

God's Trans-Racial Adoption

Why The Beauty of Diversity is Worth The Burden of Diversity

November 15, 2015 // Trevor Atwood // Scripture Acts 10 + 11:1-18//Church Go

Six of the most terrifying words my wife ever said to me were “I want to adopt from Africa.” I was afraid of that sentence for many reasons.

It was our second adoption, so I now I knew how much work and expense was involved in the process (that was totally worth it, might I add).

I knew from the tenacity of my wife in our first adoption, that once she said those words...it was inevitable. Now that she said it, we'd never have another good night's sleep until that kid was home from Africa.

Then, of course, was the unavoidable fact we were broke-as-a-joke seminary students in a very transitional time in our lives.

Nothing about adopting in the middle of seminary made any sense to me. We had no money and lived in about 800 square feet that was cramped for 3 people, much less a 4th.

But the scariest thing for me was not the cost. It wasn't our life stage. It wasn't the work or waiting involved.

The scariest part of the sentence “I want to adopt from Africa” was, well, the word Africa. The scariest thing for me was knowing that if we moved forward in this adoption, that our child would be black.

Now, I wasn't a card-member of any sort of white supremacy group. I would have never even remotely considered myself racist. It wasn't like I thought, “I don't like black people”. I didn't think my race was superior in any sort of way.

I was simply afraid.

I remember telling my wife, “I've never been a black boy before. Will we be able to relate to each other? Will I be able to lead him?” In fact, as silly as it sounds, one of the scariest things to me was figuring out the hair. I had no clue how to take care of African hair. I had seen some kids at school carry around picks. I had heard something about needing to put oil in hair, which I thought was crazy because white people are always trying to get oil out of hair. But I was scared because I had so many unanswered questions about the future of a trans-racial family.

Wouldn't it be easier to adopt another white kid? Aren't we inviting difficult questions in our life? Aren't we setting ourselves up for future trials and heartaches that naturally come from a black kid having white parents?

I knew the answer to all those questions was probably yes. Yes it would be harder. Yes it would invite criticism, or at best, ignorant questions.

There were two things God used to help me overcome my fears...

The first was a telephone call to my parents. Growing up I had heard some of the offensive and ignorant things that people say when they don't intend to be a racist, but actually are. And I heard them from my Dad.

But the Lord had grown and changed my Dad a lot, honestly through the adoption of my oldest son from Russia. When I made the call and waited for the voice on the other end...I braced myself to hear some of those words I had heard as a kid... Instead, I heard my Dad say, "Son, that little boy will be my grandson. And that means your mother and I will love him."

I expected rejection...then I heard the voice of love....

The second thing that helped me overcome my fear was a sermon I read from John Piper on "Racial Harmony and Interracial Marriage":

I want to share the end of that sermon with you so you can see what impacted me so deeply:

"Here is where Christ makes the difference. Christ does not call us to a prudent life, but to a God-centered, Christ-exalting, justice-advancing, counter-cultural, risk-taking life of love and courage. Will it be harder to be married to another race [or to adopt a child of a different race], and will it be harder for the kids? Maybe. Maybe not. But since when is that the way a Christian thinks? Life is hard. And the more you love the harder it gets.

It's hard to take a child to the mission field. The risks are huge. It's hard to take a child and move into a mixed neighborhood where he may be teased or ridiculed. It's hard to raise children when dad or mom dies or divorces. And that's a real risk in any marriage. Whoever said that marrying and having children was to be trouble free? It's one of the hardest things in the world. It just happens to be right and rewarding.

Christians are people who move toward need and truth and justice, not word comfort and security. Life is hard. But God is good. And Christ is strong to help."

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Here were two things that drove out my fear of trans-racial adoption. First, when I expected rejection in my family, instead I found unconditional love. Second, that sermon moved my mind off of how hard trans-racial adoption was going to be for me, to how glorifying it was going to be for God. I was given a vision that this adoption was not my story. It was God's.

See, there is certainly beauty in diversity but there is also a burden in it. It's not easy. The beauty has to outweigh the burden or else you'll always move toward what's comfortable.

Today, I want to show you God's trans-racial adoption. I want you to see why God is **FOR** a diversity of cultures and races in the church. It doesn't mean that diversity in the church is easy to get or to maintain. But it does mean that its worth it.

