

NORTHERN SEMINARY

ONE BODY, MANY ETHNIC PARTS

A Multiethnic Exposition of 1 Corinthians 11-14

By Jeremy L. Berg

DMin 7852: A Biblical Theology of Race and Ethnicity

Dr. Dennis Edwards

September 9, 2019

***“What God has put together,
let no man put asunder.”***

Matthew 19:6

In 1963, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick published their seminal book *Beyond the Melting Pot*, which challenged the prevalent modernist assumption that “traditional group loyalties to family, tribe, and clan would be replaced by interest-based loyalties to class, party, or state.”¹ This assumption was driving the much cherished metaphor of ethnicity in the United States—the melting pot—which celebrated the idea that all ethnic and racial differences could be melted together in the cauldron of nationalistic ideas and values (as defined by those with the power and influence) to form a new kind of national identity as Americans. Glazer and Patrick’s book sums up the main idea behind Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play *The Melting Pot* stating, “The point about the melting pot is that it did not happen.”²

Yet, in the age of Trump, Christian leaders and committed followers of Jesus know deep in their bones another kind of “melting” needs to take place if the message and mission of the gospel is to bear fresh fruit in a culture where so much now seems so rotten. This essay calls the church to become a society where hard and rigid “us vs. them” racial and ethnic prejudices are being melted down in the cauldron of gospel grace as we stand together on the level ground beneath the cross of Jesus.

¹ Steven Ybarrola, “Ethnic Identity, Ethnicity,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011) 281.

² Ibid.

Empires both ancient and modern have tried their best to assimilate distinct ethnic groups into a larger unified vision for political and cultural identity. The Roman Empire of the past and the American Way of the present are two prominent examples. Ethnic and racial distinctiveness have stubbornly resisted such attempts at globalization or the formation of a transnational corporate identity. Perhaps our inescapable “otherness” and human diversity is not something to be squeezed into uniformity, but part of the divine blueprint over which the Triune Godhead—unity within diversity embodied—spoke the words, “It was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

This presents the reader of the Bible and leaders in the Church with a kind of puzzle when confronted with the apparent universality of a gospel that calls forth a New Humanity from “every tribe, tongue, and nation,” and the sweeping vision of the church as a new corporate identity whose mission is to break down cultural and ethnic boundary lines and thus undo Babel’s legacy of divisiveness and restore humanity to a common goal of glorifying God instead of making a name for ourselves. With this puzzle in mind, I want to briefly examine Acts 2:1-21 and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost as God’s solution to our human propensity to “other” one another living in the long, dark shadow of Babel. What issues of race or ethnicity are operative in this text? How can a better understanding of ethnicity in the ancient world shed fresh light on this very familiar text?

BABEL, PENTECOST AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE GOSPEL

Many readily recognize the racial/ethnic theme as central to Luke-Acts. Witherington writes: “The universalization of the gospel will embrace not only all ethnic diversity in the Empire but also people up and down the social scale.”³ As Hays puts it, “The universalistic

³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 72.

elements of Luke's theology have implications not only for missiology, but also for ecclesiology ('how we do church') and social interaction within the Church."⁴ Luke grounds his gospel in the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12 as the answer to the scattering of the world's peoples in Genesis 11. The scattering results in a humanity divided into the families, languages, lands and nations described in Genesis 10. In Genesis 12:3, God announces the 'gospel' that "all the families of the earth" will be blessed through Abraham and his offspring. "Abraham's name occurs 22 times in Luke-Acts, underscoring the huge role that he plays in Luke's work."⁵ In Acts 3:25 Peter quotes God's promise directly, stating, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed." For Luke, the mission of the gospel to "Samaria, and the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) is directly tied to the empowering role of the Spirit in the disciples' cross-cultural mission. Hays spells out this central theme, thus setting up the significance of the Pentecost event:

