despite being in Christ. ... To be in Christ is not universal and the same for all peoples. Paul's converts from the nations are clearly designated by him as gentiles throughout his letters. His strong insistence on their not becoming Jews underlines the fact that for Paul Jew and gentile are fundamental categories and that however much Jews and gentiles share in Christ this in no wise makes them the same ... In Christ ethnic difference is not transcended but the hostility that accompanies this should be ... Paul's theologizing is dynamic and he by no means views his converts as continuing in an unchanged existence. They are continually changed by being in Christ but this involves their transformation as Jews or as gentiles, not into some third entity. (pp. 157–158)

The abiding reality of St Paul's various sub-identities at work under the freedom afforded in the gospel – and his concurrence of such in others – also deeply informs his own missionary character and praxis. This is most obvious, perhaps, in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 where in declaring that he can be a Jew with Jews and a gentile with gentiles, et cetera, we take Paul to mean that because his prime identity is given in Christ (cf. Gl 2:19–20) he is then free to take on sub-identities in a rather 'playful' way; clothed with Christ, he

can put on the 'garb' of more or less any group 'for the sake of the gospel'.

What is being championed by the Apostle Paul (in Galatians, 1 Corinthians and elsewhere) is not that humanity has been liberated from religious boundaries in order to take up residence as a citizen of a secular, desecralised world, but rather that those baptized into Christ are now to live in the reality of Christ as both the boundary and centre of their existence, a boundary which includes all humanity in our cultural, ethnic, gendered, social and historical particularities. Christ's kenotic community therefore must not violate the divine-human solidarity announced and secured in the hypostatic union by placing boundaries between itself and the world. But this is not all, for, as we shall see, the radical solidarity created in the incarnation also creates a dissonance between that which depends upon arrangements which are passing away and those which depend upon and point to the coming reign of God. Put otherwise, the incarnation and the coming of the eschatological Spirit announce that 'historical precedence must give way to eschatological preference' (Anderson 1998:92; see also Anderson 2003:252–276). So John Zizioulas (1985) insists that even Jesus must be liberated from his past history in order to bring to the present history of the church his eschatological presence and power:

Now if *becoming* history is the particularity of the Son in the economy, what is the contribution of the Spirit? Well, precisely the opposite: it is to liberate the Son and the economy from the bondage of history. If the Son dies on the cross, thus succumbing to the bondage of historical existence, it is the Spirit that raises him from the dead. The Spirit is the *beyond* history, and when he acts in history he does so in order to bring into history the last days, the *eschaton*. (p. 130)

## The nation of aliens and exiles (1 Pt 2:9–11)

1 Peter 2:9–10 is the only New Testament text where three central words for ethnic identity – *γένος*, *ἔθνος* and *λαός* – are all applied to the church; one implication being, it is argued, that the church is a new ethnic form of identity that draws into it all other identities. But does Peter's description of the Christian community here as 'a holy nation' (*ἔθνος ἅγιον*) equate to the claim, noted earlier, that the church is an *alterum genus*, a *new ethnos*, even a 'third race' (so Horrell 2011:123–143), in which all old ethnic markers are discarded? This, I believe, is to claim too much. What such a claim does at least press, however, is that there is something radically out-of-step, as it were, with this new community that Peter is concerned with; so Peter's description of them as *παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμιους* – 'aliens and exiles' (New Revised Standard Version) or 'strangers and nomads' (New Jerusalem Bible). Certainly, as Reinhard Feldmeier (1996) has convincingly argued, the affirmation and positive interpretation and self-designation of the strangerhood of the 'exiles of the Dispersion' has:

contributed substantially to the fact that Jews scattered in the diaspora – and even more so Christians, who were in the minority, outsiders in society, were able to see themselves as the

people of God, despite all attempts to make them into enemies, to exclude them, and despite all pressure on them to assimilate. (p. 242)

