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Ethnicity, Social Identity, and the Transposable Body of Christ

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Abstract

This essay 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 baptized into Christ are now to live in the reality of Christ who is both the boundary and center of their existence, a boundary which includes all humanity in its cultural, ethnic, gendered, social and historical particularities.

Keywords

ethnicity – social identity – church – christology – mission – witness – new creation – culture

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Mapping Some Spaces in Negotiation: 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 confessions, offered by theologians from India and New Zealand respectively, reflect the concern of this essay – to enquire, via a consideration of a number of Second Testament texts, about the relationship between ethnic/social/cultural identities and the creation of a new identity announced in the gospel and embodied in the gospel’s creature, the church. This is not a new question. It is, in fact, one of the most pressing concerns for the communities of the Second Testament. The question posed in Acts 15:1 – “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” – occupied the earliest Christian communities and the challenges which reverberate from it remain with us.

Certainly, the terms “gospel” (or “*kerygma*”), “culture”, and “ethnicity” are enigmatical and difficult to define in a straightforward way.¹ “Social identity”, “ethnicity”, and “*kerygma*” are terms, likewise, with their own sagas to tell, some quite brief. “Ethnicity”, for example, came to be widely used in the 1970s to denote various social constructions of descent and culture and their meanings, since which time its definition has been hotly debated while increasingly playing a key role (both constructively and destructively) in social imagination and in the discourses of politics and policy. That debates continue around these ambiguous constructions may betray just how deeply invested we are in them. Certainly, such realities have proved capable of birthing some of the most vexing and intractable cleavages in human society. David Congdon is right, in my judgement, to aver that “any responsible use of these words must”, therefore, “avoid the temptation to essentialize or reify them” (Congdon 2015:524), not least because, as Anthony Gittins has noted, “there can be no dialogue between ‘gospel’ and ‘culture’ that is not first between actual people” (Gittins 2012:156). Congdon proceeds to argue that the grammar

1 Regarding “culture”, for example, see Eagleton (2000:32–35). I am grateful here, and in what immediately follows, for the fine study by Congdon (2015).

of culture and of ethnicity cannot refer to some idealized or catholic theory but can only refer to what Clifford Geertz refers to as “the informal logic of actual life” (Geertz 1973:17; cited in Congdon 2015:525) – life never static, always negotiated and renegotiated, “fluid” and “constructed” with “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).

Similarly, the language of “*kerygma*” or “gospel” cannot refer to an ahistorical idea deracinated from cultural particularities. The gospel is always materialized within a particular cultural context, complete with particular modes of *praxis* and forms of “lived existence” (Congdon 2015:525. See also Flett 2016). This recalls that it is the concern of the Christian theologian to approach the subject foremost in light of God’s becoming human among us. Far from imposing limits on the subject, such a commitment signals a death knell to docetism and offers “a way of affirming both universal and particular in a non-alienating way, in a way that does not involve false particularism” (Gorringe 2004:101).

For our purposes, “*kerygma*” refers to the distinctive content of the Christian faith that inhabits and finds expression – inescapably so – in particular cultural forms while resisting reduction to any and all such expressed forms (see Congdon 2015:530–31). We might say that the *kerygma* is characterized by internal *excess* that “precludes its reduction to any single formulation”, and that it is precisely this excessive character that provides “the condition for the possibility of its unanticipatable migration to ever new contexts”, making possible its “continual *inculturation*, even as it remains transcultural” (Congdon 2015:531). The mode of its hearing, moreover, is always, intra-semiotic or intra-textual, thick with a multiplicity of cultural, linguistic, and conceptual structures, many of them “superimposed or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit, and which [the theologian] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render” (Geertz 1973:10).

The notion of inculturation, championed since the Second Vatican Council, has a long history in the church, most famously perhaps in the theology of the second century apologists who discerned “seeds of the Word” (*logoi spermatikoi*) in all human cultures. This is the logic of incarnation: “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” (Gorringe 2004:200). Or, in the words of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*: “[Human persons come] to a

true and full humanity only through culture,² that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature” (Vatican Council II 1965:§53).