The ethnic and cultural boundary between the Jews and the Samaritans was every bit as rigid and hostile as the current boundary between Blacks and Whites in the most racist areas of the United States. Yet by the power of the Spirit, the layman Philip, followed by the apostles Peter and John, carried the gospel successfully across this cultural and ethnic barrier. Readers today tend to gloss over the magnitude of Philip's work in Samaria, for we usually forget how much mutual animosity existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. Sociologically and missiologically, Philip's action was extremely profound, for he was able to put aside the generations of prejudice and hate that were an integral part of his own culture.... Likewise, if we Christians today are to have any hope of obeying the biblical command to form a unified people of God out of diverse ethnicities, we too must acknowledge and follow the critical leading and empowering of the Spirit.⁶

With this background, we can read Luke's account in Acts 2:1-21 as a kind of reversal of Babel. Whereas Babel resulted in people being scattered into groups divided by different

⁴ Daniel J. Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 14 (Leicester/Downers Grove: Apollos/InterVarsity Press, 2003) 157.

⁵ Hays, 161.

⁶ Hay, 163-164.

languages unable to communicate and cooperate, at Pentecost we find people gathered together from all over the ancient world, and suddenly (miraculously) able to understand one another in their own tongue. But the redemptive move toward understanding “the other” is not the same thing as eliminating our distinctiveness.

Witherington speaks of Luke’s gospel spreading both *vertically* (up and down the social scale) and *horizontally* (to all peoples throughout the Empire). We see the horizontal scope of the gospel in Luke’s map of nations represented at Pentecost in Acts 2:5-11:

There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified (or “confused” cf. Gen. 11) because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? **Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs**—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!”

Many scholars (e.g., Stott) see a relationship between the list of nations in Acts 2 and the table of nations in Genesis 10. We should not read too much into the specific places, since Luke’s main goal seems to show that the gospel destined to reach in every direction to *all nations and peoples*. Nevertheless, Luke does seem interested in including people across the color spectrum, highlighting how specific ethnic/racial barriers and prejudices are being obliterated by the gospel (e.g., Ethiopian eunuch, Cretans, Arabs, Samaritans, Roman centurion, etc.). Again, it is the barriers and prejudices that are being eliminated by the gospel, not our differences. If there is a melting pot, it is the Holy Spirit’s cauldron of gospel love that is melting hearts previously hardened with suspicion toward those who are different from us. Stott summarizes the theological import of Pentecost: “Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly than this the

multiracial, multinational, multilingual nature of the kingdom of Christ.”⁷ He goes on to note that this event points forward as well to the scene in Revelation 7:9 where the redeemed come from “every nation, tribe, people, and language.”

In Peter’s quotation of Joel’s prophecy in Acts 2:16-21, we see the vertical reach of the gospel up and down the social scale. Crucial to Luke’s purposes is the inclusive and social barrier-breaking nature of Joel’s prophecy about the eschaton: “I will pour out my Spirit on “*all* people” (or “all flesh”) giving voice and a role to sons and daughters, young and old, men and women, and, easily overlooked, “even upon my servants” which is more accurately read “slaves.” Beverly Gaventa observes that Luke alters the LXX in v. 18, adding “my” before the phrase “slaves, both men and women,” “so that the words no longer refer only to a socio-economic category but to those who are obedient to God.”⁸ Though we should not underplay the socio-economic category, which tends to happen when we translate it “servants” instead of “slaves.” Again, Stott summarizes: “All people means not everybody irrespective of their inward readiness to receive the gift, but everybody irrespective of their outward status... There are no social distinctions whether of sex, or of age, or of rank.”⁹ In sum, Acts 2:1-21 signifies the outpouring of the eschatological Spirit upon the renewed people of God—Abraham’s true descendants—for the task of bringing healing and unity to a broken and divided world. This leads directly to a key task of the church today.

⁷ Quoted by Hays, 165.

⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 76-77.

⁹ John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 74.

