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DANCING WITH PROPHETS: THE BITTER-SWEET EXPERIENCE OF MULTICULTURALISM

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Introduction: The Challenges of a Multicultural World

Throughout the centuries, we Christians have experienced that most uncomfortable feeling that comes from having to live according to our call to transcend all cultural differences and barriers. Church history can be interpreted as a continuous struggle to deal with the Spirit's forceful lead onto ever growing experiences of cross-cultural exchange, while our basic instinctive tendencies move us in the opposite direction. Even today, after centuries of extensive missionary efforts, some of them undertaken from a rather culturally-sensitive perspective, we are still in great need to think about and work toward a really multicultural fellowship among Christians. Increased international and intercultural exchanges during the last decades, propitiated by the impact of sophisticated technological communication and invasive global market economy that have thrown us all together in the same vital space, have not been enough to overcome our ethnocentric loyalties and priorities.

According to the "U.N. International Migration Report," made public in 2003, today there are 175 million people living outside their country of birth, and this figure has doubled only since 1975. These millions of displaced immigrants have by now become a rather permanent feature of the social landscape of all major countries around the globe transforming it into a kaleidoscope where varied cultures and peoples share the same space. Joseph Chamie, Director of the U.N. Population Division, projects that by the year 2050 the U.S. will have 110 million more people; 80% of them will be immigrants and their descendants.¹ But not even the obvious presence of our different customs and cultures has convinced us of the inevitable fact of multiculturalism as the only way of life available for all of us to healthily survive at the beginning of a new millennium. Nevertheless, whether we are aware of it or not, or whether we like it or not, the only future open to our society is not only multicultural in character, but even "*mestizo*." This means that we are moving definitely in the direction not only of the coexistence of people from different cultures but of the actual mixture of their cultures and their blood through intermarriage. Very passionately and cogently, Virgilio Elizondo has argued that indeed, "The future is *mestizo*." And this not only on account of the massive historical phenomenon going on in the Southwestern United States, but even more so on account of the future awaiting the great Galilean *mestizo*, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus revealed the future of God's plan in and through the medium of his

¹"A Forum Co-sponsored by the Brookings Institution and the Migration Policy Institute. United Nations International Migration Report,"

<http://www.brook.edu/comm/events/20030212.htm>

own half-breed cultural Jewishness which is the cornerstone of a new creation where divisions among peoples and cultures are being brought into a great synthesis.² It is, therefore, of the utmost importance for the multicultural church to incorporate the contributions of the “immigrant church” and of “immigrant theology” in order to develop a new and truly inclusive concept of community within the larger culture which tends to exclude immigrants.³

In an effort to communicate the importance and urgency of this fact, Christians have utilized a host of methods and media; we have even used the most appealing resources of the arts; like in this conference, in which we have been invited to let ourselves be carried away in the rapturous, beautiful movement of dancing at the rhythm, the beat, and the melody of a new, joyful song. However, even when we try to dress our message about multiculturalism in the garb of dance and in the powerful beauty of music and the artistic elements of culture, still, we continue to feel uncomfortable. We feel awkward trying to imitate the new movements and practice the complicated steps foreign to our internalized kinetic sense; we bump onto each other, step on each other’s feet, and stumble in our uncoordinated effort to stay standing and within the rhythm of the new dance. Just as the song tells us, even the Lord of the dance discovered on the cross that it is always “hard to dance with the devil on your back.” For these very reasons we still resist multiculturalism and the new world it incorporates and announces.

This reminds me of a book that appeared almost three decades ago in response to the new melodies and harmonies of a different theological message that resounded very powerfully but very differently at that time. The evocative musical titles and metaphors Robert McAfee Brown used in his review of the liberation theology of the seventies, very aptly catch the tension inherent in multicultural teaching and multicultural living. He spoke of “theology in a new key” and was deeply aware that it “challenged the established harmonies” with “a diminished seventh in need of resolution.” For him, the new hermeneutic approach to the reading of the Bible brought to light “the melodic stridency of Scripture,” and the reaction to the new message was described as “chords of discord.”⁴ In similar fashion, multiculturalism, even in its beautiful musical form of the new dance, continues to be very disturbing to us for it challenges the deeply established forms of movement and rhythm of our soul. I believe it takes something even more powerful than a dancing school to lead us into the new dance; it takes the full force of the Spirit of God.

²Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*, rev. ed. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), pp. xv, 79-81, *passim*.

³See Stephen S. Kim, “From I-Hermeneutics to We-Hermeneutics: Prolegomenon to Theology of Community from an Asian-American Perspective,” in *Proceedings of the Roundtable of Ethnic Minority Theologians*, 1988, p. 50. Quoted in Justo L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 55.

⁴Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).

Caught in the prophetic trance

In order to explain myself, I would like to bring to our consideration two passages from Scripture that to me suggest the ways in which the presence and the power of God are connected with both the tension and the festive-dancing image of the multicultural experience discussed in this conference. The first passage, 1 Samuel 10:5, 6, takes us back to the point in history when the transition between the old tribal world of the judges and the new monarchic era in Israel was taking place. That particular and meaningful moment was marked by a symbolic experience of prophetic dance. The Scripture says that Samuel told Saul:

As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you with power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. (NIV)

A few verses later we read that Saul in fact was surprisingly caught in the enrapturing force of prophetic ecstasy. So surprising was the event that people later coined the popular phrase added by the writer: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" Now, we know that in the ancient Middle East, bands of prophets like the one described in the text were not uncommon. And the use of music and dance was part of the whole technique used to learn how to prophesy and to induce the ecstatic trance under the influence of which the prophets would deliver their messages or glossolalic utterances. As the text points out, the whole experience was attributed to the power of the Spirit, an expression that explained the extraordinary character of these events which drastically affected the behavior of the prophet to the extent that it was interpreted as a profound change of personality. Reflecting along these lines, the obvious question we could ask ourselves today is: are we also among the prophets? In this story I find two of the most important principles that I would like to stress in this presentation, namely, first, that in order for us to be able to faithfully participate in a new multicultural church, the Spirit of God must work powerfully in our lives leading us to the fulfillment of God's purpose for our corporate life, and, secondly, that a profound transformation in our common personality must happen that may allow us to get into the movement of the new dance. Nothing else, short of these two extraordinary and miraculous experiences will be capable to lead this world to truly multicultural Christian living as the body of Christ.

Bitter-sweet prophetic alchemy

The other passage that helps me understand and address the issue of the tension inherent in the promotion of the multicultural church is the one that tells the experience of Ezekiel as he was called to the prophetic ministry. We read in the book of Ezekiel:

Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat

this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.” So, I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth (Ez. 2:9 - 3:3, NIV).

What strikes us immediately in this story is the fact that God’s words in the scroll are only bitter expressions of grieve and pain and death, ominous and threatening words of the imminent judgment about to fall upon Israel, yet by a strange process in the life of the prophet these obviously disgusting words of doom and destruction are transmuted into sweetly tasting words. Here lies one of the secrets of the prophetic vocation, the ability to find God’s word palatable in spite of its apparently unpleasant taste. Here is another important principle I find in the passage for our task of interpreting multicultural living as a prophetic stance undertaken in obedience by the church. Like Ezekiel, we also need the capacity to transform bitterness into honey through an internal process of prophetic “alchemy.” The word of multicultural ministry sounds bitter and has in fact proven bitter in the history of the church. It is a harsh word difficult to accept and obey. Nevertheless, for a faithful church, it becomes sweet, good, joyful news regarding the new world about to flourish where the cultural wealth of all peoples is shared for the glory and service of the Triune God and for mutual edification, enrichment and enjoyment.