The logic here is at work, too, in Vincent Donovan’s account of his time with the Masai: “God enables a people, any people, to reach salvation through their culture and tribal, racial customs and traditions . . . The incarnation of the gospel, the flesh and blood which must grow on the gospel is up to the people of a culture” (Donovan 1982:30; cf. Dodson, Elston, and McCoy 2006:249–62). As attractive as Donovan’s missio-theological instincts are, however, they are not altogether unproblematic. If, for example, the emphasis is on the taking on of human flesh, it may encourage a view of inculturation from above, rather than from below. If, on the other hand, Donovan’s convictions here are equated with the cultural education of Jesus they may overlook the ongoing necessity of dialogue between gospel and culture, and promote the kind of “culturalism” of which Aylward Shorter 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 (Shorter 1988:82). Inculturation is always attended to with a certain restlessness, and cannot succeed without deep, interminable repentance. Or, as Timothy Gorringer 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” (Gorringer 2004:201). Inculturation is always a two-way process, and whenever cultural habits become occasions of resistance to the gospel, culture can begin to function as an *idol* instead of as a *sign*. Donovan’s “bare message of Christianity, untied to any outside influence” (Donovan 1982:24) appears to be a denial of the claim that all translation is interpretation. That there is no escape from culture, however, is part of the scandal of particularity called “gospel”, the unavoidable and particular location, mode, and content of which, as I shall suggest in this essay, is the transposable and extendible body of the Ascended Christ.

2 The point to be asked here, of course, is *which* culture. For Benedict XVI, the culture in question is “the church”. Protestantism has produced its own version of this position. See, for example, Jenson (2003:323–29).

The Broken Wall and the One New Humanity (Ephesians 2:11–22)

The parallels between the contexts in which Christianity first spread and the ethnic pluralism that defines many contemporary societies has been well documented, as has the fact that the earliest Christian movements broadcast the notion that “community” was not based on cultural or social uniformity but on the gift of God who in Jesus Christ was reconciling all creation to God’s self. Consequently, such movements emboldened people to live in such ways that would make that universalism concrete – the love of enemies, the pledge to reconciliation, the refusal to dominate, the readiness to forgive, the eagerness to value and to receive the gifts of the “other”, the offer of unconditional love, and so on.

The creation of a radical unity in Christ out of the warring factionalism that characterizes humanity is a crucial Second Testament theme, and particularly in those writings attributed to St Paul. These proclaim that one of the principal fruits created by the act of divine interruption (Incarnation and Pentecost) is that a new community is formed. This new community is called to be a fore-taste of the eschatological new humanity. It is called to be one people – literally, “one body” (Eph 2:16) – transfigured but unbounded by ethnic and cultural dissimilarities and who, by account of their baptisms into Christ, count their ethnic or cultural identities now as secondary to that principal identity of being “in Christ”. This identity 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 1961:674–75). It is a community gathered by and around Christ, a gathering with implications for how its members conceive of both the community’s center and periphery. As Lamin Sanneh has it:

Christianity affects cultures by moving them to a position short of the absolute, and it does this by placing God at the centre. The point of departure for the church in mission . . . is Pentecost, with Christianity triumphing by relinquishing Jerusalem or any fixed universal centre, be it geographical, linguistic or cultural, and with the result of there being a proliferation of centres, languages and cultures within the church. Christian ecumenism is a pluralism of the periphery with only God at the centre. Consequently all cultural expressions remain at the periphery of truth, all equal in terms of access, but all equally inadequate in terms of what is ultimate and final.

Thus while we cannot conceive of the gospel without its requisite cultural expression, we cannot at the same time confine it exclusively to that, for that would involve the unwarranted step of making ends and means synonymous.