RACE & ETHNICITY IN CHURCH MINISTRY TODAY

We can draw a direct line from Babel's demise to our world's inability to communicate in healthy, constructive ways today. We have a global and national speech impediment. Now, in the light of the gospel, instead of fashioning fire-hardened bricks into Babel-like sky-scraper monuments to our own egos and idolatrous projects that make a name for ourselves, God is fashioning soft and moldable human hearts into a new Temple for his Spirit to dwell. This indwelling Spirit is the divine power that can bring about the "s/Spirit of *unity*" in the Body "so that with one heart and mouth [we] may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:5-6). The global church is this new spiritual edifice—the New Humanity learning to speak the sweet and lovely dialects of love, peace, patience, kindness, forgiveness, grace, mercy and reconciliation in every native tongue. Within this Temple, people of the Spirit are learning how to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). This Temple is not built by high-reaching efforts of the human ego, but by lowering ourselves in humble service to all the "others" we tend to avoid, misunderstand, fear, and are tempted to write off. Jesus taught and embodied this new language of Love and His Body must now learn to speak into the cacophony of the conflicting choruses of our own day. In doing so, the church implements His victory and brings about the first fruits of healing and redemption to a world still very scattered and deeply divided.¹⁰

This sounds lovely in theory but the question lingers: How exactly can we learn to celebrate diversity in the Body of Christ while moving toward unity of purpose? Does the New

¹⁰ Cf. Geoffrey Holsclaw, "Is Babel Reversed at Babel?:" "At Pentecost it is the divisions caused by our fallen fear and panicked prejudice that is overcome. In the preaching of the Gospel, made possible at Pentecost, cultural diversity is affirmed even while sinful divisions are overcome (as is the reverse of sinful unity)" (Accessed June 18, 2019 at https://www.seminary.edu/is-babel-reversed-at-pentecost/?fbclid=IwAR2JNgBRkNRoRKbrOnVLWGiaQimhXPEtztz_7zL6X4W7aBFtkLbB-Kb0b18).

Testament provide us with an ecclesiological vision we can implement “on the ground”? I believe it has been staring us right in the face, lingering under our noses all along. Many have preached all around it and built church ministries upon it. But in all my ecclesiological experiences and theological training in the predominantly White Evangelical world, I have never heard this famous block of Scripture applied to the challenges of *racial and ethnic unity* in particular. I am referring to Paul’s “One Body, Many Parts” manifesto in 1 Corinthians 12. What can we learn from this well-trodden passage about pursuing Christian unity while honoring and celebrating racial and ethnic differences?

‘ONE BODY, MANY (ETHNIC) PARTS’

Scholars have long emphasized that the metaphor of the body for a society or state was very common in ancient political literature and certainly influenced Paul’s use of it.¹¹ Margaret Mitchell’s work, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, is especially relevant here.¹² While Paul is clearly addressing social factionalism and inequality within the Corinthian church—worst of all, in the celebration of it’s most sacred cultic act (cf. 11:20)—much popular preaching on the “One Body, Many Parts” leaves aside these *social* dynamics. Preachers in my context and experience are often quick to jump to giving church members Spiritual Gift Inventories and helping church members appreciate the “spiritual gifts” of the parking lot attendants and nursery workers as much as they appreciate the gifts of the preaching pastor or worship leader on the stage each Sunday. Such treatments of Paul’s body metaphor tend toward a myopic application to a local congregational leadership system (focused on ministry gifts *inside* a local church), and

¹¹ See Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 157 n. 554 for a good sampling of scholarship. Cf. Aristotle’s political theory in *Pol.* 3.5.10.

¹² Mitchell, 157ff.

rarely invite a more global consideration of our worldwide Abrahamic call to be the reversal of Babel through the formation of a new unified ecclesial society, or Body, that is comprised of many ethnic and racial parts—what my teacher calls “a fellowship of differents.”¹³

So let us revisit the body metaphor and draw out key insights for more nurturing more harmonious multiethnic relations. As Christians navigating the divisive climate in the era of Trump, leaders in the church should shudder at the thought of ever hearing someone say of our community what Paul said of the Corinthians: “Your meetings do more harm than good....I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you” (1 Cor. 11:17-18). The task of church leaders in an age of growing ideological tribalism and the instant amplification of social-political-ethnic-religious differences via social media type-casting, is not to melt all our differences away or strive toward a kind of “color blindness” (which I long thought was the solution). Instead, church leaders must work to heighten our sensitivity and appreciation for the “need for diversity within unity” in the Body.¹⁴ The goal is not that there be no *differences* in the body, but “that there should be no *division* in the body” and “that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Cor. 12:25). In Mitchell’s words,

