

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND GOD'S MISSION



Isaias D'Oleo-Ochoa



In Late Summer of 2013, I decided to purchase cycling sunglasses. Because it was an attractive price deal, I bought a box of five instead of the single item I originally saw online. As soon as I received and opened the box, I breathlessly chose the black polarized sunglasses and left the rest of the colored sunglasses in the box without paying attention to them. Regardless of whether or not it was morning or afternoon, I wore the polarized sunglasses most of the time. When the sun was out, they significantly reduced sun glare and overexposure; however, I soon learned that when the night came out, it was better not to wear them at all. Instead of using the non-polarized colored sunglasses, I wistfully stopped riding my bike after 8:00 pm or when it was too cloudy. One day while I was checking the sunglasses box during that Fall, I found the prolix instructions that said that the box included five sunglasses for both day and night, even for cloudy and snowy days. In the end, I found out that the non-polarized sunglasses—especially the white and yellow ones—would indeed work great during nighttime! I must admit that I honestly thought that the color of sunglasses was simply a matter of preference: some people like the yellow one, others—like me—the black one. I couldn't believe how silly I was. By the time I had learned about the usefulness of all colored sunglasses, the warm and sunny days were gone. Besides, as a Costa Rican, a temperature between 50-55°F was more than enough reason to stay at home during the Fall. As you can see, it is not difficult to figure out

that my own biased ideas towards the colored sunglasses prevented me from riding my bike even more during the rest of the summer. In fact, my experience has left me with bittersweet feelings about sunglasses. Nonetheless, this same bittersweet experience has allowed me to reflect on the topic of cultural diversity in the church in relation to God's mission. It is no secret that the visible church is far from being perfect. But, if it were, I firmly believe the visible church would be beautifully diverse where men and women, black and white (and all the colors in between), and young and old could live out their faith, enjoying the blessings of the Gospel and being united in diversity while being transformed by the Holy Spirit. In that regard, I consider that the modern church should pay much closer heed to the following three aspects.

We All Have Cultural Lenses

Diversity is a means by which all the people of God and church leadership may identify significant points of encounter. To do this, one needs to pay attention to the socio-cultural dynamics in our communities of faith. When many people in the North American Church, for example, hear the word "Latino(a)," there is a high percentage of probability that they are making some reference to people from Mexico—or Mexicans. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, Mexicans represent 65% of the total population of Latinos living in the United States. The remaining 35% represents people from other countries in Latin America, such as

Colombia, Cuba, Argentina, and Puerto Rico. Besides this issue of social misidentification, the Hispanic population is also perceived by the mainstream society as having reduced salaries, low-education rates, and lacking cultural assimilation, among other aspects. It grabs my attention, however, that in the North American Church these generalizations still exist. There are people who usually link being a Latino(a) with being prone to criminality, or they link poverty and financial problems with particular ethnic groups, specifically Latinos and African-Americans. It does not take much to be aware of the truth that financial problems are not issues that concern only Latinos or African-Americans; it is something that concerns everyone regardless of color, gender, age, and even religious affiliation. Situations like these show us how mainstream society not only affects Christians by shaping their worldviews, but also their attitudes toward the mission of God. It is my belief that the first step in faithfully following God's mission in the world is to be aware of our worldview and cultural lenses. When we acknowledge its existence and the strong role that our own lenses play in the process of interpreting reality, we will be able to keep those lenses accountable in light of the Scriptures.

The Issue Is What Kind of Lenses We Choose to Use

The way mainstream society shapes believers could be positive or negative. In the particular topic of multiculturalism, the modern church has a serious problem to overcome: culture has not shaped people necessarily according to the principles that guide the Kingdom of God and His mission. Conflicts in the church such as racial intolerance and skin-color prejudices, for instance, not only persist in the life of many evangelical and reformed congregations in North America, they are also frequently ignored. I wonder how the church will be able to offer adequate pastoral care, for instance, if



