

## Homogeneous Unit Principle

### Ethnocentrism or Idolatry by Another Name?

Jensen and Payne observe that Christian denominations become idols when we show ourselves to be "more interested in preserving our mainstream, Anglo-Saxon culture than in adapting to others for their salvation."<sup>1</sup> Criticism of so-called 'mono-ethnic churches' is hypocritical if mainstream churches, even if they achieve a measure of ethnic diversity, presuppose that all newcomers must learn to fit in with the way they do church.

### Homogeneous Units and Evangelistic Strategy

#### *McGavran's Pioneering Role*

Donald McGavran fathered the term 'homogeneous units' which today are more often called people groups.<sup>2</sup> At the time he was wrestling with the major social barriers to church planting posed by the caste system in India.

A sociological definition of a *people group* is supplied by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation: "A significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of these." Along with this is the following operational definition which expresses the intention of the sociological definition: "From the viewpoint of evangelisation, a people group is the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of acceptance and understanding."<sup>3</sup>

Dayton and Fraser<sup>4</sup> suggest the following examples: Urdu-speaking Muslim farmers of the Punjab; Cantonese-speaking Chinese refugees from Vietnam in Paris; Welsh working-class miners; Tamil-speaking Indian workers on Malaysian rubber plantations; the gay community of San Francisco; Nomadic Muslims moving into urban settings.

To McGavran the most important question in connection with the propagation of the Gospel is: *How do Peoples become Christian?*<sup>5</sup> McGavran observes that generally speaking people intermarry within their own people group and this signifies that their intimate life, in distinction from their economic life, is wrapped up with individuals of their own people. His classic statement upon which the

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<sup>1</sup> P.D. Jensen & T. Payne, "The Denomination as Idol" in *Have Evangelicals Lost Their Way? and other Stuff: Selections from The Briefing* [Lancer Books; Homebush West: Anzea Publishers, 1991] 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> For an Indian Rubberman definition of "people group" which allows it to be a non-homogeneous unit, see Dayton and Fraser, 99-101.

<sup>3</sup> Barrett and Schrenk have refined definitions somewhat by distinguishing the term *peoples* from the term *people groups*. By 'peoples' they mean "the ethno-linguistic, church-planting target", i.e., a unit which is large enough for a people movement to take place in. By 'people groups' they mean "the smaller, more finely defined groups within peoples" (E.R. Dayton & D.A. Fraser, *Planning Strategies for World Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990) 28). But the distinction does not alter my point since the definition of both terms presupposes the central importance of homogeneity.

<sup>4</sup> *Planning Strategies*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Donald A. McGavran. "The Bridges of God" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. A Reader*. 3rd edition; eds. Ralph D. Winter & Steven C. Hawthorne. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library / Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999, 323.

homogeneous unit principle is based is: "*People like to become Christian without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.*"

### **The Homogeneous Unit Principle and Barriers to Conversion**

It would seem clear that the onus of proof is upon the proponent of the homogeneous unit principle to demonstrate that his/her acceptance of the social barrier between higher and lower caste people is not a rejection of the one 'new man' in Christ, since in this instance it seems *prima facie* that not one brick of the 'dividing wall of hostility' has been dislodged by the impacting force of the gospel of Christ crucified. There is a need to show why retaining the division between higher and low castes is not an expression of sin of which would-be converts need to repent (contrast Sumithra<sup>6</sup>).

#### *The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the Language Barrier*

It is appropriate for the cross-cultural communicator of the gospel to recognise divisions created by language and to plant, establish and develop churches, along linguistic lines. The Bible itself is written in the languages of those with whom God was communicating at the time of writing. Since the Bible is not a collection of magic incantations, but rather God's intention is to communicate a message that has conceptual meaning, it follows that the gospel must be expressed in the language of those the communicator is trying to reach. Hence the formation of churches which are separated from each other on linguistic grounds is not a first order gospel problem, though even in this case thought should be given as to how to express the oneness of all language groups in Christ.

#### *Is the Homogeneous Unit Principle Taught in Scripture?*

There have been attempts to show that the homogeneous unit principle is biblical. It is not legitimate to use the Jewish people themselves as an example of the working of the homogeneous unit principle. It is true that Jesus chose twelve Jews and that many other Jews associated themselves with him as his disciples. It is true that after Pentecost many other Jews were reached through the gospel ministry of these initial Jewish Christians.

