



Symposium on Faith and Ethnicity
Center for M.B. Studies/MBBS
Fresno CA
November 19-21, 1987

Doing Mission with a Universal Gospel and Cultural Diversity

Frances F. Hiebert

Dealing with issues of cultural and ethnic diversity is nothing new for Christians. As soon as Jesus revealed himself as Messiah to the Samaritan woman, the issues were joined. They were a major concern for Paul, the Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles.

In our time, we are being forced to deal with these issues not only because of our belief in a universal Gospel, but by the spirit of our times. Especially after the world wars, the world is telling us that we have to learn to affirm pluralism of all kinds because, for one thing, the survival of our planet is at stake. The old way of various cultures seeking to gain dominance over others can only lead to global disaster. People must learn to live together in peace or the world may self-destruct. This contemporary concern for our "one world" validates the many worlds of different cultures and ethnic groups. It also has the effect of relativizing the values and world-views of them all. Each is to be accepted on its own merits as equally valid with all the others. As Christians who believe in the flawed nature of all human cultures, we will need a double portion of the Holy Spirit's gift of discernment to deal with this prevailing zeitgeist. We do well to remember John Howard Yoder's injunction that Christians are called to be with the world and against it at the same time.

Christian missions, from the time of the Apostle Paul, as stated above, have always had to face issues of pluralism. Christian unity, however,

rather than world peace, or response to different socio-political phenomena, usually has been the major concern of Christian missions. Perhaps partly due to the spirit of the times, what is new in the church's response to diversity is the idea that cultural and ethnic distinctions should be preserved and taken along into the kingdom of God.

And if you were looking for a model, you might say that although it happened unintentionally, our Mennonite Brethren peoplehood is an example of just such a preservation of ethnic identity in the context of religious faith.

Can it be that we are really so avant guard? Or am I confusing you? Did you think rather that we are here at this conference because some of us think we should play down our ethnicity?

There certainly is much to be said in favor of a strong ethnic identity. For one thing, when you are young, you know where to start looking for a marriage partner. You may not end up there, but at least you have a place to start. People sometimes make light of this advantage. But that is usually more in retrospect -- when they are safely beyond the critical period of choice and into a solid marriage.

More to the point of our discussion here, ethnicity fused with religious faith is a powerful vehicle for transporting values and ideals over time and space. Ethnic identity also provides security in changing circumstances and contributes to a sense of meaning in life.

But as John Redekop has pointed out, the ethno-religious orientation does not inevitably assure the retention of the faith commitment or the form of its expression. I must admit that in the past I have been one who simply equated Mennonite with Christian. John's many illustrations and carefully reasoned arguments have convinced me that I was

wrong to do that. I fit his category of "anti-ethnic", meaning that the ethnic factor of the term "Mennonite" is denied (A People Apart 1987:146).

With further reflection, it seems to me that there also may be a difference in perception depending on which side of the Canadian-U.S. border you happen to be. Perhaps our brothers and sister to the North may not understand how hard we had to struggle to recover our Anabaptist theology in our generation. In that struggle, we may not have distinguished carefully between faith and ethnicity. We have just caught our collective breath from trying to escape absorption by an evangelicalism that is not Anabaptist. Now may be the time, however, for us to draw that distinction. After all, to be Anabaptist, we need to be intensely evangelistic. Where ethnicity is a barrier, it must be dealt with.

John makes a related point that needs to be taken quite seriously. What exists among Mennonites is a kind of ethno-religious fusion. If the religious factor in that fusion requires people to be involved in evangelism and mission, then an almost contradictory situation exists (1987:57-58). A person's natural birth determines ethnicity; according to Scripture, the spiritual, second birth supercedes the first. How then can an ethnic identity be a boundary for a spiritual community? Ethnicity is by definition a bounded set. The church, as Paul Hiebert has shown, is better described as a centered-set, Jesus Christ, of course, being the center (1979:217-227).

Well, haven't we Mennonite Brethren been a strong missionary church? We certainly have. But it is rather obvious that our mission activity has been most successful in distant lands. There are now more Mennonite Brethren in other countries than in North America. It is foreign missions that have been our major focus. Why?