these issues are ignored? How could church leadership lead a congregation properly in matters of social justice and cultural diversity when biases and prejudices are not addressed? Every social group understands life differently and brings an invaluable richness to its community of faith. The problem is that sometimes we do not pay attention to the roles that a particular social group plays in the life of the church. In other cases, many communities even ignore the variety of thought, perspectives, and beauty that having a united multicultural group worshipping God as one people produces. In the end, all of us have lenses, but some lenses are useful and some not. It is impossible not to have any cultural or societal lenses at all, but it is possible to modify them for the sake of the mission of God. In my own experience, while I was on a mission trip in New York to work with people who were affected by an intense hurricane some time ago, I was challenged by some of the false beliefs I had about short-term mission trips. I mistakenly used to think that only long-term mission trips were important—at least, that had been my experience. However, I had the opportunity to see God's work and the result of our efforts in this group's life. After two weeks, my perception about short-term mission trips and local community work improved. Every work we did, regardless of how big or small it was, made a difference. How groundless my original perceptions were!

Diversity Does Concern the Visible Church

While reading the Gospels, one can easily observe that God does care about every group found in the Church and every person that belongs to the Church. A great example from the Bible to appreciate is the conversion of the centurion Cornelius as described in Acts 10. One may interpret this passage in many ways; nevertheless, one of the central themes of this narrative is that the conversion of Cornelius was the event that started the cross-cultural movement of the Gospel. This cross-cultural event was not only significant for the Early

Church, it is also important for the Church today. After Jesus' resurrection, God started the development of the mission to the Gentiles in different ways, e.g. the ministry of Philip the Evangelist in Samaria, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the episode with the Apostle Peter and Cornelius. Despite the diversity of characters in these events, it must be noted that the admission of the Gentiles into the Jewish-Christian community stirred up a controversy in Jerusalem. As a result of such dispute, the Council in Acts 15 established that the Gentiles were not obliged to obey laws that only applied to the Jews, such as the rites and the festivals, which opened the doors for the expansion of the Gospel to the Gentiles as registered later in Acts 15. The Council rightly recognized the differences between cultural patterns of a particular society (for example, circumcision for the Jews) versus the universality of the Gospel through Christ.

The universal character of the Gospel is strongly highlighted in these passages. One notices how the Scripture suggests that every person and every member of the church is important before God's eyes and has a role to play in the community of faith. God commands believers to love our neighbor as ourselves, not as "the other" but as a brother and sister in Christ. Following this direction, the Apostle Paul and other missionaries nurtured the Gentile cross-cultural mission in a very special way. Such vision later led Paul to affirm that there was no distinction between Jew and Gentile in the Church since Christ broke down the dividing wall of hostility on the cross. It is in this respect that in the process of faithfully following God's mission in the world and offering spiritual guidance to different ethnic groups in our society, the church should take into consideration her responsibility to create the space needed for all the people whom God has called in order that they would grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. No one but God makes the visible church diverse since He has formed the Church from people of all tribes, nations, and languages. Therefore, diversity does not only concern the visible church; it is ingrained in the

mission of God.

In conclusion, cultural diversity forms an integral part of the mission of God. We believers should consider that God's mission allows us to appreciate God's work in others amidst diversity. God wants us to follow His mission, and such mission is far from being a burden—it is a gift to the visible church. One notes above how the decisions made in the Jerusalem Council—concerning the establishment of the parameters the Church needed to take into consideration when accepting Gentile people who embraced the Christian faith—were not only necessary and right but also guided by the Holy Spirit. The issue was not a matter of following strict rules of Jewish culture, but of accepting the gift of diversity that Christ through the Gospel brought, keeping believers' cultural lenses accountable. This accountability was based in the truth and in the revealed word that God had called the Church to live out faithfully: the universality of the Gospel. Nowadays, I believe that the church needs to go back to the basics in the particular area of embracing true diversity that reflects integrally the mission of God. I find it regrettable that many congregations do not pay attention at all to "the other"—the person that is not similar to us in skin color, cultural background, education, or family origin. God's mission is exemplified when believers are united amidst diversity as a community of faith that strongly desires to live according to the principles of the Kingdom of God through the power of the Holy Spirit—a desire to embody the Gospel integrally by fighting any kind of injustice and oppression, promoting justice proactively, and keeping our cultural and societal lenses accountable to the Holy Scriptures. ✓

**Isaias is a Th.M. student in Pastoral Care from Costa Rica and currently serves as the Lead Editor of Stromata.*