See, Life is hard. But God is good. And Christ is strong to help.

Here we go. Lots to cover today so I'll be skipping a few verses here and there, most of which are the recounting of events we already read once.

Acts 10:1-6

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea."

Every single time I read about "Simon a tanner who lived by the sea" I picture this leathery old guy in a speedo who spent way too much time in the sun. You're welcome for that image.

Anyway, Cornelius sends a squad to go pick up Peter. Meanwhile, God's got a message for Simon Peter, too.

Acts 10:9-16

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

While Peter is trying to figure out what in the world this vision is supposed to mean, the Italian Cohort (which sounds either like a mob squad or a fantasy football team) shows up and tells Peter about Cornelius' visit from the angel and invites him to come to Caesara to his house. So he goes, and when Peter shows up, Cornelius had invited all his friends and family to listen to Peter.

Acts 10:25-29

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

Cornelius tells him about the angel visit and then says, "So, what do you have to say to us?"

Acts 10:34-11:4

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” But Peter began and explained it to them in order:

At this point, Peter explains his dream and everything that happened in Cornelius' house. Here's the end of Peter's explanation of why he was fraternizing with Non-Jews:

Acts 11:15-18

As I began to speak [to Cornelius & his household], the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?” When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

Today, I want to show you why cultural & racial diversity is beautiful, and I want you to see why its hard, too. Then, I want you to see how Christ is a strong help, who not only overcomes the sin of racism but overcomes every that keeps you from seeing the beauty of God.

1) God doesn't celebrate diversity, diversity celebrates God.

So you might be thinking right now, "It's cool that God is for diversity, about time he caught up with the rest of our progressive evolving culture."

"After all, cultural diversity isn't just a Christian value, at my school or at my job, we have written into our mission statements. It's cool to be diverse."

But the diversity that's promoted in most of our schools and workplaces is valued for a different reason. See, our cultures view of diversity is that it's good to celebrate different cultures because that will keep anyone from telling one particular story that explains the world, which only leads to one group getting power and exploiting all the other groups.

In other words, if we don't celebrate diverse opinions on what the truth is about God, life, and the world, about who we are and why we're here, then we can keep people from claiming they know the truth and keep them from oppressing everyone who doesn't agree with them."

The diversity that our culture typically celebrates is one that says, "There is no one truth. There is no big story about God that explains everything. See, look at all these different equally legitimate opinions. Lets celebrate diversity so we can deny any transcendent universal truth."

See, that celebrates diversity for diversity's sake. But what you find in the Bible is not that God celebrates diversity but that diversity celebrates God. What you find in Scripture is that God is telling one true big story about himself through different cultures. In fact, whatever culture you go into, you'll be able to find a longing for God. And wherever you find people longing for God, you'll find God adopting those people.

When Peter is hungry and has this dream of the animals coming down in a sheet then here's the voice telling him to eat he's very confused. See, for 1400 years, the Jews have avoided eating these animals, because they were obeying God's law. God told them they were unclean. Now, God is saying to Peter have some bacon. Eat some alligator tail. Of course, Peter protests and he hears Jesus say "What God has made clean, don't call common"

Here's the cliff notes of what's happening here

The prohibition on eating these animals for the Jews was a reminder of sin. It was a reminder that God had made a promise to somehow cleanse them of sin, to forgive them, and those laws and promises were unique to Israel.

Now, through this dream and through Cornelius (who is a Gentile) God is making an announcement through Peter that Jesus Christ is the way he's forgiven sin and not only that that forgiveness is available to everyone. In other words, this dream indicating to Peter that its not only the Jews and can have sins forgiven and know and worship God, but it's every person in every culture of the world.

This is further driven home in 10:45-45a and 11:15. After these non-Jews hear the gospel of Jesus, they believe it and the Spirit of God comes into them. Then, they start to speak in tongues praising God. Note what Peter says when he answers the Jewish religious leaders in chapter 11, he says **"The Holy Spirit fell on them...just as at it did on us at the beginning"**

You know what he's talking about? He's talking about Pentecost. What's happening here is reverse Pentecost. In Acts 2, tongues were given to Jewish Christians who preached the gospel in actual human languages that they didn't already know, as a sign that the gospel wasn't just for them, but was for people in any culture.

