

Peace To The Nations (Zechariah 9:10): Ethnicity in the Mission of God

Author: Ethnicity and Identity Advisory Group

Date: 31.05.2010

Category: Ethnicity

Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Dewi Hughes on behalf of an international advisory group, as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Multiplex session on "Ethnicity and Identity." The advisory group includes Claude Nikondeha [Burundi], Gerard Willemsen [Sweden], Joseph Nyamutera [Rwanda], Joyce Dube [Zimbabwe/South Africa], Menna Machreth [Wales], Nyasha Manyua [Zimbabwe], Peter Nyende [Kenya], Philbert Kalisa [Rwanda], Prabu Deepan [Sri Lanka], Rhiannon Lloyd [Wales], Solomon Sule-saa [Ghana], Tito Paredes [Peru], CSW. Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the author and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

When a session on ethnicity starts by asking the audience to record the first words that come to mind when they hear the words 'ethnic,' 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic identity,' the most common word that usually surfaces is 'conflict.' In fact, the majority of words that come to mind are negative. It is not surprising, therefore, that many evangelical Christians consider ethnicity a dangerous and/or divisive part of human identity to be de-emphasized or even avoided. And yet many Christians love their ethnic identity and see it as a gift from God.

Prior to investigating what the Bible says about ethnicity, some definitions may be helpful.

Ethnicity Defined: The following definitions reflect current thought:

The transliteration of the Greek plural of *ethnos* is *ethne*, translated as 'nations' or 'Gentiles' in English Bibles. *Ethnos* [singular] and *ethne* [plural] will be used as English nouns in this essay.

Ethnos - A type of community with a consciousness of being a people distinct from all others with the following characteristics: a common proper name; a belief in a common ancestry; a shared history, memories of a common past; elements of a common culture, such as language, customs, material culture, religion; a link with a homeland; a sense of solidarity.

'Ethnic Minorities' - *Ethne* that for various reasons, such as migration or enforced transportation (slavery), are dispersed in a state.

'National Minorities' or 'Indigenous Peoples' - *Ethne* that have been oppressed or marginalized in their ancestral territory.

In light of these definitions, the term 'nation' becomes problematic, especially in the context of its common use. For example, many call the United Kingdom a 'nation,' while according to the definitions above, the UK is a country or state made up of three national minorities: indigenous peoples, a dominant national majority and many ethnic minorities. According to these definitions, a 'nation-state' implying a state ruling over an individual nation hardly exists at all. Korea (North and South) and Lesotho are rare examples of states that are almost coterminous with an individual *ethnos*.

The overwhelming majority of the world's states have many *ethne*, although in many multi-ethnic states one *ethnos* is dominant. To illustrate what the definitions mean for an individual state, it may be helpful to consider the following typical example of a post-colonial state:

Uganda has over 50 *ethne* in four major divisions. The largest division is the Bantu of the Southern half of the country who make up over 60% of the population, representing almost half the *ethne* in the country. The largest *ethnos* is the Baganda, who dominate the area around the capital, Kampala, although they represent less than a fifth of the population of the country. The Bagandans are more

than twice as numerous as any other single Bantu ethnoses, although some of them—such as the Bankole, Bakiga and Basoga—number between one and two million. The second largest division is the Nilotic, concentrated in the Northern half of the country, which comprises around a quarter of the population, divided among 18 ethnoses including the Iteso, Acholi and Karamajong. The third division, representing only 5% of the population, is the Sudanic ethnoses of the Northeast. But even they are divided into eight ethnoses. The final division of around 2% is made up of immigrants from neighbouring countries and a growing Asian community.

Ethnoses in Modern Thought

According to Western modernist historians and political philosophers, the pattern of nation-states that characterises the modern world emerged in the eighteenth century when Enlightenment political philosophy was put into practice in the formation of the USA and post-revolutionary France. The freedom and equality that these new nation-states offered was equality to engage in the political process and freedom to engage in economic activity. Abandoning ethnic distinctions was part of the price that it was believed had to be paid for this freedom and equality. So, in the USA freedom and equality were denied to Native Americans as Native Americans. In France the Bretons and Basques, for example, who had preserved their identity within the monarchical French state, were brutally suppressed by the brotherhood of revolutionaries. The same pattern was adopted as other European states adopted the Enlightenment pattern. In the United Kingdom there was a renewed move to suppress Irish, Scottish and Welsh identity.

Up to the middle of the 20th century the elimination of ethnic distinctiveness was believed to be altruistic. Diversity was believed to be a hindrance to the development of a democratized and industrialized society that would lead to greater prosperity and happiness for a greater proportion of citizens. Underlying this was the conviction that people's primary needs were physical, and that once people saw the benefits of uniformity, they would be more than happy to jettison their ethnic identity. This modernist political creed confidently predicted the demise of ethnic identity in the wake of its emphasis upon rights of equality for each individual citizen of the state irrespective of ethnic identity, and corresponding growth in material prosperity for each of those individual citizens. However this has not happened.