Whether we are thinking about the Patriarchs and the beginnings of Jewish identity or about the call of Israel's post-exilic priest-prophets to 'separate yourselves from the peoples of the land' (Ezr 10:11), being a stranger, in fact, is one of the main characteristics of life according to God's promise. To be sure, outside of 1 Peter, the category of strangeness plays a fairly subordinate role in the New Testament; an oddity, perhaps, given the Lord's own self-designation as a 'stranger' amongst us (Mt 25). Here, Moltmann's (1974) reminder is apt:

Whether or not Christianity, in an alienated, divided and oppressive society, itself becomes alienated, divided and an accomplice of oppression, is ultimately decided only by whether the crucified Christ is a stranger to it or the Lord who determines the form of its existence. (p. 3)

Certainly, throughout 1 Peter, the metaphor of foreignness is one of the main attributes employed to describe the people of God. As Feldmeier (1996) notes:

In a bold recourse to a minor biblical and Jewish tradition, the negative experiences of non-identity are interpreted as the specific characteristic of Christian identity ... 'Foreignness' and membership of the people of God are thus opposite sides of the same coin. The (Christian) people of God sees itself as the counterpart to a peoplehood that defines itself from *traditio* and the *mos maiorum* [way of the elders]. This also has consequences ... for the inner composition of this community – for its whole ethics, and for the way it deals with the social boundaries of the society and its evaluation of the 'underdogs'. (pp. 252, 262)

Feldmeier's point here is that it is precisely as strangers that the people of God belong to the divinely elected community, a self-understanding that implies both 'distinction and encounter, loyalty to one's own belief and coming to terms with the foreign' (Feldmeier 1996:269). This theme is powerfully taken up in the 20th century by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and William Stringfellow, both of whom draw attention to the deep connection between the church's 'strangeness' and its 'suffering' in ways indispensably connected to the strangeness and suffering of Christ. So Bonhoeffer (2000) reminds us that Jesus' disciples are:

those who cannot be brought into accord with the world, who cannot conform to the world. They mourn over the world, its guilt, its fate, and its happiness. The world celebrates, and they stand apart. The world shrieks 'Enjoy life', and they grieve. They see that the ship, on which there are festive cheers and celebrating, is already leaking. While the world imagines progress, strength, and a grand future, the disciples know about the end, judgment and the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, for which the world is not at all ready [*geschickt*]. That is why the disciples are rejected as strangers in the world, bothersome guests, disturbers of the peace. Why must Jesus' community of faith stay closed out from so many celebrations of the people among whom they live? Does the community of faith perhaps no longer understand its fellow human beings? Has it perhaps succumbed to hating and despising the people? No one understands people better than Jesus' community. No one loves people more than Jesus' disciples – that is why they stand apart,

why they mourn ... The community of disciples does not shake off suffering, as if they had nothing to do with it. Instead, they bear it. In doing so, they give witness to their connection with the people around them. At the same time, this indicates that they do not arbitrarily seek suffering, that they do not withdraw into willful contempt for the world. Instead, they bear what is laid upon them, and what happens to them in discipleship for the sake of Jesus ... [*The disciples*] bear suffering by the power of him who bears all suffering on the cross. As bearers of suffering, they stand in communion with the Crucified. They stand as strangers in the power of him who was so alien to the world that it crucified him. This is their comfort, or rather, he is their comfort, their comforter (cf. Luke 2:25). This alien community is comforted by the Cross. (pp. 104–105)

This is part of what it means for the church to not abandon the world – to live in the world whilst discerning the presence of the Word of God in common life; that Word who makes us free for 'versatile involvement in the turmoil and travail of the world's everyday existence', for intercession for the sake of the world, and for service of the world in the name and style of Christ. Christians, in other words:

must live in the world – and not for their own sake, and not for the sake of the Church, much less for the sake of any of the churches, not even for God's sake, but for the sake of the world. That is to say, the Christian must live in this world, where Christ lives: the Christian must live in this world *in* Christ. (Stringfellow 1962:74)

Such life marks her as a stranger amidst the world's common life.