Now, God is giving these Gentiles tongues that the Jewish believers hear and understand in their own language as a sign to the Jews that the Gentiles are now included in his salvation. This is not an unintelligible utterance. This is an actual language that the Jews understand. We know that because when they hear it they know that they are praising God.

I realize that's a lot of theology and philosophy. Let's take a quick breath and let me show you just a little bit of the beauty of this in the church.

By the time you get to Acts 13, Antioch was the capital of the Christian world, and take a look at the leadership there. First, there's Barnabas, a Hellenistic Jew. That just means ethnic Jews who have embraced Greek culture. Then, there's Simeon, who is called "Niger" that literally means "black" and attributes him to Sub-Saharan Africa. Then you have Lucius from Cyrene, which would be North Africa, and there is Manaen, who is a part of Jewish aristocracy...and of course, Saul, who represents the guy from the strict Jewish religious hierarchy.

That means that **of the five leaders** mentioned, one is from the Middle East, one from Asia, one from the Mediterranean, and two are from Africa. I think Luke included this detail to show us that very early in the history of Christianity, the church's leadership was diverse.

Christianity is not a white thing. It's not a western thing. That's why the call to the church is not to go into different cultures and change those cultures, rather, its to go to all cultures preach the gospel, showing them what parts of their cultures are celebrating the God who made them.

God is more beautifully glorified when he isn't **only** worshipped by one particular culture, but when he is worshipped by every race, every language, every culture.

A huge part of that is the way we show our unity in Christ that overcomes prejudices and barriers we have based on stereotypes or sometimes based on preferences.

Here's a couple of things that means for our church. First, it means we should strive toward multi-cultural leadership at City Church. Now, we don't have total control over that or over the timeline of when that happens. But we have to have to make it a serious goal, and we have to keep asking God for it. It's difficult for the church body to be more diverse than it's leadership.

Now, If your first thought is "Hang on, isn't that tokenism?" I would tell you no. Tokenism is when you put someone in a position of a different race or culture and have no intention of actually giving away authority but simply want a different color face on your staff to appear that you're doing that or it's when you **put** an unqualified person in a position of leadership simply because of their skin color.

That is entirely different than intentionally pursuing racial and cultural diversity for the glory of God. We are looking for qualified people of every race to lead at our church. I've been praying for this for the last couple of years. If you are a part of our church, I'd ask you to pray this direction too.

Here's the second thing this truth means for our church. We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Every culture has their preferences of expression in worship. Some shout, some stand still. Some have more rhythmic music. Some shout back at the preacher. I want City Church to be a people that doesn't look at those different expressions of worship and say "I need to be in a place where everyone worships like me," but instead that we would see the glory of God in those expressions of worship and even when they make us uncomfortable, that we embrace them because we know that is diversity celebrating our God.

You know what else. It means we need some people to make us uncomfortable. So here's what I tell you if you grew up in a more expressive tradition. Put us to the test. Lead us in worship from right where you sit. I guarantee you say "Amen" or "That's right" or "Praise Jesus" from out there, people will begin to look at you as a worship leader. I know I will.

And see, that's the thing about diversity. It doesn't come easy. It doesn't stay easy. There will always be a difficulty in killing our preferences for the sake of someone else. There will always be a burden in welcoming others into fellowship and that's just another place where Jesus can do what he does so well. See,

2) The Holy Spirit is a social worker getting orphans ready to come home.

When we adopted each of our two older sons, Micah from Russia and Isaac from Ethiopia, we had an adoption agency that was actively helping us to get our sons home. At the same time they were helping our sons prepare to come home.

On our end, we had a social worker talking to us about what to expect and prepare for. She also conducted home studies to be sure that our boys were coming into a safe a loving home. When information became available about who our boys were, we got pictures and a write up about them.

I still remember both days like yesterday. With Micah, our oldest, the envelope came while I was out on a run. I rounded the corner to our house and Keva was sitting on the porch with the envelope in her hand waving me in to run faster with a look on her face like "Seriously, you had to go for a run." I still think back now about how hard it had to be for her to wait for me.

I remember her slowly pulling out Micah's picture as I prayed, "Lord, if he's ugly, I'm still gonna love him." We both breathed a sigh a relief when we saw the picture.