SANNEH 1995:61 (ITALICS ORIGINAL); CF. SANNEH 2009:81–82

This 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). *In nuce*, the argument here is that 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 his own crucified “body”. Whatever practices or attitudes may have defined members’ previous relationships with others have now been radically re-altered in Christ who is now their primary identity. So Markus Barth:

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.

BARTH 1960:37

A number of scholars, including but not limited to many enthusiasts of post-colonial and queer theologies, have suggested that this “new identity” created in Christ’s body means not the erasing of ethnic, cultural, and other differences but rather their “*combining . . . into a hybrid existence*” (Wan 2000:126; cf. for example, Bantum 2010; Sebastian 2012:161–78; Cheng 2013:51–64; Thweatt-Bates 2012). But this notion of hybridity to describe the existence of life in Christ is, it seems to me, problematic, not only because it is suggestive of “third race” language (that I will discuss soon) but also (and principally) because of the assumptions it makes about the nature of the divine embodiment itself in Jesus Christ.

A more constructive approach is that proposed by Graham Ward in his discussion on the “extendible” and “transposable” character of the body of the Ascended Christ. Of Christ, Ward avers that “what had throughout the gospel story been an unstable body is now to be understood as an extendible body.

For it is not that Jesus, at this point, stops being a physical presence. It is more as if this physical presence can expand itself to incorporate other bodies, like bread, and make them extensions of his own" (Ward 2000:102). He continues:

[It is] as if place and space itself is being redefined such that one can be a body here and also there, one can be this kind of body here and that kind of body there . . . Bodies are not only transfigurable, they are transposable. In being transposable, while always being singularities and specificities, the body of Christ can cross boundaries, ethnic boundaries, gender boundaries, socio-economic boundaries, for example.

WARD 2000:103

Ward suggests that Jesus' body is "continually being displaced so that the figuration of the body is always transposing its identity", and that Christ's displaced body is "now taken up in the limbs and tissue of his body as the Church. Poised between memory and anticipation, driven by a desire which enfolds it and which it cannot master, the history of the Church's body is a history of transposed and deferred identities: it incarnates a humanity aspiring to Christ's own humanity" (Ward 2000:112–13). There can be no question that the life of Christ is not reduced to that of the church. Still, the very logic of the Ascension, Ward argues, suggests a continuation of the logic of Christ's opening-up, of "the Logos creating a space within himself, a womb, within which . . . the Church will expand and creation be recreated" (Ward 2000:113).

There are distinct echoes here of Karl Barth's own approach to the subject. Barth speaks of the church – with all of its infallibilities – as the risen Lord's own earthly-historical form of existence and as unequivocally accepted by God. We must, he insists, reject all hints of "ecclesiastical Docetism", as if the church only has the appearance of being fully human (Barth 1961:653). Barth affirms that the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Lord lives at the right hand of the Father; but he rejects any idea that the risen Christ is somehow "enclosed" or entrapped in his heavenly form of existence. Rather, "the Crucified and Risen" Lord *also* "lives in an earthly-historical form of existence" in the Christian community. Indeed, it is only because Christ is, that the church is. So Barth: "It is, because He is. That is its secret, its being in the third dimension, which is visible only to faith" (Barth 1961:661). To flesh this out, as it were, Barth employs the language of the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ.

In the light of Easter, . . . [Christ] lives . . . as the *totus Christus* [the whole Christ]. And this means that, although He lives also and primarily as the exalted Son of Man, at the right hand of the Father, in the hiddenness of

God . . . , at an inaccessible height above the world and the community, He does not live only there but lives too (in the power of His Holy Spirit poured out from there and working here) on earth and in world history, in the little communities at Thessalonica and Corinth and Philippi, in Galatia and at Rome.