### Liturgics: Partakers of the one bread (1 Cor 10:17)

Whilst the ink with which the New Testament was being written was still drying, Justin Martyr (1993) penned the following confession:

We who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies, and endeavour to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ, to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God the ruler of all. (p. 167)

It seems that for Justin, there was something liberating and joyously unprecedented about the existence of a community of former enemies now, by the Spirit, united around Jesus in whom they experience a new trans-ethnic identity and by whose power they discover themselves oriented toward the still threatening 'other'. Certainly, our baptisms call us into a new community in which ethnic and cultural identities are no longer primary markers. So, too, with the Supper, the 'sacrament of unity' that joins 'us all in the same triumphant joy that the presence of the risen Lord gives to his Church' (Benoît 1958:16). So Moltmann (1977):

Because the fellowship of the table unites believers with the triune God through Christ, it also causes [*persons*] to unite with one another in messianic fellowship. The common bread and the common cup point to the oneness of the people who partake in the one Christ, and in him with participants at all times and in all places ... The open invitation of the crucified one to his supper is

what fundamentally overcomes all tendencies toward alienation, separation and segregation. For through giving himself up to death for the fellowship of [people] with God and with one another, the godless and inhuman divisions and enmities between races, nations, civilization and classes are overcome. Churches which permit these deadly divisions in themselves are making the cross of Christ a mockery. (pp. 257–258)

One of the things that the Supper gifts to the church is a common drama which at once recalls and draws forth the evangelical centre of all that God is making new in Christ. Insofar as it does this, it bears witness to and attends to God's overcoming of all the boundaries (cultural, linguistic, theological, etc.) that God has demolished in the cross, it recalls the costly action involved in that overcoming, and it adjusts our (ethical, ecclesial, missiological, etc.) compass to the divine *telos* towards which all creation is moving. To employ words from T.S. Eliot, the Supper serves to 'purify the dialect of the tribe' (Eliot 1991:204).

One act in that drama, in the common liturgy of the church, is the passing of the peace. For many in the West, the exchanging of the sign of peace can be embarrassing and awkward. We might offer a peck on the cheek to members of our family or to friends, but strangers are more likely to receive a distant nod or a polite handshake. But it was not always so. During the Middle Ages the kiss of peace was a solemn moment of reconciliation in which social conflicts were resolved. The community was restored to charity *before* Holy Communion could be received. One of the earliest preaching missions entrusted to the Dominicans and Franciscans was what was called 'The Great Devotion' of 1233. Northern Italian cities were torn apart by division which in some cases amounted to civil war. And the climax of the preaching was the ritual exchange of the kiss of peace between enemies. At the table was enacted the reconciliation made real in Christ, reconciliation which included confession that we Christians have often been unimpressive witnesses to Christ's peace. Our history is marked by aggression, intolerance, rivalry and persecution. These days we usually avoid the extremes of some early Christians, rarely poisoning each other's chalices or arranging ambushes of our opponents. But we still tend to succumb to the dominant ethos of our competitive and aggressive societies, though rarely with the clarity of a First World War general (Major-General Sir William Thwaites of the 46th [North Midland] Division) who instructed his chaplains that he wanted 'a bloodthirsty sermon next Sunday, and would not have any texts from the New Testament' (cited in Snape 2005:106).

When the baptised offer each other a sign of peace they are not so much making peace as accepting, confessing and sharing the Christ who is their peace. When members of the Christian community offer each other Christ's peace they do no less than accept the basis upon which they are gathered together, recognising that they are gathered together not because they are friends or because they share the same ethno-cultural narrative, or because they have the same theological opinions, but because – *and only because* – they

are one in Christ's indestructible peace. The exchange of the kiss of peace with strangers is the exchange of the sign of the Lord's victory in the face of all that assaults human communities.

