



Ethnic Diversity & Gospel Unity

A Position Paper Written by the Elders at Crawford Avenue Baptist Church

INTRODUCTION

The gospel is for all people (Galatians 3:28). Therefore, Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples of all nations (*ethne*)” (Matthew 28:19). Furthermore, the gospel has the power to unite diverse peoples into one people who by their love for one another bear witness to the reconciling grace of Jesus (Ephesians 2:11-22).

This diverse unity is our charge as Christians. Many Christians genuinely desire to experience it. However, achieving it as a reality in our lives and in our church can prove to be much more difficult. For example, in the New Testament, the gospel did spread to more and more peoples. But, as these diverse peoples were called to live in community with one another, the prejudices and divisions between them began to emerge. Whether it was the disciples balking at Jesus conversing with a Samaritan woman (John 4:9, 27), or the Hebrews neglecting the concerns of the Hellenistic Jews in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1), or Peter subtly withdrawing from the Gentiles at the church in Galatia in favor of fellowshiping with his Jewish kinsmen (Galatians 2:11-14), living in loving community with people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds proved to be difficult. Therefore, much of the New Testament is concerned with teaching and discipling the people of God to embrace their unity in Christ and to live in love with one another.

An honest assessment of history reveals that ethnic divisions have plagued the church in America. Gratefully, progress has been made, but there is still work to do. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously observed that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. Still today, congregations in the United States remain largely segregated. For example, a 1998 National Congregations Study, revealed that 90% of American congregations are made up of at least 90% of people of the same race.¹

¹ A LifeWay study conducted in 2013 found that 85% of senior pastors in Protestant churches say every church should strive for racial diversity, but only 13% of those pastors said they had more than one predominant racial or ethnic group in their congregation. Research: Racial Diversity at Church More Dream Than Reality.

Crawford Avenue Baptist Church is located in a diverse community. This is true of the larger CSRA² as well as our more immediate neighborhood, Harrisburg. For example, according to one study, the residents of Harrisburg are 51% Black, 42% White, 2% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian, and 3% Other. The diversity of our community and neighborhood presents certain challenges, but more importantly it affords a tremendous opportunity to bear witness to the power of the gospel to unite diverse peoples in love. As Jesus taught us, John 13:34-35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

RECONCILIATION AND MULTIETHNIC CHURCHES

God is a reconciling God. From beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of God reconciling sinners to Himself and to one another.

Reconciliation is “the restoration of fellowship between estranged parties.”³ One of the most devastating effects of sin is that sin severs our relationship with God and alienates us from one another.

But, even when we were enemies of God, alienated from God, and hostile in our minds towards God, God reconciled us to Himself. Paul declares in Romans 5:8, 10-11: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ...For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” The goal of Jesus’ death on the cross was relational. Jesus died for us so that He might restore our relationship with God. As Peter states in 1 Peter 3:18: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring (reconcile) us to God.” So, we are no longer enemies of God; we are friends. We are no longer alienated from God; we have been brought near. We are no longer hostile towards God; we love Him because He changed our hearts & called us into fellowship with Him.

As Christians, this is the good news that we have been called and sent to proclaim, the good news of God’s reconciling grace, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting

² “Located in the east-central Georgia, along the Savannah River, the CSRA includes 13 counties: Burke, Columbia, Glascock, Hancock, Jefferson, Jenkins, Lincoln, McDuffie, Richmond, Taliaferro, Warren, Washington, and Wilkes. The largest city in the CSRA is Augusta – the economic core of the region.” CSRA Regional Plan 2035 – Georgia Department of Community Affairs.

³ Dictionary of Biblical Theology, Accordance.

their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

In the work of reconciliation, not only does God restore our relationship with Him, God redeems our relationships with one another. Ephesians 2:14-16:

“For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.”

In pride, we naturally erect barriers between ourselves and others and view others who are different than us with suspicion or outright contempt. The gospel humbles and strips away these false identities. God does not favor one over another based on their ethnicity, skin color, culture, language, education, or economic status. Only the blood of Jesus makes us clean before God and only the righteousness of Jesus commends us to God. Therefore, Christians from every tribe, tongue, language, and nation are humbled by their common need and united by their common hope in Jesus (Revelation 5:9). As Paul celebrates in Colossians 3:11: “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

This unity that God has purchased for us in Christ is an objective and present reality. Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Despite the varied divisions we see and experience among Christians in the body of Jesus, we are one in Jesus. This oneness is an objective reality based on the atoning work of Jesus. At the same time, we have a responsibility to live out this unity... and to be eager to do so. Just one verse prior, Paul writes, “...(be) eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).⁴

What does it mean for our church and churches like ours, which are located in diverse communities, to live out this unity? Surely, it means that more and more of our churches would reflect the diversity of the communities in which we live and minister. This does not mean that every church should be multi-ethnic. Some churches are located in monoethnic communities or are called to particular ministries that would preclude a multiethnic congregation.⁵ Yet, we must acknowledge that the scarcity of multiethnic churches in our communities communicates a false narrative about the reconciling power of Jesus’ grace. We learn from the New Testament that pursuing multiethnic churches is not easy, but the apostles answer was never to suggest that diversity in a congregation should be abandoned in favor of, for example, two monoethnic

⁴ Also 1 Corinthians 1.10; Philippians 1.27; Philippians 2.2-4; Colossians 3.12-14.