BARTH 1958:658–59

Certainly, an ecclesiology fittingly determined by the ontological scandal of the “extendible” and “transposable” character of the body of Jesus compels Christian communities to work for multiethnic rather than homogenous churches in ethnically and culturally diverse contexts. Here the church’s traditional four marks – especially “oneness” and “catholicity” – are often highlighted, and their christological and trinitarian correlations noted. And those committed to articulating a lexicon of the good news grounded in some form of social trinitarianism, for example, have been eager to draw attention to ways in which the gospel embraces both *diversity* (though “differentiation” may be a better word) and *unity*. Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, argues that the triune life is a kind of community that creates “unity in diversity, while at the same time differentiating and making diversity in unity possible” (Moltmann 1992:220). This raises a challenge for Protestants (and for other Christians too), for while the magisterial Reformers (at least) located the unity of the *communio sanctorum* in the invisible rather than the visible church, such consideration has been used, tragically, as a way of authorising churches to do little about working to see concrete unity as a visible mark of the church in its present experience. Insofar as this has been the case, Protestant churches have contributed towards the widespread 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 itself 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 very often been abstracted from the church’s christological moorings and from the particularities of culture and history. The ecclesio-political implications of the *kerygma*, trumpeted in the Epistle to the Ephesians, make plain that “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). Here we note, as signaled earlier, 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. Claims that the new community formed around Jesus constitute 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 gifts that arises from the *kerygma* 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, principally, its being as the Body of Christ, and so too its apocalyptic character, and it would radically re-author its vocation by recourse to the language and imagination of the old economy. The Word and Spirit who form a new social identity and who both chasten and transcend “cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries” (Uniting Church in Australia 1992:5) do not annul these identities. These remain, but they ought no longer represent or function as barriers, or provide any justification for not traversing the fence line. Catholicity does not mean uniformity; neither does it equate with the flattening of ethnic/cultural realities, a blending or homogenization of such to the extent that all that remains is a theo-cultural soup. Catholicity, instead, is inescapably grounded in the most radical particularity, the *sui generis* movement of the God who suckled on Mary’s breast. Christian theology will want to insist that both true unity and catholicity are possible only in the human Word, the Son of the catholic God in whom particularism does not cancel out the universal horizon of love’s creative movement. The only reality that makes the church both catholic and one is not any particular form, structure, 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 humanity. The members of his body are those who are learning to tell the truth not only about themselves but also about their “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 extended and transposed. Presupposing that we can *both* stand with a given tradition *and* learn from and be transfigured and reformed by other traditions, and drawing upon Hannah Arendt’s notion of an “enlarged way of thinking [that] needs the presence of others “in whose place” it must think, [and] whose perspective it must take into consideration” (Arendt 1961:220), Volf describes the process by which “double vision” is able to take place. It happens

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.

VOLF 1996:213

Responsible Christian theology will want to be explicit in grounding such talk of “double vision” in christological and pneumatological terms. 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 behavior that might characterize local and international politics, matters which are beyond the purview of this essay.

Also beyond this essay’s direct scope is that question left unresolved by the close of the Second Testament canon; namely, the question of the two-fold form of God’s people as Jewish and Gentile *ekklesias*. While some 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, a subject to which we now turn.

Apocalyptic Identity: How “New” is the New Identity? (Galatians 3:27–28 and 1 Corinthians 7:17–24)

J. Louis Martyn insists that the Apostle Paul’s apocalyptic theology – particularly in Galatians – is “focused on the motif of invasive movement from beyond”, is concerned to track the shape of God’s “fundamental and determining line of movement” and its ecclesial/missional implications, and is resolute

to champion the claim that “the gospel is not about human movement into blessedness (religion)” but is “about God’s liberating invasion of the cosmos (theology)” (Martyn 2000:254, 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 is set against the “community-destroying effect of Sin as a cosmic power” (Martyn 2000:257) and set for the creation of an embodied new community characterized by mutual service in the world 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 N4

Such a claim 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-realized) talk of the community being anything other than truly worldly. And although we must go on, as we shall, to say something about the fact that the community resides in the world as “aliens and strangers” (1 Pet 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 election precedes creation. This need not be to claim any more than, as per Barth, 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” (Barth 1960a:122).

