

Ethnocentrism, as Opposed to the Effective Proclamation of the Gospel of Life.

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Abstract

Ethnocentrism is the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and cultures, accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures (2nd Revised Edition of Macquarie's Dictionary). Would this be the major hindrance to the Church's partnership-in-mission today?

This paper explores and raises questions concerning the conflicts caused by 'an attitude' of ethnocentrism that produces segregation and division in the Church as opposed to a more effective proclamation of the Gospel that enhances unity and the 'Catholic Spirit' that John Wesley urged.

Social, political, economic and religious instabilities in our World have caused the greatest emigration movements in our history, which stirs up and instigates fresh challenges for the Church's mission and governance. The Pacific Island Churches in Australia (the Tongan context an example) whilst fervent in their gatherings are compounded and influenced by cultural exploits that undermines the truth of the Gospel. This calls for authentic Christian leadership and critical hermeneutics.

How do we face up to these challenges and what tools for mission from our Methodist Tradition could be used to encourage cross-cultural integration and not 'reverse mission' as these Tongan Church congregations look to their Home Church overseas, for ownership and governance?

The Church's Mission is strengthened by actual consistencies of unity-in-diversity and not in segregation and exclusion. Whilst diversity continues to strengthen the Body of Christ and her Mission, cross-cultural co-operation and integration is difficult. The temptation is to think that the best solution is avoiding contact and not creating pathways that works.

How do we bridge the gap between the Church in one sense, a human multicultural institution and in another, ONE spiritual body?

Background to the stated topic

In a proposal for a doctoral research study in 2003, it was a stated theory that *ethnocentrism* is a major hindrance to partnership-in-mission. The investigative study was to look at the theology of Mission and Church governance of existing indigenous Pacific Island churches under the Uniting Church in Australia, Tongan Wesleyan congregations under the United Methodist of New Zealand, and the working experiences of mission partners serving under the World Church in Britain Partnership programme. It was to be a testing research first and foremost, in order to authenticate the above theory; then to compare and contrast the three mission contexts of Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The study was to trace the emerging trends of Church practice and governance which appears to be some form of provincial Methodism prevalent in the Pacific Islands (in particular the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga).

From the above mentioned issues, this paper is written not as an academic exercise but to open up a forum for dialogue and discussion to redress concerns that are causing confusion and division amongst Tongan congregations in Australia and New Zealand which has links with the Methodist Church of Tonga (Free Wesleyan Church) wanting governance and ownership from the Home Church, and in conflict with those that are integrated into the Australian and New Zealand Church. Several churches of ethnic background (Korean, Indonesian, Chinese, Fijian) other than Anglo-European follow the same trends for a variety of reasons. However, there are cultural exploits that undermines the universality of the Gospel message, and which raise concern about the urgency of the Gospel re-visited in critical hermeneutics and authentic Christian leadership nurtured into a diverse and divided community. The writer of this work believes that a major hindrance to proclaiming the Gospel of God's grace for all- is the issue of ethnocentrism in its various forms and guise. It is almost like party politics in its worst scenario.

The dictionary defines 'Ethnocentrism' as the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and cultures, accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures. Ethnocentrism occurs when and where cultural difference is found, fostering the kind of response that has to do more with attitude rather than understanding. Here is an example. Anglo Australians are shocked in the wake of funerals, when they see Islanders queuing not only to view their dead but to kiss them farewell as they pay their final tribute, but Islanders are appalled to see the Anglo public display of lovers passionate in kissing and aged family members sent away to be cared for by strangers.

In a broader sense, ethnocentrism can also be found within one community. Take for instance, parents and children who are critical of each other because of the differing cultural framework in which they were brought up. People from one ethnic group see themselves to be better than those of another; urban folk look down on their country cousins, and people from the home country are disgusted with their relatives overseas.

The attitude of ethnocentrism emerges in various forms as a major cause of division and segregation within the Church today. It has also become an obstruction to the effective proclamation of the Gospel in its redeeming and transforming nature. That culture stands under the guidance and correction of Scripture and not the reverse.

Population Movement

Unlike the 18th century, the current global instabilities in social, political, economics and religious grounds caused the greatest emigration movement in our history. This time of transition stirs up and instigates fresh challenges for the Church mission and governance. The Pacific Island churches in Australia and New Zealand (the Tongan context an example) whilst fervent in their gatherings are compounded and influenced by cultural exploits that undermines the liberating message of the Gospel.

A case scenario is folk being emotionally blackmailed to give huge sums of money they can ill afford, to a Church building project costing more than 6 million in order to build in New South Wales, a replica of the Methodist Centennial Church in Tonga.

To be more specific in setting the scene on the population movement in the South Pacific Region since 1960s and 70s, every year thousands of Australians and New Zealanders travel to the islands as short term visitors. They lodge in hotels and guesthouses. On the other hand, thousands of Pacific Islanders travel each year to Australia and New Zealand as short term visitors lodging mostly with relatives. In this way the islanders tend to manage well in maintaining their traditions and cultures. They still see their 'Lotu' (religion) as the heart-beat of their community life, but perhaps unaware of the changes that come into effect because of this movement.

Alan Tippett talked positively in his book, 'People Movement in South Polynesia,' (1971) about people who came to salvation in large groups-families, extended families etc. in the days of the missionaries a century and half ago. However, Tippett states this movement in a way that we can see both sides, and its similarities to what is still happening to day.