In this regard, there is a certain similarity between prophets and poets. Both have to do with the transformation of reality through a process of painful aesthetic creativity. In a beautiful and profound reflection about the poet, Soren Kierkegaard asks:

What is a poet? A poet—he explains—is an unhappy creature, whose heart is tortured by deepest suffering, but whose lips are so formed that when his sighs and cries stream out over them, their sound becomes like the sound of beautiful music. His fate is that of the unfortunates who were imprisoned in Phalaris’ brazen bull, there to be slowly tortured over a low fire; their cries would not reach the tyrant’s ear to strike terror into his heart, they came to him transformed into sweet music. And men flock about the poet, saying: Sing for us soon again; that is to say, may new sufferings torture your soul, and may your lips continue to be formed as before; for the cries would only make us anxious, but the music is lovely.⁵

Poetry is the product of this torture and of this deformity in the poet’s constitution. But the similarity with the prophet’s method and message is only superficial, for, while the esthetics of poetry depends upon the suffering of the poet and is mere human sublimation, the beauty and the sweetness of prophecy depends on the work and power of the Spirit upon the prophet and is a wholly divine creation. Nevertheless, this

⁵Quoted by David F. Swenson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Philosophical Fragments or A Fragment of Philosophy*, by Soren Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. xx, xxi.

prophetic transmutation is a process that takes place in the deepest recesses of the human heart and involves the sometimes painful discipline of obedience to the Word. Multiculturalism is not just poetic beauty; it is radically prophetic. If we were to produce only an external appearance of multiculturalism, full of the folkloric beauty and exotic seduction resulting from a well planned and well managed process of social persuasion and staged artistic choreography, nothing meaningful and transforming would happen. There has to be a profound, costly but glorious process of deep reshaping of our innermost being that may carry out this prophetic miracle the church has to undergo in order to change bitterness into sweetness.

Our earliest struggles with multiculturalism

That Christianity was to be a multicultural religious experience has been clear from the very beginning of Church history. This is evident in the gospels from Jesus' purposes, instructions and commandments to his disciples. It is also evident in the symbolic and foundational model-event of Pentecost. But no sooner had Christianity established a foothold in the religious landscape of Jerusalem when it was already entangled in the struggle against the ever present resistance to prophetic multicultural living. And ever since then, the church has found that it is not easy or pleasant to live according to its call and nature. Having to incorporate both the needs and the gifts of people from different cultures runs against the grain of established religious and cultural patterns. We all tend to socialize with birds of our own feather. This is normal. But not normative . . .at least, not for Christians. By its very nature, Christianity is countercultural and, therefore, disruptive of our established habits, customs, loyalties, and affinities. Thus, we have always resisted it.

The Book of Acts portrays with amazing honesty and candor the series of failures of the church to faithfully live up to its call to be multicultural. For the earliest Judeo-Palestinian Christian community in Jerusalem, resistance to the prophetic multicultural church was expressed in the form of a not so subtle and perhaps unintentional but nonetheless destructive discrimination. The widows among the Greek-speaking Jews were neglected in the distribution of food (Acts 6:1-7). They were the objects and victims of the ever recurring societal neglect for the weakest members of a group and the subconscious proclivity to discrimination against minorities and non-dominant sectors of the population.

Resistance to multicultural church-life was expressed through discrimination against the Judeo-Hellenistic segment of the community. The situation has obvious cultural factors, namely, the language that prevented the Hellenistic widows from defending their rights from the very beginning, but it also has other ethnic components, since the more internationally-socialized Jews of the *diaspora*, so different in customs and attitudes, were considered somewhat paganized by the more purist-inclined Palestinian Jews. There is also the obvious economic component associated with the just and fair distribution of goods available to the community. Finally, there is the political component, or the dimension of the struggle for power that obtains within groups of different racial, social or ethnic background, in this case wisely solved by the election of a group of "the seven" representatives of the Hellenistic Jews *vis-à-vis* "the

twelve” apostles representing the Palestinian Jews. Notice that the minority was properly empowered and given control over its own issues.

From this experience, it is evident that prophetic multicultural life according to the demands of the gospel is in fact a constellation of many and very significant factors. That is what makes it so difficult for the inclinations of the flesh to accept the intimations of the Spirit toward a different dance . . . so much is at risk for our carnal tendencies.