## 'The glory and the honour of the nations' (Rv 21:24–26)

Any consideration about the status of τὰ ἔθνη in the new eschatological reality which has dawned in the resurrection of Jesus and which awaits its full cosmological realisation must take into account the Book of the Revelation, not only because of the prevalence of the theme therein but also because of the great hope that is promised there for their entry into the city of God. The Apocalypse comprehends the world's nations (whether understood as ethnic groupings or as political entities but understood, in each case, in distinction from Israel) as the object of the church's proclamation (Rv 10:11), as the enemies of the holy city and of God (Rv 11:2, 18), as the subject of violent rule (Rv 12:5), and as those seduced and deceived by sin (Rv 14:8; 18:23; 20:3, 8). They are also highlighted as the object of God's (subdominant) judgement (primarily) against 'the systems – political, economic and religious – which oppose God and his righteousness and which are symbolized by the beast, the false prophet, Babylon, and the kings of the earth' (Rv 11:9; 16:19; 17:15; 18:3; 19:15) (Bauckham 1993:102). I use the word 'subdominant' here because there is, it seems, a more final and more joyous vision of God's purposes for the nations. Rather than being discarded in the new creation, the Apocalypse envisages hope that 'the nations will come and worship' before the Lamb (Rv 15:4). And by the time we finally get to Chapters 21 and 22, and to the Seer's description of 'a new heaven and a new earth' and of 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God' (Rv 21:1–2), we are graced with a promise that 'the nations' (τὰ ἔθνη; Rv 21:24) – and presumably these are the same nations who had previously been the object of Babylon's deception and the object of God's wrath – now 'walk by the light provided by the Lamb, 'and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into [the Holy City]' whose gates are never shut. Moreover, 'people will bring into [the City] the glory and the honour of the nations' (τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰς αὐτήν; Rv 21:26). Here, finally, the longings expressed in Isaiah 60 and in Romans 8:18–24 are realised. Here, any national superiority that Israel may have harboured is overturned within the universal blessing of God as it is not only Israel but saints from every tribe and language and people and nation who are engaged in the priestly activity of worship (see Is 19:23–25; Ac 17:26–27), the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham (see also Rv 7:9), the restoration of the blessing upon creation, and the reversal of Babel. Here, in the slain Lamb, the nations are reconciled and brought to their long-awaited end, and the consequences of their enmity healed by the tree of life (Rv 22:1–2). All that separates the nations, 'separation of language and interests and aims, shall disappear forever' (Hoeksema 1969:700), and 'the glory and the honour of the nations' (Rv 21:26) – what we might think of as 'the rich glory

of culture and wisdom, gifts that have built up the treasures of [humanity]' (Bingham 1993:202) – shall be brought into the City. Here in the eschatological City, human cultures with all their distinguishing colour, song and flavour are carried into the City in a vision not too unlike the opening ceremony of an Olympic Games, a movement which recalls, amongst other things, that 'the witness of the church is intended to bring about the conversion of the nations' (Bauckham 1993:138) rather than their end.

## Creation and socio-cultural identities

The tradition has always insisted that God is the source of all things, the one from whose sway nothing escapes and in whom 'all things hold together' (Col 1:17). In other words, God is a faithful Creator, responsible for all God has made. Moreover, because creation was not only made by God but also 'for' God (Col 1:16), there are no autonomous areas of human or other activity not subject to divine appraisal – and, by extension, to theological appraisal, as Barmen insisted. Therefore, socio-cultural identities, what Cicero called the *cultura animi*, are of fundamental concern to Christian theology not only because they are a basic and indispensable feature of creation but also because apart from such there can be no intelligible speech about God. The gospel is as human as is it divine. It is as much a part of culture as it is altogether as foreign and irritating to it. And in Christ, cultural identities both flourish and undergo transformation.

Whilst the barriers erected by socio-cultural identities can both occasion and be occasioned by various forms of idolatry, in and of themselves the diversity of identities represents nothing less than the gift of the liveliness of God as life-affirming and creative Spirit. The divine action made tangible on the Day of Pentecost (as recorded in Ac 2) finds its counterpart in a theology which takes diversity and catholicity as seriously as it does unity and apostolicity. Such theology will celebrate real difference whilst avoiding making an idol of such, and accent the fact that it is only insofar as diversity represents a graced but no less creaturely response to the one Spirit that it can have an underlying unity, thereby witness to the Spirit's undoing of the idolatry of human pride responsible for the Tower of Babel.