This was the political creed on which the post-colonial states were established. Their independence was premised on the elimination of ethnic distinctiveness. Given this premise it is not surprising that the failure of many of the post-colonial nation-states is blamed on its ethnocentrism or tribalism.

However, since the middle of the 20th century the modernist paradigm, especially in Western countries, has been changing. Multiculturalism, which is far more positive towards ethnic distinctiveness, became state policy in many countries. In Europe this has led to granting a measure of autonomy to some indigenous ethnoses such as Catalans in Spain and Scots in the United Kingdom. This could be the beginning of a post-modernist paradigm of the nation-state in the West.

Ethnoses in the Biblical Story of God's Mission

The biblical book of origins (Genesis 1-11) ends with an account of the origins of the ethnoses (Genesis 10:1-11:9). In Genesis 10 the existence of ethnoses is seen as a direct result of the outworking of God's command to the original human beings to multiply and fill the earth. 1. The fulfilling of this command is twice interrupted. The first interruption is the Flood that destroys most of humanity. After the Flood God reasserts his command to humankind to 'be fruitful and increase in number' and 'to multiply on the earth and increase upon it.' 2. The evidence that this command was effective is found in the table of nations in Genesis 10. As the families of Noah's sons became more numerous, various social, economic and other pressures drove some clans to go in search of a new place where they would be better off. Very early in the history of humanity, some even crossed the sea in this search 3. so that, in time, distinct peoples came into existence and spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with their own language. 4.

In contemporary academic discussion of the subject, it is interesting that the "nations" of Genesis 10 correspond very closely to the main features of ethne. Many of the names in Genesis 10 are somewhere between a proper name for an ethnic group and the name of an ancestor. For example, Japheth's son Gomer is a proper name of an Indo-European people who lived in southern Russia, and Madai or Medes; is the proper name of an Indo-Iranian people. 5. In verses 8-12 there is a break in the genealogy to tell the story of Nimrod, one of the descendants of Cush, the son of Ham, who was the founder of Babylon and Nineveh in Mesopotamia. This is a good example of the type of historical memory that forms an ethnic identity. The diversity of languages that followed the scattering is mentioned after the genealogy of each son of Noah while a number of the names in the lists are also names of territories. Mizraim/Egypt, Seba, Havilah and Dedan are all examples of known territories. The only feature in the list that is not clearly witnessed in Genesis 10 is a sense of solidarity??but where the other five factors exist, solidarity is inevitable.

The account of the formation of ethne in Genesis 10 is completed by the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. The events at Babel tell us that what seemed to be a perfectly "natural" process in Genesis 10 was in fact deeply affected by human wickedness throughout.

The building of the Tower of Babel is the second interruption to the story of the scattering of humanity. Early in their history after the Flood, we find human beings with one common language, moving east from Ararat until they come to the broad and fertile plain of Mesopotamia. There they settle down and multiply in number and skills. In order to make a name for themselves, they set about building a tower reaching to heaven. This is probably the first proclamation of empire in human history with, in this case, one city seeking to dominate the rest of humanity, and in the process, trying to usurp a position that belongs to God alone. The city and its tower were also meant to be a magnetic centre of power that would keep people from moving apart from each other and filling the earth as God had intended they should. Seeing that a united humanity with one language would have an endless capacity for rebellion, God confused their language, thus hindering their ability to communicate freely and to cooperate with each other in opposition to God's will. With their ability to understand and communicate hindered, their ability to resist God and his will was undermined. Without understanding, collaboration was impossible. So the tower was abandoned as humanity scattered in every direction "over the face of the whole earth." The final outcome was precisely what God had originally intended for the human race, that is, for the whole earth to be filled with people of ethnic diversity. From reflecting on Genesis 10 and 11 together, one can only conclude that the formation of different ethne was a part of God's providence, but that this process was marred by sin, as everything else since the fall.

There is a striking contrast between the story of the Tower of Babel and the beginning of the Story of Redemption in the calling and life of Abraham. The Babelites set out to make their own name great and were prepared to hinder the development of ethne in order to achieve their end. God would make Abraham's name great and in the process bring blessing to the nations. The oppression or elimination of ethne is the way of Babel and the complete antithesis of the blessing God intends for them through Abraham's seed, Jesus.

Passages such as Deuteronomy 2:9-12, 19-23; 32:8; Jeremiah 18:1-10 and 27:1-7 testify to God's sovereign control of the ethne. 6. In the New Testament Paul affirms in his sermon to the Athenian intellectuals of the Areopagus that all nations are ultimately descended from Adam and that God has and will continue to oversee their formation, geographical extent and demise. 7. God's sovereignty over the ethne means first that in the long view, nations are not permanent entities. They begin, grow, flourish, decline and die like human beings. Therefore, there is no room for the idolatrous absolutising of the ethnos as happens in ideological nationalism. Second, God has a moral purpose in his dealing with the ethne/nations. For example, repentance can save a nation from oblivion (Jeremiah 18:7-10; Jonah 3) and one nation can be used by God to punish another nation for its sin?;though the latter idea should never be used by a nation to justify its acts of aggression or war against another people (Deuteronomy 9:4-5). 8.