With Isaac, we got a picture emailed to us. Also, that day, I happened to be in another town about 30 minutes away. I rushed home and Keva and Micah and I all sat in front of the computer as our slow internet access slowly began to reveal the picture of this little Ethiopian stud. I remember exactly what he looked like. He was sitting in a car seat holding a pen and paper. They told us he loved to draw.

We printed the picture out and let Micah tape it up in his room. Then for the next 6 months, Micah would talk to Isaac's picture like he was actually in the room with him.

But things were happening on the other side of the ocean, too. There were people working for our agency in Russia and Ethiopia. They were showing Micah and Isaac pictures of us. They were completing paperwork on the boys' behalf to ensure they could come home.

See, in order for an adoption to go through, there is someone at work on behalf of the parents and the child. Did you know that adoption is the language that the Apostle Paul uses to describe God's relationship with his children?

Take a look at Romans 8:15-16. Paul speaking to Christians in Rome says:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God

Galatians 4:4-6

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, ... to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

Did you notice something in both of those passages? The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God's Son, Jesus Christ, is acting like an adoption agency. God is adopting sons and daughters of every race and culture, and the Spirit of God is doing the work to be sure that all God's children know they now have every right to call him “Daddy”.

Of course, there is another way the Spirit of God is at work. He's also at work preparing people to take the good news about adoption. Over and over in the book of Acts, God keeps adopting his kids and over and over in the book of Acts, he's got the kids he already has ready to receive them.

Think back a minute with me. 2 weeks ago we talked about an Ethiopian Eunuch coming to trust Jesus. An Ethiopian being adopted into God's family. In that story, through the word of God, the Spirit of God was showing the Ethiopian about his adoption as a son, at the same time, the Spirit of God was working in Philip to go to him and explain the gospel.

Then, last week, we talked about Saul. Saul was an enemy to the family of God, but Jesus shows up and tells Saul he's going to be a part of God's family and then the Spirit shows up to Ananias and says “Hey, Ananias, get ready, you're gonna have a little brother. Put his picture up in your room and when he gets here you need to let him know he's a part of the family”

Did you happen to notice...it happened again in this story? First, an angel showed up to tell Cornelius, “Get ready, God is coming with some good news” Then, God speaks to Peter and says, “Get ready, I'm about to do something that's going to interrupt your life, shake down your paradigms, I'm going to take someone you think has to be separated from you. I'm going to move him into your house.” “What I have made clean, do not call common.” “The son I am adopting, well, you better call him your brother.”

The Spirit of God is like the Father's social worker. He's preparing both the sons and daughters of every race and culture to be adopted and he's giving those who are already in the family the message to welcome them in.

One more thing. Look at how he does it. Did you notice that when God speaks to Cornelius and when God speaks to Peter, that both of them are already praying? The scripture makes it very clear that Cornelius was following every glimmer of light that God had given him to know him. Cornelius is not a Jew. He is a Roman soldier. But there is something Cornelius saw in this God of the Jews that he longed for. Something beautiful that he could not deny. Something that explained the meaning of life to him. So, he did all a non-Jew could do. He gave alms and prayed. See, there were 3 things that a good Jew would do regularly. Give to the poor, Pray, and Fast. It's interesting hear that fasting is not mentioned. I have a theory, hang on.

Here's the point. Cornelius was being drawn to God. And even though he didn't yet fully know God, he wanted to. We don't know what he was saying in his prayers but maybe he was praying like an orphan. Maybe he was praying that he could come into this family of God. And then there was Peter.

Peter knew Jesus. He had been adopted by God, so he was praying too. But he wasn't praying "God adopt me. He was praying what a Christian always prays. Thank you Father. Thank you for adopting me." And I love that we are told Peter is hungry while he's praying. You ever been praying and your stomach growls?

That's what's happening with Peter. But then, God puts in front of Peter this buffet. A buffet that he should be fasting from, permanently. If he's going to obey the law, if he's going to be a good Jew. But God says eat. See, Cornelius was hungry for God, but he wasn't fasting. Peter had God, but he was fasting.