That dear Christian apostle and ethnic patriarch of our church, Brother J.B. Toews, visited our home recently. Elmer and Phylis Martens were there too. After dinner, Brother J.B. recited for us the story of M.B. missions from its beginnings in Russia to the present time. The rest of us sat listening like fascinated children, soaking up the stories of our tribal ancestors.

Because we were all "ethnic Mennonites", this became much more for us than a merely social time. It also had become an occasion for transmitting ethno-religious tradition. That this was completely unplanned only points to the authenticity of the event. And if I were to say that I valued my ethnic relationship to that event much less than the religious, it would not be true. That would be like trying to decide between my maternal and fraternal grandparents. I am part of both sides.

But I have digressed. The reason for remembering that evening is this. During his analysis of M.B. missions, Brother Toews made an interesting comment that seems very relevant to this discussion of ethnicity. He noted that one reason among others for our church's focus on foreign missions may have been a kind of escapism.

Taking my cue from him, I would propose that doing foreign missions was a way for us to bypass the inherent contradictions of our ethno-religious orientation. We could evangelize "out there" because new converts would not be hindered by our rather concrete ethnic boundaries here at home. Nor would we be challenged as a church to remove them and become more inclusive. Together with other, very valid reasons for doing foreign missions, it seems we tried to escape the evangelistic mandate at home by fulfilling it abroad.

An ethno-religious tradition that is as biblically oriented as ours, however, cannot escape forever. It was easier when we lived encapsulated in rural and village settings. But with our move to the pluralistic urban environments, we cannot so easily withdraw. The world is on our doorstep, in our car-pool, at the office, in the children's school and at the super-market. In that context, the Holy Spirit constantly reminds us of our responsibility to our near neighbors.

Urbanization is a process that at first threatens identity and then erodes it. For people with an ethno-religious identity this may have very serious implications. It clearly will be important for us to distinguish between faith and ethnicity with regard to what may be given up in the process.

On the other hand, could it be that this is God's way of asking us to lose our corporate ethnic self so that we may find ourselves more clearly the body of Christ? That, of course, is different from a rejection of ethnicity. In fact, according to the paradoxical pronouncement by Jesus, may we not expect to find ethnic affirmation along with all the others who are in Christ?

We cannot escape the universality of the Gospel. Everyone is invited in; no one can be automatically ruled out. The gospel of Jesus erases every kind of humanly-drawn boundary, be it ethnic, sexual, or socio-political. There is no Jew nor Greek, no male or female, no slave nor free. We are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

We have been born anew of water and the Spirit, and as a result of that second birth, we inherit a new ethnic identity. We are born into the spiritual family of God and no matter what our physical ethnicity, it is superceded by this new, spiritual ethnicity. None of us is Christian

ethnic by right of human birth. Our second birth is purely a matter of the grace of God.

Then what is the place of our old identity? It remains, just as our physical body and human nature remain after we are born again. But it can never take priority over our Christian ethnicity. And being secondary to that, all kinds of human ethnic identities are both accepted and relativized. The church by its very calling presupposes a multi-ethnic body, but over all these human ethnicities, spiritual ethnicity has priority.

And all those who are ethnically Christian will be part of God's mission to the world. The children cannot help being like the Father. Even if, as in case of Mennonites, our human ethnicity stands in a somewhat symbiotic relationship to our religious identity, we cannot escape our Christian responsibility to other kinds of people. A church truly cannot exist without being in mission. Whatever it takes to bring those around us into the body of Christ cannot be counted too costly. For me, that includes giving up Mennonite ethnic identity if necessary.

But please allow me to remind you that while we Mennonite Brethren are considering the sacrifice of ours, the prevailing zeitgeist affirms human ethnicity, almost with a vengeance.

And now I come to the one central concern that I wish to raise in this discussion of the universal gospel and cultural diversity. I see the possibility of another kind of escapism in the way we go about evangelizing our near neighbors. And it is all tied up with the beautiful ribbon of ethnic affirmation. I'm referring to a basic tenet of Church Growth Strategy called the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP).

The Homogeneous Unit Principle is a something of a sacred cow at Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission. According to Church Growth

theory, the HUP provides nourishment to grow the church in any ethnic group. It is based on Donald McGavran's now famous dictum that "men (sic) like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers." In the revised edition of Understanding Church Growth, McGavran quotes with approval Michael Novak's defence of the "right of each ethnic group to remain itself" (McGavran 1980:223). Church Growth theory maintains that planting churches along ethnic lines is the way to make them grow. Interestingly, as President Hubbard pointed out in chapel one day, this theory comes from a school that represents the widest range of diversity of faculty and students in the Evangelical world.

