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methodological, anthropological, historical, ethical and theological implications of the HUP, and five participants responded; these papers and responses were then debated with a further 25 consultants. The findings of the colloquium are published by the LCWE as Occasional Paper No. 1.

At the colloquium, Donald McGavran defined the HUP as a section of society in which all members have some characteristics in common such as geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, vocational or economical, or a combination of several of these factors. This common characteristic makes them all feel at home with each other, gives them a group identity in terms of 'we', in distinction to 'they'. Following the spirit of Lausanne, the colloquium obviously stressed the evangelistic implications of the HUP.

The following articles in the section on Mission and Evangelism reopen the debate on the HUP, not only because of its continued significance, but also because several fresh evaluations of the HUP are now available.

Perhaps one of the best exegetical studies relevant to the issue is that of René Padilla, and so we start with his rather substantial criticism of the HUP. This is followed by a new defence by Donald McGavran himself. Then two concrete cases, each exemplifying the issues discussed are appended.

We invite our readers to respond with articles or letters to the Editor.

Sunand Sumithra p. 248

The Nature and Mission of the Church: The Case for Unity

C. René Padilla

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Throughout the entire New Testament the oneness of the people of God as a oneness that transcends all outward distinctions is taken for granted. The thought is that with the coming of Jesus Christ all the barriers that divide humankind have been broken down and a new humanity is now taking shape *in* and *through* the church. God's purpose in Jesus Christ includes the oneness of the human race, and that oneness becomes visible in the church. In the first part of this article we shall examine the New Testament teaching on the oneness of the church in which God's purpose to unite all things in Jesus Christ is expressed. In the second part we shall examine the historical unfolding of God's purpose of unity in apostolic times. Finally, in the last part, we shall evaluate Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit principle, according to which 'men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers,'¹ in the light of our previous analysis of scripture teaching and apostolic practice.

¹ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p.108.

1. GOD'S PURPOSE OF UNITY IN JESUS CHRIST

The Bible knows nothing of the human being as an individual in isolation; it knows only of a person as a *related* being, a person in relation to other people. Much of its teaching is colored by the Hebrew concept of human solidarity, for which H. Wheeler Robinson coined a well-worn label—‘corporate personality’. Accordingly, the church is viewed in the New Testament as the solidarity that has been created in Jesus Christ and that stands in contrast with the old humanity represented by Adam. The Adam-solidarity is humankind under the judgement of God. Its oneness is a oneness of sin and death. But where sin abounded, grace has abounded all the more. As a result, the Adam-solidarity can no longer be viewed in isolation from Christ’s world, in which God has justified sinners. Over against the darkness of death that fell upon humanity through the first Adam, the light of life has broken into the world through the last Adam ([Rom. 5:12–21](#)). By means [p. 249](#) of the first Adam, the kingdom of death was established among humankind; humanity as a whole slipped into the void of meaningless existence out of fellowship with God and under his judgement. By means of the last Adam, a new humanity comes into existence, in which the results of the fall are undone and God’s original purpose for humanity is fulfilled.

The letter to the Ephesians assembles a number of insights regarding the new humanity brought into being by Jesus Christ. It opens with a doxology ([1:3–14](#)) in which the unity of Jew and Gentile in the church is viewed in the light of God’s eternal purpose, which includes the creation of a new order with Christ as the head. The whole universe is depicted as intended by God to be ‘summed up’ or ‘recapitulated’ in Christ, moving towards an *anakephalaiosis*—a harmony in which ‘all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ.’² In that context, the unity of Jew and Gentile (vv.[13–14](#)) can only be understood as a proleptic fulfillment of that which God is to accomplish in the ‘fulness of time’ (v.[10](#)).

Both Jews and Gentiles may now receive the seal of the Spirit by faith. Circumcision, which in former days was the sign of participation in the Abrahamic covenant, in the new order becomes irrelevant—it is merely an outward sign and it has been superseded by the ‘circumcision made without hands’ ([Col. 2:11](#)). With the coming of Christ, ‘neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation’ ([Gal. 6:15](#) cf. [5:6](#)). God has brought into being a new humanity in which the barriers that separated the Gentiles from the Jews are broken down ([Eph. 2:11](#) ff.). Out of the two large homogeneous units whose enmity was proverbial in the ancient world God has made *one*; two enemies have been reconciled in ‘one body’ (v.[16](#)). In his death Jesus Christ removed the wall that stood between the two systems under which ‘the people’ (*am*) and ‘the nations’ (*goyim*) had lived in former days. Now both Jews and Gentiles stand as equal in the presence of God (v. [18](#)), as members of a new fellowship that may be described as a city, a family, and a building (vv.[19–20](#)). Thus the unity that God wills for the entire universe according to the first chapter of Ephesians becomes historically visible in a community where reconciliation both to God and to one another is possible on the basis of Christ’s work.