Pentecost makes plain that it is the world and not the church which is the objective end of the *missio dei* (see Hoekendijk 1967:38–39). Indeed, the church is simply that part of the world which confesses Christ as Lord – *Dominus Iesus Christus* (Phlp 2:11). It has no separate culture,<sup>3</sup> nothing but its election to distinguish it from the nations, apart from whom it is not saved and entirely for whom it exists to serve. So Barth (1961):

What Christians have in and for themselves in the sharply differentiated particularity of their being they have as the bearers and representatives of a specially qualified and emphasised solidarity with all other men. (p. 750)

<sup>3</sup>The claim here that the church has 'no separate culture' is vulnerable to misunderstanding. Certainly, scripture, the sacraments and the rule of faith, et cetera are cultural forms that distinguish the church, in some sense, from the world. But each of these forms shares a provisionality which is uncharacteristic of other cultures. Perhaps, therefore, it may be preferable to say that the church has 'no lasting culture' (to paraphrase the language of Hebrews)?

That history records a conveyor belt of failures on the part of the church to grasp this unique vocation – to 'live ex-centredly' (Hoekendijk 1966:43) – at this point is bluntly articulated by Johannes Hoekendijk (1950):

The call to evangelism is often little else than a call to restore 'Christendom', the *Corpus Christianum*, as a solid, well-integrated cultural complex, directed and dominated by the Church. And the sense of urgency is often nothing but a nervous feeling of insecurity, with the established Church endangered; a flurried activity to save the remnants of a time now irrevocably past. (p. 163)

Here we must note also that creation is no more a given than is the new creation. This is to claim more – though certainly no less – than a doctrine of *creatio continua* would vie for. It is to contend that creation should be considered as a divine act occurring anew in every moment and unintelligible apart from eschatology. Creation is no closed system but one *wholly* contingent upon and open to the possibilities and promises of God. Human culture too, as a requisite mark of creation, is patterned after the unity in differentiation that characterises the divine life itself. We might note that one place where these possibilities and patterns find their creaturely counterpart is in the fostering of what we might call 'indigenous theologies', the responsible source of which will not be creation itself, however, but rather the apocalyptic interruption of God announced in the incarnation although articulated in forms germane to human culture and language which themselves come under the interruption's judgement and blessing.

## The divine crisis and the end of idolatrous association

There remains some important debate to be had amongst Christian theologians as to whether or not the church, as a visible and cultural institution, is itself an embodiment of the coming kingdom. Put otherwise, we might ask: Does the gospel imply and give rise to a particular culture? If the answer is yes, as many theologians (e.g. Yoder, Hauerwas, Jenson, etc.), including many Reformed theologians, want to argue, then does the church merely sponsor a mission of expansion fundamentally indistinguishable from mere propaganda, as Nathan Kerr (2009) and John Flett (2009:457–476) charge? Moreover, does such a move promote a crude reduction of the gospel as a *Weltanschauung* in competition with other world views? George Lindbeck's identification of the church with a cultural-linguistic semiotic system seems to fall precisely into this trap (see Lindbeck 1997:423–450).

The main concerns are helpfully spelled out by Bruce Hamill (2012):

Where Hauerwas and Jenson and others are predominantly concerned with the dangers of a Protestant *abstraction* of salvation from the life and practices of the community of Christ (in the thinking of their predecessors and contemporaries) rendering the gospel apolitical and otherworldly, Kerr *et al.* are predominantly concerned with the dangers of a *domestication* of salvation within the life and practices of the church, rendering

the church's culture totalitarian and self-serving. Thus we can helpfully locate the debate between the twin temptations of abstraction and domestication. (p. 278)

One concern here, noted by Hamill, is that Christian worship, amongst other activities in which the church engages, loses its integrity when it becomes either isolated from concrete realities and cultural identities, or an escape from the implications of oppression. Concerned that the apocalyptic reality of the Christian community not promote a view of the church divorced from historical and social particularity, and grounding his argument upon the premise that the church's confession about itself at Nicene ('We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church') both arises from and is made sensible because of 'the core facticity of Jewish and Christian experience that salvation has not only a history but its own *sociality*' made concrete and historical 'by the singular and transformative event of Jesus Christ' in whom 'the life of the triune God has been rendered historically and visibly participable albeit in an eschatologically incomplete manner' (Hamill 2012:280), Hamill has sought to provide a constructive way through the impasse by arguing that ecclesiology might tell the truth about the apocalyptic nature of the Christian community, with all the 'otherness' and invisibility that such implies, whilst not neglecting to speak also of the community's proper concreteness, and to do so without domesticating the church (and, by implication, salvation) sociologically.<sup>4</sup>