But there is no indication in the Scriptures that God intends to multiply people groupings with each becoming analogous to the Jewish nation and bearing an equivalent missiological significance. Also, God's purpose in choosing the Jews was so that through them the nations too might be attracted to himself and be incorporated into the one people. God did not begin by choosing one or even a few Jews through whom he began a people movement among Jews. He began with Abraham and the Jewish nation was formed biologically. In choosing Jews God was not trying to reach other Jews but quite the opposite! The intention was to reach non-Jews (a bit of a problem for the people group theory, to put it mildly).

Further, the Jewish people in the time of Christ can hardly be compared with unreached peoples since they had experienced a considerable degree of pre-evangelism and prior preparation. Clearly the Jewish people occupied a unique place in salvation history and it is therefore very precarious to treat as analogous the reaching of other so-called 'people groups'.

Finally, it is simplistic to view the Jewish people in Christ's time as a homogeneous unit. On the contrary we know that there were major divisions among the Jewish people. It follows then that in

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<sup>6</sup> Sunand Sumithra. "Justification by Faith: Its Relevance in Hindu Context" in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World*. Ed. D.A. Carson; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press / Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992, 227.

order to appeal to the Jewish people as an example of the outworking of the homogeneous unit principle it is necessary to find a degree of detail identifying what kind of Jews are involved in any particular context that, unfortunately for this view, is simply lacking from the text.

In seeking to biblically defend the homogeneous unit principle recourse is also made at times to the 'God-fearers', but this will not do, since these people can hardly be regarded as comprising a homogeneous unit. Indeed, as far as I am aware, the only valid New Testament example of a homogeneous unit having a missiological significance is that of the household.

Despite the presence of significant Jewish communities in cities outside of Palestine, there is never any suggestion of countenancing the formation of separate Jewish and Gentile churches within the same town or city. Nor in such areas do we find Paul confining his attention to Gentile Christians while ignoring Jewish Christians and telling them that they must look to Peter for their leadership. Indeed in Paul's epistles often he is plainly addressing himself to both Jewish and Gentile Christians who fellowship together in the same church. Always he exhorts them to unity and not once does he ever suggest that any tensions between them might best be resolved by the formation of a separate Jewish and Gentile church.

## **Reasons for and against establishing Homogeneous Churches**

### *Reasons for<sup>7</sup>*

#### **1. Sociological Divisions**

Paul Hiebert distinguishes between *horizontal segmentation* - tribes occupying their own turf - and *vertical segmentation* - groups distinguished not by geography but by rigid social differences. The homogeneous unit principle seeks to negotiate the realities and dynamics of vertical segmentation. Some justification for establishing a homogeneous church arises when a people group is one which at a social level refuses to relate to other people groups. For example, it would be very difficult to establish an international church in which both Muslim and Jewish converts fellowshiped together.

Given that Anglo-Australian churches often reach out to people culturally close to their church members, it is grossly inconsistent of them to insist that ethnic churches integrate with them, especially when the cultural and linguistic gap between the Anglo-Australian church and the ethnic church is even more accentuated than that between differing social Anglo-Australian "classes".

#### **2. Language**

It is one thing to be able to use another language with reasonable fluency. It is another thing to sing God's praises and pray and communicate deep spiritual insights in another language. There is no substitute for one's heart language. "Many Aussies fail to realise what a difficult, inconsistent language English really is for others to learn."<sup>8</sup>

#### **3. Conscious Ethnic Identity**

Wilcox (24) comments, "There are factors such as cultural cohesion, ethnic 'feel' or temperament and ways of thinking, as well as of doing things (e.g., the style and 'feel' of their worship service, notably the music, may be quite different from a normal Australian church service)."

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<sup>7</sup> See also C. Wilcox, *Ethnic & Cross Cultural Ministries: Handbook*. Hawthorn: Baptist Union of Victoria, 1994. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Wilcox, 24.