The beautiful account of Acts 10 and 11 is another monument to the formidable work of the Spirit mysteriously and convincingly working to eradicate personal prejudices and attitudes that resist the multicultural prophetic church. At the beginning, Peter finds himself unwilling to dance the new song of the Spirit. His own limited perspectives about pure and impure peoples and cultures did not allow him naturally to envision a Gentile Christian world alongside his Jewish Christian community. It was not only offensive but even “against the law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him” according to Peter’s own words in the account (10:28); consequently, for the leader of the early church all Christian efforts to communicate the Gospel had to remain restricted to the somewhat comfortable area of his own people and culture. The Spirit, however, will not dance within that limited space. Fortunately, Peter was teachable and obedient enough to let himself be carried away, literally, by the ecstasy of the new dance, but had to pay the price of the prophetic steps he was now practicing—he was called to be questioned by the other apostles and members of the Jewish-Christian community. The bitter disputation that followed with the circumcised believers, however, was transformed into the sweet doxology at the end of the session acknowledging the presence of the Spirit in other peoples and cultures.

Another form of the resistance to the multicultural church was expressed in the early church’s development of methods and policies to carry out its missionary and evangelistic efforts. According to Acts 11:19, it was customary for those who bore witness to the gospel in the early days to tell the message “only to the Jews.” This was the established practice even among the Hellenistic Jews in spite of the fact that they were at ease living within the international Greco-Roman communities. Apparently, this “only to the Jews” tendency was due to an established practice supported by an approved policy of the mother church in Jerusalem. Evangelistic and outreach efforts in the church are at times unfortunately based upon prejudiced inclinations later instituted into official policies. But the Spirit was about to overturn this tendency. It was those very people among the Hellenistic Jews who for the first time broke the rules of engagement, went beyond the protocols of missionary outreach and started a movement of the Spirit that grew to become the beginning of the dynamic Hellenistic mission which resulted in the development of Gentile Christianity to this very day.

These resolute Antiochian Christians, endowed with cross-cultural gifts of the Spirit and willing to dance and live according to the lead of the Lord, are the architects of the multicultural church. Among these bilingual and bicultural missionaries, Barnabas and Paul stand out supremely. But, again, their pioneering efforts and success were faced by bitter opposition and stubborn resistance. A very intense, well-planned, international campaign, complete with theological argumentation, was launched to stop the new multicultural missionary trend in the church. In Acts 15 we read of pharisaic-

like Christians from Judea who went all the way to other countries to teach the need for new Gentile converts to submit to Jewish cultural and religious customs as prerequisites for salvation. Since then, there has been a tendency for dominant, self-proclaimed authoritative centers of Christianity to determine, on the basis of their own cultural understanding of the faith, what they think must be appropriate and normative in theology, liturgy or mission for all other Christians. This tendency to “circumcise” all other cultures amounts to a well-concerted and very successful plan to suffocate the possibilities of the multicultural church intended by the Holy Spirit. Thank God, the early church was not only wise in dealing with the issue, but especially open to the work of the Holy Spirit. It came up with the convening of the so called "Council of Jerusalem" which wrestled with the bitter-sweet issues involved in missionary outreach and the project to stifle the lead of the Spirit toward multicultural patterns of church life. Again, the distasteful contention that originated the need for the council gave way to the establishment of agreeable sound theological principles (no circumcision required for salvation) and a practical cultural compromise between the two parties involved (abstaining from customs offensive to the Jews), thus creating the basis for a multicultural project for the future of Christianity.

The threats posed by multiculturalism

The culture in which every one of us has been socialized is that invisible though powerful complex web of life-sustaining spiritual structures that make our life in the universe possible and meaningful. We all, therefore, instinctively resist the multicultural life-style because it complicates our existence by forcing us into the unfamiliar, the different, the “other”; it expands, challenges and threatens long established patterns of individual and societal life from which we profit. These patterns, however, very frequently involve benefits that obtain at the expense of other cultures or people. Thus, if true multiculturalism is to prevail, many of the negative patterns that cater to our interests and privileges would have to go. In this effort, Christians in the dominant cultures will do well to pay attention to those theologians among the ethnic minorities who offer constructive criticism toward the development of a multicultural theological paradigm.⁶

To start with, we have to mention **ethnocentrism**, the naive idea that our way of life, of doing things and of experiencing the universe, just because it works very well for us, is the only one available to all people. This simplistic idea, then gets complicated by the fact that we tend to think that our way is the right way while the others are wrong and thus we try to make ours normative and even compulsory for everybody else. All