One might here also recall Duncan Forrester's (2005) reminder that:

it is impossible to keep company with Christ if we refuse to accept the company he has chosen to keep. Following the patristic principle *ubi Christus ibi ecclesia* (where Christ is, there is the church), it is necessary to go to find Christ and therefore the church among the poor he loves, to listen to them, and to learn afresh from them how to worship God in Spirit and in truth ... Worship separated from the great issues of liberty and justice has become idolatry, an instrument of ideological manipulation, a way of hiding from God rather than encountering [God]. (pp. 109, 110)

The patristic principle noted here bespeaks God's free decision to be with Christ's community rather than in any way sponsoring a collapse of the distinction or a restraint on the sheer freedom of grace. So too with the Reformers – to engage in theology in continuity with Luther and Calvin is to take as given a radical dialectic between God and God's creation, and to resist all efforts to coalesce the two outside of One *in whom alone* creation comes to its *telos* and the divine and creaturely realities are brought into fitting communion. Certainly, it is to reject all claims that God is a given object available to any neutral observer on the surface of history or of nature. God is never empirically or directly given to us. Rather, God's revelation – the content of which is God in God's self – is always and only ever an event of God's gracious self-giving in every new moment. Thus, revelation cannot be confined in or reduced to Holy Scripture, or to any part thereof – an error

4. Barth (1961:653) made the same point at some length (in *CD IV/1*, 650–725) charging those who would underplay the visibility of the church with fostering 'ecclesiastical Docetism'.

associated with evangelical fundamentalism. Moreover, the church can no more be straightforwardly equated with any visible community than God can be directly identified with anything creaturely, whether with the humanity of Jesus, or with the natural cosmos, or with any socio-cultural-religious form – the latter being an error of both Roman Catholicism (as represented, for example, by the communion ecclesiology of Reinhard Hütter [1994:334–361]) and postliberalism, at least in its Lindbeckian forms.

The 'ethnoreligiosity' of which Paul Mojzes speaks to describe phenomena associated with the symbiosis between ethnicity and religion in the Balkans during the 1980s (Mojzes 2011:146–147), or the 'ethnoclericism' coined by Vjekoslav Perica to describe the same, both birth situations deplorable to the gospel. Perica (2002) writes of the way that:

'Ethnic churches' are designed as instruments for the survival of ethnic communities. Small wonder they have always abhorred liberal ideas – they decay when no outside threat exists. Due to their 'survivor nature' they cannot be liberal within either. They are authoritarian-minded and centralized organizations capable of organizing resistance against an outside threat and maintaining stability inside the community. The upper section of clerical hierarchies exercise a hegemony in ecclesiastical affairs (at the expense of lower clergy and lay members). Ethnoclericism is thus both an ecclesiastical concept and political ideology. It champions a strong homogeneous church in a strong homogeneous state, with both institutions working together as guardians of the ethnic community. Ethnic churches depend on the nation-state as much as the nation depends on them. (p. 215)

One problem here is that mission thereby becomes inextricably bound up with the extension of a particular habitable 'culture' and the propagation of a culture's own particular way of life. But the church's missionary relation to the world cannot but be a function of its own culture precisely because the Word of which the church is a creature is a Word that calls the community itself to die and to live by the Word alone. This is to recall that the church is:

the most vulnerable of all communities, roaming through the world with no place of its own, suspended over the abyss of nonbeing, upheld solely by a Word that calls it continually into being. It is a church whose identity lies outside itself, whose institutional continuity is not a possession but an eschatological promise ... Without a time, without a place. The church of Jesus Christ is the most fragile of all institutions, since its own constitution (so to speak) strictly prohibits any attempt to win for itself institutional security and continuity ... [T]o confess is to venture the risk of obedience. To confess is to stand exposed before the strangeness of the one who calls. (Myers 2010:40, 41)