And now, God is going to bring himself to Cornelius, by showing Peter that the time to be hungry is over. That God is now going to allow even the Gentiles to feast on his goodness. See, Cornelius feared the Lord. He was hungry for God, so he prayed, and angel showed up. Peter had tasted the goodness of God, and he wanted more, so he prayed and God said, "I've got an orphan for you to feed."

In many ways, it was a fulfillment of Psalm 34. Take a look. First, tell me if this doesn't sound like Cornelius, the orphan?

Psalm 34:4 & 6-7

**I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.**

**This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him
and saved him out of all his troubles.**

**The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.**

And then in the very next verse in Psalm 34:8-10, is Peter, through the Social Worker of the Holy Spirit saying back,

**Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear him have no lack!
The young lions suffer want and hunger;
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.**

The orphan says, "I want parents," and the church, all the adopted children of God, by the Spirit of his Son, who testifies to us that we are indeed his kids, we say back, "Come on home. Your days of being hungry for a Good Father are over. He's come to you. He will not leave you as orphans."

Church, can I ask you something? When the Spirit of God leads you to share the gospel with a friend, a relative, a classmate, a stranger on a airplane, a person sitting by themselves at a coffee shop, why is it that you think he's only speaking to you?

Don't you know the Holy Spirit is a social worker. While he's getting you ready to welcome an orphan home, he's also getting that orphan ready to hear the good news of his adoption. So open up your mouth, you have good news to share.

After all, like Peter said, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who am I that I could stand in God's way?"

But I need to warn you,

3) The gospel is only good news to those who know they are orphans.

I'll never forget the first time I saw Isaac Sentayehu Atwood in the flesh. Keva and I rolled up in a van to his group home in Ethiopia. They opened the gate and there he was. He was sitting in the lap of one of the home's caretakers doing his favorite activity, eating.

When you adopt kids and you meet your child for the first time, it's always a little awkward. They aren't real sure whats going on, you aren't real sure whats going on, so you want to grab and squeeze the kid at the same time you're trying to be sensitive to how weird it is for them.

But a Momma's love is hard to contain. I remember Keva reaching out to pick Isaac up, but he didn't like it. He screamed really really loudly. Even though we knew Isaac was going to come home with us, it still broke our hearts. It hurts to be rejected by someone you love so much. Someone you've come to bring into your family. But in Isaac's mind, he had what he needed. A bed. Food. Someone to care for him. But what he didn't understand was we had something better. We had traveled this distance, we had been through financial expense, through emotional trauma, we had met legal demands, all so we could unconditionally love Isaac forever. So we could adopt him.

But Isaac didn't know any of that. He thought the best thing for him was to sit in that caretakers lap and eat his lunch. How could getting in a van with these strange people be better? Can you imagine if Isaac would have chosen the orphanage over his parents? Can you imagine if we gave him what he wanted in that moment? See, Isaac didn't know he was an orphan, so when we showed up, it wasn't good news.

Can I show you something about Cornelius? Cornelius was pretty moral guy, right? He was religiously devout, he was generous with his money, and he prayed a lot. So what did God do? God sends Peter to tell him to repent of his sin and believe the gospel that leads to life. Is that strange to you? See, God didn't adopt Cornelius because he was religiously upright and moral, he saved him from that.

He sent Peter to tell him that the only way he can finally know God, is to admit that his good works cannot add up to salvation. That he has to repent.

He has to say, "My good deeds are just an orphanage. They make my fatherless life a little more bearable, but I still don't have the father I'm hungry for."

We became orphans when we decided that instead of living with God the Father, we would, like the prodigal son, go to a far country to make our own way. We feast on things that promise us a full stomach, but always leave us hungry. Sex, pornography, a great job, a steady relationship, being a nice person, a good athlete, all of these things are just bowls of porridge in the orphanage.

But on the cross, Jesus went the distance that we had traveled away from God, in our adoption he worked to bring us home with his perfect life, the one we were supposed to live, he met the legal demands of God's law by dying the death we were supposed to die and then he raised to life to bring us the good news.

So he could say like a Daddy standing in the driveway of an orphanage.

John 14:18

"I will not leave you as orphans...I will come to you"

Are you resisting your Good Father who has done everything to adopt you? Are you ready to take that message to every tribe and tongue and nation to have the diversity that celebrates God?

It's not easy.

Life is hard. But God is good. And Christ is strong to help.