⁶See, for instance, the proposals of the Roundtable of Ethnic Minority Theologians reminding us that true catholicity in our theology has to be multicultural in character and must take into account that “Western churches and their theologies fell prey to the influence of capitalistic, imperialistic ideologies, and participated in, or at least acquiesced to, the expansionist oppression policies of the West. . . . We want to do theology for the oppressed, not to scorn or fight the West but to dialogue in search of the more holistic, more just, more humane, authentic community in which we all are but destined to coexist.” Quoted in González, p. 32.

other cultural forms are then considered deviant, wrong and inferior. Ethnocentrism is, therefore, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, for it denies the grace of God bestowed upon all of God-created cultures and peoples, and leads to sinful and unjust cultural scorn and oppression. The multicultural dimension of the church means that we are willing to acknowledge the equal status of all cultures before God and renounce the use of systemic cultural dominance to pursue our interests and further our privileges. Against the inveterate tendencies of dominant cultures to install themselves at the center of the universe, the multicultural mission calls us to accept the challenge of marginality and exclusion represented by those who are relegated toward the periphery of social and cultural existence. We are called in that direction by the Lord who himself became a member of the marginalized classes and groups in his own time and culture. In the experience of those communities who have undergone the systemic sting of marginalization, like the Asian-American communities, Jesus becomes “the margin of marginality” in order to provide us with a paradigm of a new redemptive marginality, according to Jung Young Lee.⁷ Obviously, ethnocentrism is threatened by the development of the multicultural church.

The worst of all the vicious cultural patterns that affect our world is that of **racism**. Resistance to multicultural efforts in church life is to a very large extent the result of the racist proclivities operating within every one of us. The concept of race and its consequence, racism, is obviously not a biological or genetic category, not a scientific concept,⁸ but a social construct, a historical development, a cultural and political ideology; it operates through a constellation of cultural mechanisms arising from our irrational fear and rejection of that which is culturally and physically different. In a sense, it is an insidious handicap that plagues the whole of humankind; it is like an unfortunate halt in our human development that impedes our growth to full maturity tying us back to our irrational childish fears, reinforcing them, and ultimately rendering us dangerous and violent against those who are culturally different. Dominant cultures have greatly and unjustly profited from this tendency. The church, essentially understood as multicultural in nature, is, however, the antidote for racism. It helps us to overcome our instinctive fears by providing us with a safely warm, loving and inviting opportunity to grow toward cultural maturity through the dynamic resources of Christian faith in accordance with God’s will. This has been known from the very beginning of Christianity, but the inevitable multiculturalism worked out providentially by the Holy Spirit has sometimes been handled inappropriately and against its own purpose by church leaders on behalf of a particular culture. Thus, many of the early church controversies can be understood as launched in order to affirm the priority of one culture over another. Such was the controversy regarding circumcision that we spoke about in the

⁷Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995), *passim*.

⁸The American Anthropological Association concluded that “differentiating species into biologically defined ‘races’ has proven meaningless and unscientific.” Quoted in Fumitaka Matsuoka, *The Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), p. 44.

previous section. There was also the second century controversy against Montanism,⁹ which was popular in Asia and Africa but rejected in parts of Europe. Later on, other cultural struggles arose like those between Antioch, Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople regarding Christology in the fifth century.¹⁰ The final great cultural schism of AD 1054 between the Latin-speaking West and the Greek-speaking East, which included such cultural differences as the Western clean-shaven clergy over against Eastern bearded clergy, the celibacy of clergy in the West against the married clergy of the East or the use of unleavened bread for the Eucharist in the West as against the use of leavened bread in the East.¹¹ Interestingly, even today, although the majority of Christians now live in the South and the weight and growth of Christianity has moved away from the North to the South and from the First- to the Third-world countries, still the official languages in international ecclesiastical gatherings are those of the dominant cultures.