The metaphor of the body for the social organism in ancient political texts, as we have seen, *is used to combat factionalism*... There can be no doubt that 1 Cor 12, which employs the most common *topos* in ancient literature for unity, is a straightforward response to the factionalism within the church community.¹⁵

The climax toward which our shared Story is heading, again, is the Eternal City populated by people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9), the “new

¹³ See Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together* (Downers Grove, IL: Zondervan, 2015).

¹⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 584-85.

¹⁵ Mitchell, 161.

heaven and a new earth, where (racial and ethnic) justice abides” (2 Pet. 3:13). With this background in mind, let us look at our passage with new ethnically sensitized lenses and draw out some key insights we may have missed in the past.

A RACIAL/ETHNIC EXPOSITION OF 1 CORINTHIANS 12

In what follows, I am fully aware that Paul was not referring to ethnic or racial diversity of parts in the Body. Still, the general principle I want to build upon is this: *Just as spiritual gifts must work together harmoniously for the healthy functioning of the body of Christ (vv. 4-11), so I also our God-given ethnic identities should be viewed as a gift to the universal church to be exercised and stewarded responsibly for the harmonious functioning and compelling witness of the multiethnic Body of Christ in the world.*

With this in mind, Paul might very well write to today’s racially divided church in America, saying: ***“Now about the gifts of the Spirit [including the gift of ethnic and racial diversity], brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed” (12:1).*** Just as ***“to each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (12:7),*** so to each person an ethnic identity and perspective has been given, and should be shared and received “for the common good.” The ethnic and racial unity we are called to pursue is rooted in our sharing in the one Spirit and our common allegiance and confession of “Jesus as Lord.” ***“No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit” (12:3).*** In the same way, no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God can use racial slurs, callously perpetuate anti-immigration rhetoric, fail to repudiate white supremacist ideologies, and so on. Likewise, no one who confesses “Jesus is Lord” should be

found resisting the Spirit of Jesus who is committed to confronting and working to heal the racial injustice all around us.

As we move into the heart of Paul's body metaphor (vv. 12-31), united by one Spirit and confessing one Lord, we are then reminded that our unity also derives from a new baptismal identity that must supersede any other identity markers including race, ethnicity, class or nation: ***“For we were all baptized by/with/in one Spirit so as to form one [multi-ethnic body]—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (v. 13).*** At Pentecost, a new Body of 3,000 ethnically diverse ‘parts’ was formed from pilgrims from a wide geographical arc (Acts 2:5-13). Onlookers who witnessed the birth of this new multiethnic Body accused them of “having too much wine.” Indeed, they “were all given the one Spirit to drink” and perhaps had the appearance of being “drunk with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18) as they elicited an intoxicating kind of community capable of dulling our insensitivity to the ‘ethnic other.’ A sobering question for us to consider is this: Would onlookers observing the church in America today conclude we are drinking from that same Spirit? I fear certain segments of the church in America are in real danger of getting drunk on some other kind of spirit such as nationalism, identity politics, racial prejudice, etc.

Next, Paul emphasizes our *mutual interdependence* in the Body which, when be applied to race/ethnicity, offers some revolutionary and far-reaching principles for racial healing and cooperation in the church. First, just as we need all parts of the body, so we need all ethnic groups to be truly whole. ***“God has placed the [different ethnic] parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be” (v. 19).*** Second, one ethnic group of Christians cannot say to another ethnic group, “I don’t need you.” To paraphrase Paul, ***“If the Latino church should***

say, *'Because I am not a white church, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body*" (v. 15). Third, if we compare each ethnic group to "an eye," we can appreciate how we need each "eye," or *unique ethnic perspective*, in order to see more clearly and charitably. That is, if the whole body were white, where would its colored vision be? Pushing the metaphor toward the absurd, we might put verse 17 thusly: *"If the whole body were [white], where would the unique black perspectives be? If the whole body were Black, where would the Asian perspective be"* (v. 17)? Paul concludes, *"As it is, there are many [racial and ethnic perspectives], but one body"* (v. 20). That is, we are all connected to one another even if we don't acknowledge it, like it, or seek to understand and love the other ethnic parts of the Body. Dr. King spoke eloquently of our struggle for justice and the fact of our destinies being interconnected: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."¹⁶