' A people movement to Christ is a positive phenomenon in any discussion on church-planting and church growth. At the opposite pole, we have the negative movement out of the church. The anthropologist may call it a 'nativistic' movement. Patterns vary, but they are common with second-generation Christians, who have not personally shared the dynamic experiences of the original converts. They also grow from disillusionment, unsatisfied yearnings, and spiritual voids. They may be triggered by culture contacts ...' (1971: 6-7)

This well restricted community structure shows a tendency not to easily give way to new challenges and interactions with the society at large. It is also apt to be insular in its attitude. The link with the home country is well maintained in this way, and they have the tendency to be manipulated and exploited culturally and economically by those at home. This is a replica of what is happening in the Home Church arena in its connection and governance of the respective indigenous congregations overseas.

The home office of the Wesleyan Church of Tonga, for example, fail to seek proper consultations first, with Tongan congregations overseas, and second, the host churches of New Zealand United Methodist and the Uniting Church in Australia. In order to build partnership in mission and promote cross-cultural ministry the Home Church could shun the temptation in thinking that the best solution for group conflict is to avoid contact.

The link with the Home Church proves to be the major cause of the division and segregation between the Methodist families who manage well to integrate and work side-by-side with the host churches, and those congregations who look to the Home Church for ownership and governance.

The challenge we face now is how we can bridge the gap between the differing groups or in a broader sense, how can we bridge the gap between the Church in one sense, a human multicultural institution and in another, One spiritual body? This brings to mind John Wesley's passion of preaching the Gospel into any situation.

'Offered Christ.'

Wesley's effectiveness in preaching was not in his style or oratorical gifts, but in the Gospel he proclaimed. As referred to by Kenneth Garder in the Wesleyan Heritage (1994:84), that Albert Outler remarked on Wesley's success as a preacher: "More than anything else it was Wesley's *message* that struck home; people not excited by his eloquence were moved by his vision of the Christian life and his gospel of universal redemption." Central to Wesley's life and preaching was the 'order of salvation,' and holiness of the heart was his desire for himself and for all people. The church is likely to miss this passion to which Wesley in his own words, 'Offered Christ.' In his own expression for the lasting influence of his preaching was that he preached 'Christ in all his offices,' plus caring and nurturing a Methodist system which engaged people in a community that provided support and accountability.

Perhaps, the surprising thing is Wesley's capacity, alongside the frequent 'declaring' the gospel, to engage in 'doing' the gospel. His last letter to William Wilberforce was an encouragement to persevere to the end the fight against the wicked practice of slavery. The continuing combined passions of evangelical faith and social righteousness was a remarkable way evident in the life of the early Methodists. There is the conviction that genuine faith will be accompanied by evidences.

So now we may have to face tough questions that they may restore and give light to our mission in this age. The question is whether we have the characteristically Methodist passion to engage in these things, and stand to accept whatever the cost may be. Obviously, Methodism in general does engage in evangelism, and is socially and politically engaged. But the question is, do we have the capacity and concern to allow the two things not only to exist side-by-side in our lives but also to influence one another as they did in the life of John Wesley? This is one of the toughest challenges for the Methodist Church of Tonga in its status as the so called State Church.

Catholic Spirit.

Wesley's emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit did not in any way discredit the Church and the Sacraments. His concern for all Christians is to be brought to the means of grace and most of all to meet Christ in the breaking of the bread and the cup. This is one of the obvious signs of the Revival which was the enormously increased attendances at Holy Communion in the area where Methodism had gained a stronghold. To recover the meaning of the Lord Supper as a means of God's grace and a meal that unites, would allow us to see that what unites us is greater than the thing that divides us.

He was strongly opposed to schisms both in the form of disunity of heart among those in the same communion or in the form of actual separation. Such separation could be permissible only if it is impossible to remain within the church. He was well aware of the tensions between the Methodists, Anglicans, Dissenters and Moravians. In his sermon on the 'Catholic Spirit,' he urged unity with all Christians whose 'heart was right with God,' who believe in Jesus Christ and walked by 'faith with Him' even if their theology and liturgy are not conformed to his own.

His passion for unity of all Christians was undoubtedly based upon his belief on the centrality as well as the universality of Christ, the supreme gift of God's grace. And for him to cry, 'we are the friends of all and the enemies of none' is a positive way of creating a platform for bridge building with others.

Bridge Building.

Past attempts that have failed should be revisited, reviewed and new constructs made to suit the time, but the poignant quest is still how can we remain faithful to the biblical norms in the Gospel teaching and maintain at the same time an attitude of ethnocentrism that separates and excludes others?

Christianity is not simply about feelings or emotions, and preserving cultural norms. It is about walking through life with Christ constantly by our side to.

I had a conversation with my daughter when she was old enough to take note of the Tongan Church services we had attended. She asked me one day, ‘Dad, why do the Tongans cry when they preach?’ I replied, ‘because the Tongans feel what they say.’ It might also be true to put it another way, ‘they say what they feel.’ Islanders are generous in their financial giving to the Church and offer hospitality regardless of time and the cost. This is partly true of what Tippett referred to in the positive movement of large groups into salvation. Although this kind of emotional community spirit give life and warmth to most occasions ‘Lotu’ included for the Islanders, but it certainly never lasts.

Therefore, bridge building should be raised above the emotional level. John Wesley never based a doctrine on feelings. He based his theology on the bible and experience, but far more on the bible than experience. He was well aware of human feelings in its fuller sense and part of what he meant by experience, but in lesser degree than the theological exposition that he valued much more.

However, bridge building should be above the emotional level and beyond group-centred infrastructure to being Christ-centred. Christianity is not church-centred or even book-centred. Wesley was a ‘man of one book,’ but he never made the bible an end in itself. What pathways can we create and infrastructures put in place as panacea for the prescribed situation above?

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