It should be obvious for all of us that the only form of church Christ intended was a multicultural church whose shape, both historically and eschatologically, is that of a multitude “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev.7:9, NIV). The church universal can only be the church multicultural. The church we confess in our creedal statements is not the private enclaves we build to protect the interests of our class, nation or race behind the pretense of religion or piety. The church that is at the heart of our faith commitment is that made up “from every nation, tribe, people and language.” That is why in its fullest form, the multicultural church is a lethal weapon against all these sinful expressions of our fallen nature, that is, discrimination, oppression, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, racism, political imperialism, economic exploitation, injustice. It is only the structures of “this world” that perpetuate these sinful patterns through tyrannical monocultural patterns of societal life. That is the source of the bitter opposition the church faces today as it strenuously works toward increased multicultural faithfulness. It is this bitterness that has to be finally transcended into the sweetness that results from the alchemy of prophetic obedience.

Learning the steps of the new dance

Certainly the Lord knew what he was doing when he founded the church multicultural. Multiculturalism indeed by its very nature represents an enrichment of our spiritual horizon. It provides a richer treasure of resources for meaningfully coping with life and existence; it expands our possibilities for worship, for fellowship and mission by opening us to the cross-fertilization that comes from the gracious acceptance of the contributions of other people and the humble offering of our unique gifts. The multicultural church further promotes our common human development as true human beings by letting us know that part of our own being comes from the “others” as gifts of

⁹*Ibid.* p. 165 f.

¹⁰Cf. Justo L. González, *Historia del pensamiento cristiano* (Buenos Aires: Methopress, 1965), I, p. 359 ff.

¹¹See Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol. I: *Beginnings to AD 1500*. Revised Edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p.571.

the “Wholly Other,” the mystery, source and goal of our own total being. According to Ephesians 3:18 and 19, knowledge of the love of God is beyond the capabilities of an individual Christian—or even of a single cultural expression of Christianity—because it surpasses all human knowledge; but it is through our interaction “together with all the saints” that we are able to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is. Thus, fullness of human life can only be actualized within the realm and mystery of the church multicultural. By disciplining ourselves into learning the steps of the new dance of the Spirit leading to the magnificent symphony of the multicultural church we will also be able to enrich our fidelity and obedience to the Lord.

In our efforts to be obedient and develop our multicultural ministry, however, certain precautions have to be taken so that we learn the right steps of the new dance. For instance, we have to avoid **obsessive multiculturalism** or the implementation of efforts, techniques and programs of multicultural character at any cost, forcing them upon the people in the church in a frantic, mechanistic manner. Not all people and groups accept changes at the same pace. Cultural change sometimes takes years, even decades to occur in a healthy way; consequently, it demands sensitivity, patience and wise timeliness on the part of those who promote it.

Along with this, there is also **bureaucratic multiculturalism** which descends from on high and is imposed upon an unprepared population with very limited fruit. The organizers of this conference know how important it is to carefully help create conditions that are conducive to the obedience of the gospel of the multicultural church. And they know very well how long it takes to get people ready to embrace the new melodies and motions and plasticity of the world to come. It has taken years of constant work to build up awareness and create momentum. We have been learning this for two thousand years just to find out that we must go back to square one and start all over again.

For this very reason, it is also important to avoid that kind of **faddish multiculturalism** which is the result of our tendencies to buy the latest missiological products in the market out of the itching to be “relevant” or “contemporary” just because this is the “cool” thing to do. Regrettably, when this is the motivation for our endeavors we lack depth of commitment and clarity of vision; thus, when we experience the hardships or the ups and downs of an unstable economy, we just cancel our efforts; or, once new trends occupy the religious or theological market’s attention we abandon the project and try something new. But, if the shape of the church is eschatologically multicultural, then this must be a permanent task of the church’s mission and not simply a temporary emphasis.

Similar in its superficiality but perhaps even more misguided is what I would call **folkloric multiculturalism** which consists of the utilization of resources, symbols, objects, images and even people from other cultures to provide an attractive effect to certain religious activities. Here, all we try to do is satisfy the sense of curiosity of the people and to appeal to their inclination for the exotic and extravagant attractiveness of strangely looking costumes or actions to provide “a nice touch” or an entirely theatrical setting to worship. Unfortunately, all of this is done without addressing the deep issues involved in the true multicultural effort, namely, those of real human fellowship, racial prejudice, discrimination, cultural equality, injustice, ethnocentrism, etc.