One of the clearest expressions of this witness (made explicit in Galatians) is when the Christian community resists the temptation to define itself along lines determined by the old creation and is defined instead by the apocalyptic reality that 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 2006:102). St Paul gives expression to this in Galatians 3:27–28, wherein the baptismal liturgy drawn upon presupposes that clothes are removed, an act signifying 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” (Gal 3:28). Martyn suggests that while in Galatians St 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 opposite pairs were identified as the elements that 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

While, according to Martyn, the epistle’s author is uninterested in attending to the distinction between “male *and* female”, our attendance to such can serve to sharpen our appreciation of the 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 narrative in the early chapters of Genesis, 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, who is the new creation *in nuce*.

The Synoptic Gospels reveal an astonishing tension on matters of sexual differentiation and family. On the one hand – for example, 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 the abiding functional goodness of creation. Antithetically, 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 on the radical newness of the new eschatological family defined around himself (Mk 3:33–35). Here tension exists between arguments offered on the basis of creation in itself and those made on the basis of the divine promise announced in the gospel. We see this tension in the Apostle Paul's writings too: so, for example, in Romans 1:18–32, Paul employs an argument explicitly based on, and draws certain conclusions from, "the things [God] has made" in "the creation of the cosmos" (Rom 1:20). In Galatians 3 and 6, however, he employs contrapositive logic when he argues that the church ought to take its theo-ethical cues 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 in-breaking 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" (Martyn 1997:381). Indubitably, in a different context, St 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 apostle 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). If the Apostle Paul is to serve as guide, the apocalyptic realism underscored so heavily in Galatians cannot 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 Scripture's address to different situations be made moot.

While 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 is principally concerned with social rather than ethnic realities, it is possible to observe here a general principle – "to remain as you are"³ – that is germane to both. J. Brian Tucker assesses ways in which St Paul negotiates and transforms existing social identities of the Christ-followers in Corinth in order to extend his Gentile mission, and to form a Christ-movement identity in the diaspora churches wherein previous ethno-social identities are not abrogated but are transformed "in Christ". Rejecting the view that in the church such identities are so radically relativized as to be

3 A text like this, so burdened and problematized as it is with the history of slavery, needs to be handled extremely carefully. For a fine example of such handling, see Brett (2008:153–77).

rendered meaningless, Tucker argues (on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7) that St 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 the Apostle Paul, the continuation of various social and ethnic identities remains an open question and is always situationally determined. So too Gordon Fee, who presses that such situational determination is established 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 God's call 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 a situation calls for ongoing discernment and judgment 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; cf. Esler 2003:48).

Undoubtedly, the construction of identity in Christ occurs within a complex of layers of significant sub-identities (so Rom 11:1; Phil 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:

[W]hilst Paul shares [with Gentiles] the primary identification of being in Christ, this is accompanied by a differentiation in terms of ethnic and cultural affiliation . . .

To be in Christ is not universal and the same for all peoples . . . 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 [sic], not into some third entity.

CAMPBELL 2008:157-58

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 missionary praxis. This is made plain in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 where, in declaring that he can be a Jew with Jews and a Gentile with Gentiles,

we take the apostle to mean that because his prime identity is given in Christ (cf. Gal 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 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, desacralized world, but rather that those baptized into Christ are called to live in the reality of Christ’s body extended to include all humanity in its cultural, ethnic, gendered, social, and historical particularities. “Christ”, as Andrew Walls has argued, “takes flesh as he is received by faith in various segments of social reality at different periods, as well as in different places. And these different manifestations belong together; they are part of the same story” (Walls 2002:74). Christ’s kenotic community therefore must not violate the divine-human solidarity announced and secured in the hypostatic union – a union always open to what Ward calls “transposed and deferred identities” (Ward 2000:113) – by placing boundaries between itself and the world. Moreover, as we shall see, the solidarity created in the incarnation also creates a dissonance between that which depends upon arrangements that are passing away and those that depend upon and point to the coming reign of God. Put otherwise, the incarnation and Pentecost announce that historical antecedence capitulates to eschatological predilection.