⁵ For example, a congregation that is specifically designed to minister and reach out to people with whom Chinese is their first language will inevitably be monoethnic.

congregations, one Jewish and one Gentile. Rather, the apostles' solution was always to advocate for a deeper understanding and application of the reconciling grace of Jesus among God's diverse people.

A VISION FOR A MULTI-ETHNIC CHURCH

Our church's mission is to *glorify God by making disciples who enjoy, live, and proclaim the gospel*. Given our cultural context, if we are serious about fulfilling Jesus' command to proclaim the gospel to all peoples, then we must seek to become a multi-ethnic church. As we seek to build a church that reflects the ethnic diversity of our community, the following five principles will guide our efforts.

1. Theological Conviction

We love the Bible, and our desire is to be a biblically and theologically robust church. We have no interest in compromising theological integrity to achieve a multiethnic church. To the contrary, it is biblical fidelity and theological conviction that compels us to pursue a multiethnic church. We cannot guarantee that we will achieve our goal, but we are persuaded by Scripture that we must pursue it. Therefore, we will consistently return to the Scriptures to remind ourselves of why we are pursuing a diverse unity in the gospel and to learn how we can faithfully and effectively do so.

2. Missionary Mentality

To achieve a multi-ethnic church we must all have the mind and heart of a missionary. Missionaries intentionally move towards those who are different than them. They are eager to learn and adapt to other cultures and to create an atmosphere in which peoples from different backgrounds and experiences feel welcomed and are able to thrive. In short, they exhibit the missionary impulse of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”

Faithful missionaries will not compromise the truth but are willing to adapt and flex when it comes to cultural preferences. We will seek to cultivate these missionary instincts among us.

3. Inclusive Worship

God is glorified when the diverse peoples of the world worship Him consistent with His Word and consistent with their unique cultural background. God is also glorified when a diverse people gather in worship and take joy in setting aside their own cultural

preferences to join in the cultural preferences of others as they worship God together. Therefore, we intend to progressively include new and diverse cultural expressions of worship in our services. These new and diverse cultural expressions will correspond to the people that God is calling us to reach and the people that God is gathering into our church. As a result, over time, we expect to create a cultural expression of worship that is specific to Crawford Avenue Baptist Church, a cultural expression that reflects the makeup of our church and our community. In so doing, we hope to create an environment where people from different backgrounds feel welcomed and encouraged to worship God.

4. Diverse Leadership

A truly multiethnic church does not only welcome minorities to attend but gives minorities opportunities to serve and to lead. In Acts 6, the Jerusalem church was conflicted. The Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews felt that their widows were being neglected and that the widows of the Hebraic Jews were receiving preferential treatment. The apostles, along with the congregation, determined to appoint deacons to resolve the conflict. It is important to note that the leaders chosen were both qualified and diverse. Acts 6:3 states that the men were to be “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” They were qualified. We learn in Acts 6:5 that all seven of the men chosen possessed Greek names, which seems to indicate that all seven were from the minority of Hellenistic Jews. So, the leadership team in Jerusalem was immediately diversified. It was a group of qualified and diverse leaders that were then able to resolve the cultural tension in the church. As a result, we read in Acts 6:7: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” Our desire is to increase the diversity of our leadership teams by equipping and empowering biblically qualified minority leaders. Their presence on our leadership teams will add a unique perspective and will underline to others the sincerity of our commitment to be a multiethnic church.

5. Intentional & Patient

It will be a process to achieve our goal to more effectively reach our community by becoming a multiethnic church. We will approach this process with intentionality and with patience. We will be intentional to plan, and by faith, to take steps forward to increase the diversity of our congregation. We will also be patient with ourselves and with one another as we learn, grow, take risks, make mistakes, fail, and try again. We will also seek to be patient as we wait on God. We will wait for Him to move and to accomplish this great work for apart from Him we can do nothing. It has been said that most people overestimate what can be accomplished in a year and underestimate what can be accomplished in ten years. We are committed to this work of reaching our community, and so we pray and trust that by faithful persistence we will see God move and bless our efforts. We trust that in time the people of our church will be increasingly diverse and unified in the gospel until one day we all join the “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ...crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Revelation 7.9-10)!