Neither can we accept the identification of the gospel with any worldview (*Weltanschauung*) for just as the gospel announces the end of cultural institutions defined by the old order, so too the gospel announces the rupture of all world views. Neither can the *missio Dei* delineate a set of programmatic forms. As John Flett (2010) argues:

Its very nature as community of Jew and Gentile precludes such an approach. Such an affirmation is wrongly understood if it is treated as abstracting mission, that is, rendering it non-

historical and impractical. The missionary act is a living history, not a program. The charge of propaganda may result from the confusion of the world with regard to the church's motivation, or it may be an instance of the world's active resistance to the gospel, but it may equally be true. As the community moves across natural boundaries, the naturalism that limits her missionary witness becomes apparent. Cross-cultural movement unveils how a particular community domesticates the gospel, how a community considers her necessary particular expression to be normative for the whole. Missionary methods often fall prey to this trap, because it is the constant temptation for the community to settle in this way rather than be the body broken open with the press toward the final *parousia* and the universal revelation of the kingdom of God. The response to this temptation cannot rest in a mere self-satisfactory defense of that community's particular naturalisms. While it is properly and necessarily expressed in culturally and historically particular forms, it cannot be limited to these forms. Since creation possesses no inherent capacity to facilitate or retard the communication of the gospel, the community is totally free with regard to the particular forms the community's witness takes in the world, not with regard to her definite service of witness. In other words, within the limits established by the divine and human fellowship, the community is free as she exercises her freedom; that is, missionary forms develop through the process of intentional engaged movement into the world. (pp. 294–295)

The Christ who comes 'clothed with his gospel' (Calvin 1977:548) interrupts and nullifies the idolatrous hubris of all our religious practices, and reminds us that, as a visible institution, the church is merely one more sinful reality within the world. As a visible institution, the church has no claim upon God and no more participates in God than any other institution, culture, or community does. But – and it is a big but! – the church *does* have its election and calling to commend it! In such is her freedom from all particularity of express forms, including cultural ones. The divine election recalls that the church is a missionary word-event of faithful witness and action, a divine speech-act in which the *kerygma* is proclaimed and heard and embodied in humble obedience. Wherever the event of the word occurs, there is the church. As icon of the kingdom, the church has no stable culture and no visible institutional identity. It is the interruptive occurrence of divine speech and human witness, and that alone. So Hoekendijk (1950):

We should be aware of a temptation to take the Church itself too seriously, to invite the Church to see itself as well-established, as God's secure bridgehead in the world, to think of itself as a *beatus possidens* [a blessed possessor] which, having what others do not have, distributes its possession to others, until a new company of *possidentes* is formed. We reach here a crucial issue. It is common to think of evangelism, to think of the apostolate, as a function of the Church. *Credo ecclesiam apostolicam* is often interpreted as: 'I believe in the Church, which has an apostolic function'. Would it not be truer to make a complete turn-over here, and to say that this means: I believe in the Church, which is a function of the Apostolate, that is, an instrument of God's redemptive action in this world. Or to put it in terms we used here, the Church is (nothing more, but also nothing less!) a means in God's hands to establish shalom in this world. It is taken into the triumphal procession of the glorified Son of Man and on its way it discovers that it walks amid the tokens of the coming Kingdom. (p. 170)

Wherever and whenever the *viva vox dei* happens is where and when the elect community exists, held in existence not through the propagation of human practices and social institutions but solely by the Word of God 'visibly and concretely actualised' (Barth 1960:616) in and nowhere apart from Jesus Christ. Hoekendijk is correct, therefore, insofar as he avers that 'Church-centric missionary thinking is bound to go astray, because it revolves around an illegitimate centre' (Hoekendijk 1967:38). The church which, as Hoekendijk argued, is 'a function of the apostolate' must be renewed in every new moment through the ongoing disruptive activity of Word and Spirit. God must speak anew, and only in that dialogical event of speech and witness is there a true covenantal community. It is the Word of God alone that constitutes and keeps the church as a servant of and witness to God's soteriological achievement in Jesus Christ. That the church must be renewed, or reformed, by the disruptive activity of the Word and Spirit is a central insight of the Reformed, both in the 16th century in the context of an enduring commitment to and assumption concerning some or other form of Constantinianism, and in the radical witness of the dialectical theology of the 20th century – *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*.