The Nation of Aliens and Exiles (1 Peter 2:9–11)

1 Peter 2:9–10 is the only Second Testament text where three central words for ethnic identity – γένος (non-immediate descendent), ἔθνος (race, nation), and λαός (people) – 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 the Apostle 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” (Horrell 2011:123–43), in which old ethnic markers are discarded? This is to claim too much. What such a claim does press, however, is that there is something radically out of step, unexpected, about this new community the apostle is concerned with; so his description of παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους – “aliens and exiles” (NRSV) or “strangers and nomads” (NJB). Certainly, as Reinhard Feldmeier has argued, the affirmation and positive interpretation and self-designation of the stranger-hood 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” (Feldmeier 1996:242). Being a stranger is a principal characteristic of life according to God’s promise.

Doubtlessly, apart from in 1 Peter, “strangeness” plays a fairly subordinate role in the Second Testament; an oddity, perhaps, given the Lord’s own self-designation as a “stranger” among us (Matt 25). But therein, “foreignness” is one main metaphor employed to describe God’s people. In Christ, foreignness and membership are indivisible; a fact with consequences, as Feldmeier avers, not only for the community’s “inner composition” but also for its ethics, and especially “for the way it deals with the social boundaries of the society and its evaluation of the ‘underdogs’” (Feldmeier 1996:252, 262). Feldmeier’s point is that it is precisely as strangers that God’s people are 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 also taken up by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Stringfellow, and Jürgen Moltmann, among others, each 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, *and* indispensably connected to the strangeness and suffering of those who saw in Christ one “so alien to the world that it crucified him” (Bonhoeffer 2000:104–05; cf. Moltmann 1974:3). This is part of what it means for the church to not abandon the world – to live in the world while discerning the presence of the Word in common life; the 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 the Christian as a stranger amidst the world’s common life. One principal way that such holy strangeness is made concrete and public is in the church’s taking seriously the promise that its cultural diversity bears witness to the transposable and extendable nature of its catholic Lord who counts the exiles of the dispersion and those “who once were not a people” (1 Pet 2:10) to be among God’s people. To do so is to be a sign of love’s gracious achievement.

Liturgics: Partakers of the One Bread (1 Corinthians 10:17)

Writing in the second century of the Common Era, Justin Martyr confessed:

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 endeavor 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.

JUSTIN MARTYR 1993:167

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 inter-ethnic identity and by whose power they discover themselves oriented toward the still threatening “other”. Certainly, baptism calls people into a new community in which ethnic and cultural identities are no longer primary markers. So, too, with the Supper, the “sacrament of unity” (Benoît 1958:16), through which the Messiah by “open invitation . . . fundamentally overcomes all tendencies toward alienation, separation and segregation” and pronounces that “churches which permit these deadly divisions in themselves are making the cross of Christ a mockery” (Moltmann 1977:257–58). The Supper gifts to the church a common drama which at once recalls and draws forth the evangelical center of all that God is making new in Christ. By bearing witness to and attending 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 the Christian community’s (ethical, liturgical, missiological, etc.) compass to the divine *telos* towards which all creation is moving. It serves, in other words, to “purify the dialect of the tribe” (Eliot 1991:204).

One act in its common liturgy is the passing of peace – that moment of reconciliation wherein the community is restored to charity *before* Holy Communion is received. Indeed, during the Great Devotion of 1233, “the climax of the preaching was the ritual exchange of the kiss of peace between enemies” (Radcliffe 2008:162). As Timothy Radcliffe writes, at the table was enacted the reconciliation made real in Christ, and it included confession that Christians have often been “unimpressive witnesses to Christ’s peace”. The church’s history is “marked by aggression, intolerance, rivalry, and persecution”. Today, Christians usually avoid the excesses of some of their earlier forebears, “rarely

poisoning each other's chalices or arranging ambushes" of various opponents. But Christians "still tend to succumb to the dominant ethos" of the competitive and aggressive societies in which they live (Radcliffe 2008:163).