#### **4. Negative and/or Patronising Attitudes of Australian Churches**

Many visitors to mainline Australian churches do not feel welcomed, whether they be Anglos or non-Anglos. The National Church Life Survey 1991 discovered: "Interestingly, attenders are more likely to have been invited for a meal or welcomed immediately after the service in congregations which are growing than in stable or declining congregations."<sup>9</sup> Whether because churches fall into these latter categories, or for other reasons, other ethnic Christians often feel they are not loved or understood, and receive signals that they are expected to assimilate; that their own culture is not appreciated by their Australian counterparts.

#### **5. Negative aspects of Australian Culture**

Many ethnic Christians find certain Australian culture ways and values difficult to cope with, and perhaps even offensive.

#### **6. Evangelistic Effectiveness**

The most strongly stressed reason for having homogeneous unit churches is that such churches are more evangelistically effective in significantly impacting particular people groups.

##### *Reasons against*

##### **1. Some people groups are not conducive to the formation of homogeneous churches**

There are ethnic Christian workers, who themselves were originally Muslims, who have been ministering to Muslims for almost all of their adult life, and who believe it is better to encourage converts to join churches in which there is a range of ethnic groups, than to try to form a church for the particular group of Muslims concerned.

##### **2. Potentially, and sometimes actually, application of the homogeneous unit principle does promote segregation and even racism within the total Christian community**

Sumithra, as cited above, has observed how Christian missionaries have reinforced caste distinctions. Ortiz, taking issue with Peter Wagner, states, "I believe HUP has been a hindrance to race relations and to racial and ethnic reconciliation in the Christian community."<sup>10</sup>

##### **3. Many mono-ethnic churches are exclusivistic, introspective, culture-preserving institutions which at best marginalise evangelism**

It is not hard to find examples of non-evangelistic mono-ethnic churches. A disinclination to evangelism is probably characteristic of all churches. However, while the planting of homogeneous unit churches has been encouraged for the sake of evangelistic outreach it is often the case that such churches end up marginalising evangelism. In a first rate article, Min-ho Song points out that one of the key reasons why Korean churches are losing second and third generation Koreans in such great numbers is because of a serious limitation of evangelism. That is, because ethnicity is treated as being more important than the gospel, evangelism degenerates into bringing more first generation Koreans into the church.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> P. Kaldor et al., *Mission Under the Microscope: Keys to Effective and Sustainable Mission* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1995) 104.

<sup>10</sup> M. Ortiz., *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 45.

<sup>11</sup> "Constructing a Local Theology for a Second Generation Korean Ministry" in *Urban Mission* 15/2 (Dec 1997) 28-29.

#### **4. The homogeneous unit principle is too unsophisticated for the complexities of urban church ministry.**

So Huard who points out, "In urban life, many social, linguistic and age groupings constantly interact with each other and no one homogeneous unit is encompassing enough to operate effectively."<sup>12</sup>

Many would add a fifth objection to the homogeneous unit principle: **that the homogeneous unit principle violates the biblical concept of unity.** If this principle is treated as an absolute then it does indeed violate biblical unity. However, it is arguable that the Bible does give latitude for recognising and making use of cultural differences for the gospel, provided that care is also taken to ensure unity among all Christians (irrespective of cultural and ethnic background) is also suitably expressed. I would maintain that the planting and existence of homogeneous unit churches is not in and of itself at odds with the biblical concept of unity.

#### **Conclusions regarding the Homogeneous Unit Principle**

There is nothing sacred about the people group concept. The concept of *panta ta ethne* in the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20) is a comprehensive notion which indiscriminately refers to "all peoples", especially all other peoples as viewed by a particular people. In the New Testament the phrase refers to all non-Christian peoples (and possibly on occasions all non-Jewish peoples). Like Paul we desire to proclaim Christ to every individual (Col 1:28-29).

It is valid to target a particular people group to achieve this, provided it is understood that this methodology is not spelt out in the Great Commission itself. Arguably, there is no problem with the people group concept provided it is not regarded as normative, i.e., it is pressed upon us as being the only way to go about fulfilling the Great Commission.