Theologians must not claim more than that the church is the first fruits of the new humanity, but lest the divine interruption itself be so radically apocalypticised as to render the earth-bound life of God a mere charade, neither must they aver – and embody – any less.

## The gift of first fruit

Whilst it remains a truism that pilgrims cannot stay long between the old flags, the interruption of the established ways and the demolition of those boundary markers which are fading away opens up a space and a mode of life which is characterised by a certain unfinishedness and, for now, by some old baggage. Moreover, germane to this new style of life is a series of what Moltmann refers to as 'creative tensions'. Of these, he writes:

There are times in which these tensions allow themselves to be brought harmoniously into a form which appears consistent. Today they are tensions which often enough produce disharmonies and lack of consistency and lead to forms of life which display the points of fragmentation rather than the unity of the whole. (Moltmann 1977:282)

By way of examples, Moltmann lists the tensions that exist between prayer and faithfulness to the earth, between contemplation and political struggle, and between transcendental religion and the religion of solidarity. And to these we might add the concern that has given rise to this essay, to the tense space that characterises the authentic expression of ethnic diversity in christological unity, of community life made unstable by the radical interruption (otherwise named 'the incarnation') of creaturely boundary markers, and actualised ever anew by God's Word and Spirit. Moltmann contends that 'today many people are carrying out the experiment of Christian life between these poles'.

Such polarisations, he writes, ‘threaten the rebirth of life’. But whereas for Moltmann ‘we must therefore seek pointers for a way of life which springs from the endurance of these tensions’ (Moltmann 1977:282), I have suggested here that the ‘way of life’ is actualised already by God’s gracious and *sui generis* interruption in One who is ‘making all things new’ (Rv 21:5).

Until such time when all things are made new, the New Testament witnesses call upon us to join them and the children of Israel in waiting, in ‘hoping and living wholly and utterly in Advent’, to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7), to know the joy of salvation, but only in hope (Rm 8:24), and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but only as an *ἀπαρχή* (2 Cor 1:22, 5:5; Eph 1:14) – as a ‘first fruit’ or instalment of the final gift of which it is both a ‘pledge and guarantee’ of the full harvest which awaits us, and God (Barth 1960:493–494). Until such time when all things are made new, we know the gift of ‘first fruit’ graciously promised by God. That this gift cannot be disposed of (Rm 8:23) means, as Barth reminds us, that ‘our hands are not altogether empty’ and so ‘we cannot cease to pray: “Thy kingdom come”’ (Barth 1961:330).

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Gospel-grounded racial reconciliation begins with what Christ accomplished at the cross. He united one-time enemies to God and therefore to one another. He removed ethnicity as a barrier. The good news of the gospel, in that sense, includes racial reconciliation. Christ did it! He reconciled us both to the Father and to one another! In order to understand what gospel-grounded racial reconciliation is and what it means for the church, Christians, second of all, need a better understanding of race. Race was one kind of social construct in the biblical world, and it is another kind of social construct today. Race in the ancient biblical world was a social construct based on special characteristics that had nothing to do with pseudo-scientific racism. The investigation is informed methodologically by social identity theory (discussed in chapter 2), a branch of social psychology that examines the effects of group membership upon human identity and intergroup relations. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the relationship between privileged social identity, the influence of the Spirit and the allocation of group resources to the "other" in Luke 1-4. The existence of this Spirit-formed identity allows for profound expressions of interethnic reconciliation in Luke-Acts. This conclusion grants a broader role to the Spirit in Luke-Acts than the current scholarly consensus which suggests that Luke views the Spirit as the Old Testament/Second Temple "Spirit of prophecy".

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