The New Testament focuses on two additional themes with roots in the Old Testament. On the one

hand, nations are given an invitation to, and then welcome, the good news of the kingdom of God, prophetically introduced in Deuteronomy 2 as the nations in the last days flocking to Zion to present their gifts to God. 9. The climax of this Old Testament prophecy is then seen in John's New Testament vision of heavenly glory in Revelation 21:24-22:5. On the other hand, as a counterpoint theme, the nations conspire together to destroy the kingdom of God. The Book of Revelation, again echoing Old Testament prophecy, pictures this as the battle of Armageddon, a final struggle between a worldly empire that destroys ethne and the kingdom of the Lamb that blesses ethne. Until that final conflict, there should be no doubt about our aspirations as followers of the Lamb??we should be in the business of blessing and not destroying ethne.

In Revelation 7:9 we have a beautiful picture of the essence of what the Bible teaches about the nations. John sees people from every nation, tribe, people and language all dressed in white robes standing before the throne of the Lamb. All ethne will be united in Jesus and his justice/righteousness. But this unity will not destroy their distinctiveness, for they will be honoured and distinguished as members of different nations/ethne. In Jesus the Messiah, we have a unity that does not destroy diversity and a diversity that does not undermine unity.

Ethne in Modern Evangelical Missionary Theory and Practice

There is no coherent biblical view of ethnicity/nationhood in current evangelical missiology. What we have on the one hand is an uncritical acceptance of modernist political philosophy and on the other, some missionary practice that contradicts it. The frequent condemnation of nationalism/tribalism by evangelical leaders is evidence of acceptance of modernist political philosophy, whereas the continuing drive to translate the Bible into all languages is a key example of missionary practice that cuts right across this philosophy.

In a modern nation-state, ethnic diversity is supposed to disappear in the wake of human equality and material prosperity. It is not surprising, therefore, that even many Christians see so-called ethnic conflicts as the reason why the economic miracle of industrialization has not happened and that many states, particularly in Africa, remain mired in poverty. But the cause of the problem may be modern political philosophy rather than ethnic identity. This is not an affirmation of ethnocentrism but a rejection of it. Ethnocentrism is at the root of the modernist nation state. That is why even in a country like Uganda, the state can only function by retaining English as an official language because it finds the residual ethnocentrism of the colonial oppressor to be more palatable than the ethnocentrism of any one of the Ugandan ethne. The possibility of building a state on the basis of mutual respect between ethne does not seem to have been considered.

The evangelical Protestant mission strategy of Bible translation cuts right across the modernist view of the nation state. This strategy asserts that communicating the gospel in a person's own language is vital to effective evangelism. Even if pragmatism is the driving force for some missionaries, simply learning a person's language, in order to be able to communicate an important message, is recognition of the dignity and significance of a key characteristic of ethnic identity. Committing a language to writing and translating the Bible is incredibly ennobling of ethnic identity. Grammars, dictionaries and books have played a vital part in the formation and survival of ethne/nations. Bible translators give ethne, however small, an enhanced possibility of survival and growth into full nationhood!

Ethne, the Church and Mission ? Burning Questions for Discussion
How can the church model the biblical principle of unity in diversity in the context of ethnic diversity?
How can church appointments reflect ethnic unity in diversity?
How significant should ethnic identity be in the training of church leaders?
Should Christians insist that the initial education of all be in their mother tongue?
Should churches think more deeply about the relationship between ethnic identity and poverty?
If establishing a church in an ethnos helps to create a greater sense of nationhood, what should a)the church and b)the mission agency do when that leads to a desire for greater political self-determination?
Does a nation-state with a free market economic model legalise the dispossession of poor ethne by rich ethne?
How does the biblical bias towards the protection of the lowest and the least apply in the

context of ethnic identity (Deuteronomy 7:7)? How does 'love your [ethnic] neighbour as yourself' apply in a kingdom paradigm of inter-ethnic relations

© The Lausanne Movement 2010 Gen 1:28 Gen 9:7 Gen 10:5 ? From these the maritime peoples spread out.....? Gen 10:4, cf. 10:20,31,32 Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15 Word Biblical Commentary vol. 1, Waco: Word Publishers, 1987, pp.216-7 For a good analysis of the passage in Deut 2 see Christopher Wright, New International Biblical Commentary, Deuteronomy, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996, p. 36. Some other passages that make the same point are Deut 26:19; Job 12:23; Ps 22:27-8; 47:8; 86:9; Dan 12:1; Acts 17:26-28 Acts 17:26-27 op.cit p. 133 Is. 60:1-11