When the baptized 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 they offer each other Christ's peace they do no less than accept the basis upon which they are gathered together at all, recognizing that they are gathered not because they are friends, or because they share the same ethno-cultural narrative, or because they have the same theological convictions, but because *and only because* they are one in Christ's indestructible peace. The kiss of peace is the exchange of the sign of the Lord's victory in the face of all that assaults human communities. It is the sign and testimony that nothing in this world – neither doctrine, ecclesial polity, liturgical habits, nor anything else – is substantial enough to hold the church together as one reconciled and reconciling community, and that all attempts to define the church's life and boundary upon such can only sponsor idolatry and its narratives of death.

"The Glory and the Honor of the Nations" (Revelation 21:24–26)

Any consideration about the status of τὰ ἔθνη (the nations) in the new eschatological reality must take into account the Book of the Revelation and the great hope that is promised therein 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, as the enemies of the holy city and of God, as the subject of violent rule, as those seduced and deceived by sin, and as the object of God's (subdominant) judgment (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" (Rev 10:11; 11:2, 9, 18; 12:5; 14:8; 16:19; 17:15; 18:3, 23; 19:1; 20:3, 8; 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 the hope that "the nations will come and worship" before the Lamb (Rev 15:4). And by chapters 21 and 22, and 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", we are graced with a promise that "the nations" (τὰ ἔθνη) – and presumably these are the same nations who had previously been the object both of Babylon's deception and 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 honor of the nations” (Rev 21:1–2, 24, 26). Here, finally, the longings expressed in Isaiah 60 and in Romans 8 are realized. Here, any national superiority that Israel may have harbored is overturned within the universal blessing of God as it is not only Israel but now saints from every tribe and language and people and nation who are engaged in the priestly activity of worship, the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, 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 in the tree of life. Moreover, “the glory and the honor of the nations” (Rev 21:26) – the gifts of all human cultures with all their distinguishing color, song, flavor, and traditions which have so richly inspired and ennobled human flourishing – shall be brought into the City in a vision not too unlike the opening ceremony of a modern Olympic Games, a movement which recalls that the church’s witness is intended to bring about the conversion and transformation, rather than the end, of the nations.

The Divine Crisis and the End of Idolatrous Association

In God the faithful Creator, “all things hold together” (Col 1:17). And because creation was not only made by God but also “for” God (Col 1:16), there are no autonomous areas of activity not subject to divine appraisal – and, by extension, to theological appraisal, as the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934) 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.

While 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 Acts 2) finds its counterpart in a theology that takes diversity and catholicity as seriously as it does unity and apostolicity. Such theology will celebrate real difference while 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 witnessing 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 that is the objective end of the *missio Dei*. The church is simply that part of the world that confesses Christ as Lord. It has no independent culture,⁴ nothing but its election to be the continual identity-transposing and displacing body given fully to the world, apart from whom it is not saved and for whom it exists to serve (see Barth 1961:750; Hoekendijk 1966:43; 1950:163).

The implications here are profoundly important: the “ethnoreligiosity” of which Paul Mojzes (2011:146–47) speaks to describe phenomena associated with the symbiosis between ethnicity and religion in the Balkans during the 1980s for example, or the “ethnoclericism” coined by Vjekoslav Perica to describe the same, both birth situations deplorable to the gospel. Perica describes 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... 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.

PERICA 2002:215

Rather than understanding its vocation as the extension or propagation of its own modes of being, the church’s vocation in and relation to the world is to be determined by its relation to the transposing and boundary-crossing Christ, the Word of its being with whom it ventures “the risk of obedience” and before whom it stands exposed (Myers 2010:41). To be the body of Christ – that is, a body that is both catholic and missionary – is to be, as Rowan Williams has reminded us, a body that “strives to show, to embody, the way in which the incalculable variety of human concerns can be ‘at home’ in and with the confession of faith in Jesus. It does not seek to impose a uniform Christian culture

4 This claim is vulnerable to misunderstanding. Certainly, Scripture, the sacraments, and the rule of faith, etc. are cultural forms that distinguish the church, in some sense, from the world. But each of these forms shares a provisionality that 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)?

or a preconceived Christian solution; it aims only to keep open and expanding the frontiers of the community as gift" (Williams 1982:64). And because "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" (Flett 2010:294).