Fourth, and getting more politically meddlesome now, Paul articulates a general principle that *"Those [ethnic] parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the [racial groups] that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor"* (v. 22-23). This suggests that weaker racial minority group has some indispensable role to play in or lesson to teach the larger Body. The stronger racial majority group in the church should not look down on more marginalized groups with pity, but rather show them special honor and seek to discover what makes their contribution and perspective "indispensable" for the spiritual growth and worldwide mission of the whole Body.

¹⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994).

Next, some ethnic parts of the worldwide Body, at times, need “special treatment” to overcome certain disadvantages while other *“presentable parts need no special treatment”* (v. 24). I hardly need to connect the contemporary dots to show that certain strongly held political views (e.g., affirmative action, reparations, government subsidies, etc.) are challenged by the possible implications of this teaching. In these days of deep-seated political division that unfortunately plagues the American church as well, Christians who claim to confess “Jesus as Lord” (12:3) and to share in the “one Spirit” (12:13) must let their earthly political convictions be subverted and transformed by the upside-down Kingdom politics of Jesus. At the heart of the Kingdom of Jesus or “Christoform life”¹⁷ is the call to each member of the Body—White Christians and Black Christians, Christians who vote Republican and Christians who vote Democrat, etc.—to “in humility consider others more important than yourselves” (Phil 2:3). The royal law of love that can really catapult the Abrahamic Project forward is if “Each of you should look not only to your own [ethnic group’s] interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:4)—including ethnic/racial others. As Paul writes to the ethnically divided church in Rome: “We who are strong ought to bear with the shortcomings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom 15:1).

Back to 1 Corinthians 12, we find Paul’s body metaphor coming to a crashing Kingdom crescendo with a sobering call to the racially divided church of 21st century America: *“But God has put the [multiethnic] body together, giving greater honor to the [ethnic] parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its [different ethnic] parts should have equal concern for each other. If one [ethnic or racial] group suffers, we should all suffer*

¹⁷ See Scot McKnight, *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christoformity in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019).

with them” (v. 26). The traditional charge given to bride and groom at many a wedding is, “What God has put together, let no man put asunder” (Matt 19:6). There is a “sacramental” quality to the one flesh union of marriage that is to be celebrated and preserved at great cost. Similarly, Paul says, “God has put the [multiethnic] body together” as a kind of ecclesial sacrament to show the world the reconciling grace and power of the gospel. Sadly, this unified and interconnected body has been for too long torn asunder by various ethnic parts’ inability or unwillingness to “show equal concern for each other.”

In the American church, in particular, the cut runs deep from the tragic reality that the White Christian church that has enjoyed the power and privilege failed to “give greater honor to parts that lacked it.” For example, slaveholding church members in the Antebellum South—famous for reading Paul in ways that reinforced their racism—certainly overlooked this crowning passage: “If one [ethnic or racial] part suffers, we should all suffer with them.”¹⁸ *This is the task of the church today: for Christians of all ethnic and racial backgrounds to receive those of different backgrounds as a gift to broaden our perspective and deepen our love as we learn to not only understand each other’s experiences, but enter into each other’s pain and, God willing, to learn how to suffer in solidarity with them.* This is how a church of all colors, bearing bruises of all colors while bleeding the same color, will heed the Kingdom call to: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

One recent prophetic call to this task is Jemar Tisby’s book *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (2019). He challenges the White (especially Evangelical) saying, “Being complicit only requires a muted response in the face of

¹⁸ On racist readings of Paul see e.g., Emerson B. Powery; Rodney S. Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

injustice or uncritical support of the status quo.” Furthermore, “History demonstrates that racism never goes away; it just adapts.” He then gets specific:

Christian complicity with racism in the twenty-first century looks different than complicity with racism in the past. It looks like Christians responding to 'black lives matter' with the phrase 'all lives matter.' It looks like Christians consistently supporting a president whose racism has been on display for decades. It looks like Christians telling black people and their allies that their attempts to bring up racial concerns are 'divisive.' It looks like conversations on race that focus on individual relationships and are unwilling to discuss systemic solutions. Perhaps Christian complicity in racism has not changed after all. Although the characters and the specifics are new, many of the same rationalizations for racism remain.¹⁹

If Paul’s Body metaphor provides rich insights and powerful principles to consider, what are some basic first steps we can take down the road to living into this vision for ‘One Church with Many Ethnic Parts’?

A GREATER GIFT FOR A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

Following Paul’s train of thought into 1 Corinthians 13 and 14, we find him wooing a church that gifted yet divided with an enticing two-fold invitation of 12:31: “***Now eagerly desire the greater gifts***” and “***I will show you the most excellent Way.***” Having cast a compelling vision in chapter 12 for a church that is functioning harmoniously with a healthy understanding and appreciation for each of its gifts, in chapter 13 he describes this harmonious unity in a poetic flourish. Chapter 13 is often pulled out of context and read at weddings, but “When applied to a local church, it becomes dynamite.”²⁰ When applied to racial division and ethnic differences in the local church, it’s doubly explosive! Paul urged the Corinthians to desire (and one assumes develop) the “greater gifts” given to the Body, and one way you will know it is great, I suggest,

¹⁹ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019). See also Michael O. Emerson; Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁰ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 226.

is whether or not that gift leads each member of the Body down the most excellent way—the Way of Love.

The Way of Love leads one back to the source of the wound and pain, to the melting pot where soft and repentant hearts seek forgiveness, where an axe to grind become an axe to be melted into a plow share. The Most Excellent Way of Love leads one to seriously pursue reconciliation and healing. In *Divided by Faith*, Christian Smith and Michael Emerson call the church deeper down this most excellent Way where “Tears and hugs and saying I’m sorry is a good first step, but for me, the question is not one of changing the hearts of individuals as [much as] it is dealing with the systems and the structures that are devastating African-American people.”²¹

To conclude, I want to make a case for ‘Ethnic or Racial Sensibility and Sensitivity’ being a much needed Spirit-breathed *charism*, or “higher gift,” given to certain individuals in today’s church. The wise exercise and appreciation of this spiritual gift can lead divided churches down the path toward racial healing and heightened ethnic sensibilities among the rest of the members. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul discusses various gifts—especially tongues and prophecy—urging the believers to **“try to excel in those that build up the church” (14:12)**. He warns them against focusing on gifts such as tongues that primarily build oneself up while disregarding the rest of the Body.

For the task of racial reconciliation in the church today, I suggest churches stop pursuing gifts (or ministry visions or leaders, etc.) that only serve to build up one’s own ethnic group or ecclesial tribe. Instead, let leaders and churches desire the gifts (or Spirit-breathed *charisms*) that

²¹ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43.

can build up and build bridges to the larger, multiethnic Body of Christ. ‘Prophecy’ is indeed one label for this gift, especially insofar as the work of “building up” a broken and divided body often first requires naming and exposing the cracks and tearing down certain racist foundations. For me personally, Jemar Tisby’s *The Color of Compromise* was a prophetic message that touched me deeply, exposing my own life-long complicity in systemic racism and my blindness to my own white privilege. But can we push Paul’s point even further?

