

Cross-cultural unity

Recently I have been spending time reading and listening to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 3v8 he tells how privileged he feels to be able to preach to gentiles the good news that they are included in God's purpose and family just as the Jews are.

⁸Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

I feel equally privileged today to be able to meet with and speak to Indonesians and Finns who have also bridged the cultural gap and found unity in Jesus.

When Paul wrote his letter, the gap between Jews and gentiles was very big. Jews knew God had chosen their ancestor Abraham and then through Moses had given them the Law. They were a chosen people and despised the unclean gentiles. The gentiles, especially those deeply affected by the Greek culture, despised the primitive Jews with their strange customs. There was a culture war between Jews and gentiles that had lasted three hundred years since Alexander the Great first brought Greeks into Israel.

How did God feel about this? It was He who had called Abraham and said that his descendents would be a special people for God. Was God just on the side of the Jews as the Jews felt He was? See what Paul tells in Eph. 3v4-6:

⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Paul wrote "I am going to tell you a secret". What is this big secret? See verse 6:

⁶This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

The problem was that neither the Jews nor anybody else had understood who the descendents of Abraham really were. Jews thought that only those whose ancestry went back to Isaac and Abraham were true descendents of Abraham. Not so writes Paul to the Galatians in 3v26-29:

²⁶You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Anyone who has the same faith as Abraham is a descendent of Abraham. It does not matter if he is biologically descended from Abraham or not. Abraham was saved through faith. Anyone who has the same faith as Abraham will also be saved.

This amazing secret was first revealed through our Lord Jesus. He told the Jews that if they rejected the way of faith in Him, then they were not true descendents of

Abraham. He also told his disciples to go and preach his message to all nations, not just to Jews.

Did his disciples obey? Not at all! They were so stuck with the idea that Jews were the chosen people that they did not even preach to their cousins, the Samaritans, just a few kilometers down the road from Jerusalem. It took five years from the Day of Pentecost before the gospel was preached to Samaritans and even then it was not the apostles who did it but another church worker called Philip.

It took a further five years before Peter was finally forced by God to preach to gentiles for the first time. The thing that convinced Peter that God accepted both Samaritans and gentiles was that he saw the Holy Spirit coming upon the people in the house of the Roman officer, Cornelius. We read in Acts 10v44-47:

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷“Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

“If God gave them the Holy Spirit, just like he had given the believing Jews, how could I fail to accept them as fellow Christians” said Peter. The coming of the Holy Spirit and his gifts is a sign that someone, no matter their racial or cultural background, is accepted by God, and if God accepts that person, so must we.

Did all this convince Peter and the other apostles to preach to gentiles? No way! Even ten years after the events in Cornelius house, Peter was still saying that he and John were called to preach to Jews. So God had to call an expatriate called Paul, whose home was not in Israel but in Turkey, and who had only come to Israel to go to university. Paul was a Jew but he understood other cultures and languages and when he had met Jesus and become a disciple himself, he then became a chosen person for God to use to declare his secret purpose.

Many of you are from another country, but you have met Jesus and put your faith in him. Now he wants to use your cross-cultural experience to share the gospel here in Finland.

Let’s follow the history a little further. Fifty years after the time of the apostles the church was mainly composed of gentiles because so many of them had put their faith in Jesus. The number of Jewish believers was relatively small because many Jews had been killed in war. There was also a strong anti-Christian movement amongst Jews who cursed Christians everyday. What then happened was tragic. The Christians lost their understanding of God’s secret plan; they failed to understand Paul’s burning love for Jewish people, which he tells of in Romans 9v2-4:

²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, ⁴the people of Israel.

Christians turned against Jews and said God had deserted them. For almost 2000 years, Christians, in the name of Christ, have been the main cause of the suffering of Jewish people. It has only been in the last eighty years that Muslims have also started to attack Jews.

This is an important lesson for us. In the past 50 years the center of Christian life has moved from Europe to the south and east. Millions of Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, Africans and South Americans have become believers. In contrast, in Europe, the fastest growing religion is Islam and churches are struggling to survive. The Christians in the south have the Holy Spirit and life; the Christians in the north have traditions and discouragement. Now God has brought you here. He has built bridges between you and Finnish people. Why? Because God still has on his heart to join together all sorts of people into one new family in Christ.

Cross-cultural unity is not easy between Christians, even between husbands and wives. It is something we have to work on as Paul tells in Ephesians 4v2,3:

²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

The unity we have, we must work to keep. It is much more demanding to accept each other with our cultural differences than if we are with people of our own culture. We have to forgive each other more often and it costs more because often our biological programming rises up and makes us feel like closing our hearts to each other. But the Holy Spirit can lift us above these cultural issues and give us the love for each other, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God our Father who wants to make us one in his Son Jesus.

Let the Holy Spirit reveal to your heart that it is God's heart you should be one whether you are Indonesian or Finn, man or woman, Lutheran or Pentecostal, or whatever other differences you have. Hold on to what you have in Christ, forgiveness, acceptance, hope and then live it out with others, forgiving, accepting and believing there is hope even when things are difficult. Foreigners, share with Finns what you have received of Christ. Don't despise the faith of Finnish people even if they express it in a very different way to what you are used to. Finns, receive what you are being given even if you have a much longer Christian tradition, but don't be ashamed of what Christ has given you. Share that boldly with others.

Let's pray for the help of the Holy Spirit as we face these challenges and possibilities.

Graham Turner
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