The Gift of First Fruit

Those undertaking their vocation in the service of the Christian community and its witness will avoid church-centric thinking because such can only encourage the aforementioned communities to revolve around "an illegitimate centre" (Hoekendijk 1967:38). They will, instead, champion the claims that the church is a function (rather than a bearer) of the Apostolate, an earthbound instrument and sign of God's reconciling and boundary-crossing movement, and never an end in itself. One implication of such claims is that there is no church in the fullness of the new creation. The church is those who are becoming "a kind of first fruits of God's creatures" (Jam 1:18) and a sign of the kingdom of God. This is to confess that the church is most undisguised and spirited when it has its own end in view, when its loudest "Amen" is reserved for God's promise to bring all creation to share in the fullness of Christ's eschatological achievement. Until such time, its life is properly characterized by being a body in flux – a body that with joy receives and celebrates its creaturely character, and with steadfast courage and sober judgement interrupts those boundary markers which are themselves fading away, joys and interruptions that in turn open up new spaces and modes of life that are themselves characterized by a certain unfinished-ness but which nevertheless point, in their own fitting ways, to the coming of God.

Germane to this situation is a series of "creative tensions" that, as Moltmann observes, "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). Among these tensions, Moltmann names those that exist between prayer and faithfulness to the earth, between contemplation and political struggle, and between transcendental religion and the religion of solidarity. To these, we might add the concern that has given rise to this reflection – the space that marks the flourishing of ethnic diversity in the "extendible" and "transposable" character of the one body of Christ, and of community life made unstable by God's radical interruption of all creaturely boundary markers and actualized 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” and that “we must therefore seek pointers for a way of life which springs from the endurance of these tensions” (Moltmann 1977:282). I agree, and I have suggested here that the “way of life” is itself God’s gracious, spacious, and *sui generis* interruption in the extendible, transposable, and boundary-crossing body of One in whom and for whom all things are being made new.

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摘要

本文关注的是种族、社会及文化身份与具体化的基督教新群体身份的创造之间的关系。从新约里的六段经文里 – 弗2:11–22; 加3:27–28; 林前7:17–24; 10:17; 彼前2:9–11; 启21:24–26 – 本文辩称在基督里新造的身份, 即使会抹去其存在的边界线, 但并不废除其被造身份的特殊性。换句话说, 大公会本质上与最根本的个体性有关, 需要透过福音本身作出持续不断的辨明与判断。那些在基督里受洗了的, 现在活在他们存在的边界和中心, 这边界包括了所有带着文化、种族、性别、社会及历史个体性的人类。

Resumen

Este ensayo se ocupa de la relación entre nuestras identidades étnicas, sociales y culturales y la creación de una nueva identidad comunal encarnada en la comunidad cristiana. Basado en seis pasajes del Nuevo Testamento: Efesios 2: 11–22; Gálatas 3: 27–28; 1 Corintios 7: 17–24 y 10:17; 1 Pedro 2: 9–11 y Apocalipsis 21: 24–26 se argumenta que la creación de una identidad nueva y principal en Cristo no anula otras identidades del ser humano, aún cuando pide que se eliminen tales barreras. La catolicidad, en otras palabras, está intrínsecamente relacionada con la particularidad más radical, y exige un trabajo continuo de discernimiento y de juicio frente al evangelio mismo. Los bautizados en Cristo ahora deben vivir en la realidad de Cristo quien es a la vez el límite y el centro de sus existencias, un límite que incluye a toda la humanidad en sus particularidades culturales, étnicas, de género, sociales e históricas.