Sometimes in class, I have felt constrained to point out that I come from just such a homogeneous ethnic group as has been immortalized at Fuller. The bad news, I tell them, is that at various times and places we have found the sacred cow dry. Not only have we sometimes been unable to evangelize some of our own "kind of people." We also have discovered that the walls of our homogeneous unit are almost insurmountable — whether you want to climb them going out or coming in. Our son, John, tells us that he and his Goshen College cronies have spent hours discussing how much "exit velocity" it takes to actually escape from the Mennonite orbit.

So, I recognize that there is good reason for us to be here discussing the relation of ethnicity to church. And my purpose here is simply to point out that when we think about planting churches along ethnic lines, we need to remember our own history. If we insist on evangelizing and structuring churches on the basis of human ethnicity, are we not in danger of encouraging the same bounded sets that we ourselves are now trying to break out of? Isn't it more important to focus from the beginning on the spiritual ethnicity of all who are in Christ?

A young woman missionary candidate made a comment at one of the Track II sessions of CTME in Pasadena this past summer that nailed it down for me. She identified herself as a non-ethnic M.B. "I'm confused," she said. "You seem to be supportive of all other ethnic groups. Why are you so negative about your own?" We're sending a double message. It doesn't seem consistent for us to try to erase our Mennonite ethnic identity while at the same time we are establishing churches based on different ethnicities. I ask again, isn't there a danger of history repeating itself?

There is no denying that Homogeneous Unit churches provide a pragmatic solution to the problems of ethnic hostility. It is more comfortable to relate only to those who are like us, but is it the Gospel? Jacques Ellul believes that Christianity often has been subverted by pragmatism into moral systems and bureaucratic institutions. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves if pragmatic solutions that set up boundaries according to sociological and psychological comfort zones may not subvert the truth of our Christian ethnic unity.

We also need to ask ourselves if planting churches according to ethnicity has more to do with the comfort zone of the other ethnic group than it has to do with our own. Is planting a Hispanic church or a Chinese church a way to escape having to open the borders of our older, "ethnic M.B." churches to these groups?

I have suggested that the Homogeneous Unit Principle that is seen by some to facilitate evangelism, actually may present us with an escape route. Another that I will mention only in passing has to do with our rising interest in home missions itself. Are we now so interested in evangelizing in our own country partly as a way to escape a closer relationship with those churches we have planted earlier in our foreign missions era? Please

understand, I am not saying that this is necessarily so. My point is that when we affirm pluralism in the church, we must not do it as a way to escape the implications of our essential oneness in the family of God.

I'm quite sure that Jacques Ellul would consider a church encapsulated by ethnicity to be a subversion of Christianity. In his book, The Subversion of Christianity, he spends about 200 pages describing subversions of God's revelation in different times and places. Then he concludes that there is no possibility for a sociological association (read church) of any kind to also be the body of Christ. Nor can the body of Christ be forcibly put in sociological forms (1987:211). That actually rules out any kind of social organization -- based on ethnicity or not. Not that we can escape them either. There is no way to live without them.

But just there is the hope, Ellul tells us. There is always a subversion of the subversion; a transgression of the transgression. The subversion of Christianity by human institutions gives rise to conditions in which the church is forced by God and the world back to its origins. In those conditions, "the authenticity of faith, attentive listening to God's Word, the informing of everyday life by the Christian spirit, and boldness of witness become once more the true face of revelation" (Ellul 1987:208). In short, the hearing and grasping again of the Word of God, subverts the subversion. Isn't this the true hope for overcoming that which would divide and subvert the church of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps A People Apart, all those passionate letters to the editors about a name change, and even this symposium may be proof that God's underground is at work again!

References

Ellul, Jacques

1987 The Subversion of Christianity. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Hiebert, Paul G.

1979 "Sets and Structures: A Study of Church Patterns," in D.J. Hesselgrave, New Horizons in World Mission: Evangelicals and the Christian Mission in the 1980's. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House

McGavran, Donald A.

1970 Understanding Church Growth. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Redekop, John H.

1987 A People Apart. Winnepeg and Hillsboro: Kindred Press