The fact is that very often mono-ethnic churches or churches that cater for a particular range of ethnicity, even when they are effective in evangelising their own peoples (which is not always the case), are often closed to reaching out across cultural boundaries. For example many Chinese churches are very effective in evangelising Chinese but quite unconcerned about evangelising others. Now while McGavran, Winter and others who push the homogeneous unit idea of missiology don't want such a result, the question needs to be asked whether often this result is implicit in the very starting point. That is, if a concern to relate to or be concerned for people from other cultural backgrounds is not made integral to the initial constitution of the church then is it asking for too much to expect the incipient ethnocentrism to later do an 'about-face'?

#### **Avoiding an over-reaction to the Homogeneous Unit Principle**

Ortiz vigorously promotes what he calls the *Multiethnic Church* [MEC] (which we have previously described as the *International Model*): "The multiethnic church includes culturally diverse people who meet together as one congregation, utilizing one language, usually English" (87).

This is indeed a good and valid model. However, we should be wary of any treatment that presents this as being the ideal model. It is indeed crucial that Christians appropriately express the unity we have in Christ and that non-Christians be attracted to the Lordship of Christ because of the way in which his disciples love each other (Jn 13:34-35). But we should discourage any critique of the homogeneous unit principal that leads to treating mono-ethnic churches as second best churches

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<sup>12</sup> Geoff Huard. *Ministry Education for the New Frontier - A Training Program for Cross-Cultural Ministry*. Unpublished D.Min thesis for Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lombard, Illinois. June 1995, 33.

and international churches as the best kind of churches. Keeping in mind its limitations as outlined above the homogeneous unit principle continues to have validity.

A close look at Paul's rebuke of Peter in Galatians 2 indicates that for Paul the fundamental issue is that of relating to fellow-Christian on their terms (without compromising the gospel; e.g., entering Gentile homes and eating food with Gentiles) rather than insisting on one's own terms (here Jewish) as the basis for fellowship. Yes, the total context is very much concerned about the issue of Christian unity as Galatians 3:28 makes all too clear. But the principle of relating to Christians on their terms instead of imposing another set of terms to which we expect them to conform has considerable implications for church models. Provided churches are not exclusivistic it would seem to be quite biblical for them to maintain their cultural traditions (insofar as they do not violate the gospel) and quite unbiblical to demand them to give them up.

### **Applying the Biblical Culture Model to HUP**

McGavran spoke of humanity as a vast mosaic of different cultures, each of which is "psychologically closed to the rest of the world." He argued that "adaptation of Christianity to the culture of each piece of the mosaic is crucially important." From this it follows that "the true goal is to multiply *in every piece of the magnificent mosaic truly Christian churches which fit that piece*, are closely adapted to its culture, and recognized by its non-Christian neighbours as 'our kind of show'."<sup>13</sup>

In Australia, while there have been a few attempts at a multiethnic church, one which visibly demonstrates the ethnic diversity of the church of Jesus Christ in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, the vast majority of the attempts to evangelise particular cultural groups has followed the HUP.

This model of evangelism has been criticised for placing pragmatics over principles and for being ecclesiologicaly flawed.<sup>14</sup> Do the principles we have identified regarding the perspective of the Bible speak to this issue? As cultural beings people have developed particular sets of beliefs, values and behaviour patterns within their respective social groupings. It would be antithetical to the spirit of the gospel to trivialise cultural differences. If the ignoring of such particularities would undermine gospel ministry, inhibit people's progress in the faith, or even cause them to stumble and fall from grace then it becomes biblically, and not merely pragmatically imperative to take these seriously. This will often necessitate identifying homogeneous people groups who are bound together by various cultural ties and practices, and then developing ministry strategies which will exploit the homogeneity of the group concerned. However, it must also be remembered that the Bible transcends and marginalises cultural particularity. The HUP must not be absolutised. It is unacceptable to exercise cross-cultural ministry on the basis of the HUP if it leads to the development of exclusivistic, introspective churches which despise or eschew fellowship with those of other backgrounds - be they social, educational, racial or cultural backgrounds.

**QUESTION:** *Is it possible for any church to avoid operating according to the HUP?*

<sup>13</sup> As summarised by Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978. 160-161.

<sup>14</sup> So, for example, Glasser argues that any exclusive groupings in the church are a denial of its existence. Arthur F. Glasser, "In Introduction to the Church Growth Perspectives of Donald Anderson McGavran." *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*. Ed. Harvie M. Conn. Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977, 21-42.

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