Finally, I will mention **ideological multiculturalism**, an attempt to acknowledge the inevitable presence of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the midst of a dominant culture but with a view to exercise social control over the impact of that presence. The externals of their culture are accepted to some degree, but the effort is made to assimilate them as people as soon as possible in order to eliminate the potentially disruptive effect they might have upon the established patterns of the dominant community. It is important to avoid their efforts to gather together as a group and to affirm their identity as minorities because that runs contrary to official, multicultural policies. At a certain meeting, a group of Hispanic pastors were planning some events that included the affirmation of their Hispanic heritage in worship and other activities. A person who was evidently uncomfortable with that affirmation immediately objected that such a thing was contrary to the current denominational policies which rather promote all cultures while none is affirmed in particular. If we were to understand multiculturalism in this narrow way, it would certainly be no more than another oppressive mechanism utilized to control minorities instead of empowering them so they can share in the larger community; such a practice disregards the total contributions and needs of brothers and sisters from different ethnic or cultural background.¹²

It is important to understand that the multicultural project has a profound and complex spiritual component based upon the providential sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ. This providential design is more properly grasped and understood when we develop a sound and disciplined spirituality that allows us to be attuned to God's works and ways in our lives and in the life of God's church. It is the Spirit of God who sensitizes us to what God is doing in our midst. The multicultural church cannot be soundly developed where there is not a deep and vibrant spirituality, a genuine openness to the sanctifying, transforming, powerful presence of God. We cannot afford merely to go through the motions of well-designed but superficial plans and programs without also providing a rich soil into which the Spirit of the Lord will place the seed of the new world proclaimed by the multicultural movement. As Fumitaka Matsuoka has said, the matters of race relations—that underlie the issue of multiculturalism—are “more than social and programmatic concerns. They are indeed highly spiritual and religious in nature. The question becomes ultimately that of our convictions, worldviews, faith commitments.”¹³ Let the Holy Spirit fully and powerfully take over our lives the way God took over Saul's, and let God do the deep transformation needed for

¹²Although ethnic churches acknowledge that they are very imperfect representations of the multicultural, all-inclusive church, they are nevertheless necessary at the present moment as important prophetic witnesses in the midst of the dominant culture. They provide indispensable vital shelter and identity to immigrants who are not only excluded from the larger society but who are threatened by absorption and dehumanization in a culture they do not understand. The dominant church needs to protect and empower these congregations supporting their significant though temporary mission until the church at large gets rid of its exclusionary prejudices and becomes truly hospitable and welcoming, a real multicultural church. Cf. González, p. 57.

¹³Matsuoka, p. 126.

us to join the prophets and the dance.

In this process, attention must be also given to what Jesus called “the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:3). God’s providential work operates through historical means and circumstances. Much of the multicultural condition is the result of the mysterious work of the Spirit in the world today creating opportunities for the church to obey God’s lead. In this sense, the church must always be a careful reader and interpreter of historical circumstances that point in the direction of God’s will and purposes in history. While there seems to be massive evidence in the world regarding the multicultural nature of contemporary life in the planet, it is also important to understand that not all places and sectors of the population participate in the multicultural character of the church in the same way. This is what allows us understand that the multicultural project does not mean the same thing for those in the dominant culture than it means for those minority groups at the margins. While the former need to be willing to forfeit their privilege, the latter still need to get empowered and affirmed so that their full potential can contribute to the multicultural symphony. By being attentive to the signs of the times, by analyzing social and historical conditions regarding the particular social location and circumstances of the different groups within the dominant culture, the church can learn to be more effective in its own growth and development toward a multicultural ecclesiology.

Join the party! An open ending

Jesus’ masterful depiction of the nature and joy of the kingdom of God in the parable of the prodigal son ends with a thought-provoking scene of music and dance with a deliciously ambiguous open ending. For centuries, Christians have wondered what ever happened to the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. What did he do when he heard the music and the dances in response to his father’s invitation to join the party? I would like to think that the gracious invitation of the father and the joyful sound of the dance were powerful enough to overcome his bitterness and transform it into the sweetness of the gospel. He joined the party. He learned the steps. In doing that, he also experienced the joy of heaven as he danced the new song along with his younger brother.