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is frustrated with the immaturity of the Corinthian congregation for being so caught up in their own private spiritual experiences (ecstatic worship, tongues), that they are oblivious to the needs of the broader community around them—both other believers and inquiring seekers. He does not mince words: **“*Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children*” (14:20)**. Might our racially divided churches in America be similarly guilty of getting together and enjoying our own private White or Black or Latino or Asian worship experiences in our own native style and tongue?²² While these worship gatherings may edify our own group, Paul would urge us to at times pursue the spiritual gifts and forms of worship that can reach out and build up the broader multiethnic Body of Christ in our area. Paul says, **“*In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue*” (14:19)**. Echoing Paul’s heart, may God raise up for this generation Christian leaders willing to pass up ten thousand great safe and satisfying ministry opportunities within their own ethnic context, in order to pursue a handful of groundbreaking ministry efforts that build bridges across the racial divide and aim to bring healing to the larger Body. Churches too cozy in their own ethnic culture—that is, their own traditions, styles, ethnic stories, etc.—are in danger of

²² I am addressing English speaking churches of difference ethnic backgrounds in America here, and using “native tongue” metaphorically.

becoming deaf to voices and viewpoints of the other ethnic parts of the Body. This danger and folly has been repeated too many times to count. In the words of Dr. King, “People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.”²³ The greatest danger of all in this, Paul says, is that we may end up incapable of hearing God himself when he wants to speak to us through the voice of an ‘ethnic other’: ***“In the Law it is written: “With other tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord”” (1 Cor 14:21)***. On the other hand, as we learn to exercise the “higher gift” of racial and ethnic sensitivity and intelligence in our ministries, perhaps our diversity within unity will dazzle curious onlookers and cause them to declare, ***“God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:25)!***

CONCLUSION: PUTTING CHILDISH PREJUDICES BEHIND

I began this essay back at Babel, where the human race in the throes of adolescent rebellion, became too big for its britches. Justly chastised and “grounded,” they were scattered to the four winds and left “babbling” like babes in the nursery again. In Abraham, God set into motion a new plan to grow a worldwide family whose racial and ethnic differences could be sewn together into a beautiful, colorful tapestry displaying God’s glory. In Christ, and through the church born at Pentecost, the plan continues to unfold, even while many of those charged with knitting together the multiethnic masterpiece are so often found reverting back to racial and ethnic immaturity.

²³ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Advice for living" (1958, May) *Ebony*, 13(7), 112. Retrieved from MasterFILE Complete, 48347474.

It's time for the Body of Christ to grow up in this central aspect of our gospel witness. Like a refrigerated teething ring given to an infant cutting her teeth, so I have offered Paul's 'Body Metaphor' from 1 Corinthians 12 and its surrounding context for the church to chew on as we strive toward maturity and seek to become One Unified Body of Many Ethnic Parts. Once again, riffing on and adapting Paul's memorable lines:

When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew racial and ethnic intelligence, I put childish prejudices and racial myopia behind me. For now many in the church and culture still see the issue of race and ethnicity "darkly as in a mirror," but many others are beginning to see face to face and we see Christ reflected back to us in the face of the other ethnic parts of the One Body. Now we know our racially different brothers and sisters in part (and too often with suspicion and stereotypes); but someday soon, by God's grace and the Spirit's guidance, we shall know our brothers and sisters of different backgrounds fully, even as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:11-12 my adaptation).

With faith, hope and love as our threefold cord to bind together what man has too often torn asunder, let us keep marching toward the "radiant stars of love and brotherhood" Dr. King dreamed of and gave his life up in pursuing:

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.²⁴

²⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Emerson Michael O; Smith, Christian. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.

Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003.

Holsclaw, Geoffrey. "Is Babel Reversed at Babel?" Accessed June 18, 2019 at <https://www.seminary.edu/is-babel-reversed-at-pentecost/>.

Horrell, David G. *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence*. Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark Ltd, 1996.

King, Martin L. *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

_____. "Advice for living." May 1958. *Ebony* 13(7). Retrieved from MasterFILE Complete, 48347474.

McKnight, Scot. *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christoformity in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019.

_____. *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together*. Downers Grove, IL: Zondervan, 2015.

Mitchell, Margaret M. *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Powery; Emerson B; Sadler, Rodney S. *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

Prior, David. *The Message of 1 Corinthians*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985.

Stott, John. *The Message of Acts*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Tisby, Jemar. *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.

Witherington, Ben. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.

Ybarrola, Steven. "Ethnic Identity, Ethnicity." *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*. Edited by Joel B. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011.