Further on, in chapter [3](#), Paul claims that God’s purpose of unity in Jesus Christ has been made known to him ‘by revelation’ (v.[3](#)). He is a steward of a ‘mystery’ that was hitherto faintly perceived but that has [p. 250](#) now been revealed, namely, that in Christ ‘the nations’ have a share in the blessings of the gospel, together with ‘the people’, on the common ground of God’s grace. Unmistakably, the unity of Jew and Gentile is here said to be *the gospel*,—not simply a result that should take place as the church is ‘perfected’, but

² J. B. Lightfoot, quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), p.33.

an essential aspect of the kerygma that the apostle proclaimed on the basis of Scripture (vv.8–9). Furthermore, it is conceived as an object lesson of God’s manifold wisdom, displayed for the instruction of the inhabitants of the celestial realms, both good and evil (v.10).

The unity resulting from Christ’s work is not an abstract unity but a new community in which *life in Christ* becomes the decisive factor. The only peoplehood that has validity in the new order is that related to the church as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Pet. 2:9). Although made up of Jews and Gentiles, the church is placed together with Jews and Greeks (non-Jews), as a third group (1 Cor. 10:32). It is viewed as ‘the seed of Abraham’ in which, since one is incorporated without any conditions apart from faith in Jesus Christ, ‘there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor freeman’, for all are one (*heis*) in Christ (Gal. 3:28). No one would, on the basis of this passage, suggest that Gentiles have to become Jews, females have to become males, and slaves have to become free in order to share in the blessings of the gospel. But no justice is done to the text unless it is taken to mean that in Jesus Christ a new reality has come into being—a unit based on faith in him, in which membership is in no way dependent upon race, social status, or sex. No mere ‘spiritual’ unity, but a concrete community made up of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women, all of them as equal members of the Christ-solidarity—that is the thrust of the passage. And, as Donald Guthrie puts it, ‘Paul is not expressing a hope, but a fact.’³

A similar idea is conveyed again in Colossians 3:11, where Paul states that for those who have been incorporated into the new humanity created in Jesus Christ, the divisions that affect the old humanity have become irrelevant: ‘Here there cannot be Gentile and Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all.’ Race loses its importance because all the believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, belong to the ‘Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16). Religious background is neither here nor there because ‘the true circumcision’ (Phil. 3:3) is made up of Jews who are Jews inwardly, whose circumcision is ‘real circumcision ... a matter of the heart, p. 251 spiritual and not literal’ (Rom. 2:28–29). Social stratifications are beside the point because in the new humanity the slave becomes his own master’s ‘beloved brother’ (Philem. v.15); the slave is called to serve the Lord and not humankind (Col. 3:22) and the free person is to live as one who has a Master in heaven (Col. 4:11). Here—in the corporate new human, in the new homogeneous unit that has been brought into being in Jesus Christ—the only thing that matters is that ‘Christ is all and in all’. Those who have been baptized ‘into one body’ (1 Cor. 12:13) are members of a community in which the differences that separate people in the world have become obsolete. It may be true that ‘men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers’, but that is irrelevant. Membership in the body of Christ is not a question of likes or dislikes, but a question of incorporation into a new humanity under the lordship of Christ. Whether a person likes it or not, the same act that reconciles one to God *simultaneously* introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another. ‘The unifier is Jesus Christ and the unifying principle is the “Gospel”.’⁴

God’s purpose is to bring the universe ‘into a unity in Christ’ (Eph. 1:10, NEB). That purpose is yet to be consummated. But *already*, in anticipation of the end, a new humanity has been created in Jesus Christ and those who are incorporated in him form a unit

³ Donald Guthrie, *Galatians* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1969), p.115.

⁴ John A. Mackay, *God’s Order: The Ephesian Letter and the Present Time* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1953), p.84.

wherein all the divisions that separate people in the old humanity are done away with. The original unity of the human race is thus restored; God's purpose of unity in Jesus Christ is thus made historically visible.

II. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AND THE APOSTOLIC PRACTICE

A cursory examination of the New Testament shows the way in which the teaching on the new unity of the church developed in the foregoing section was implemented by the apostles. Furthermore, it brings into focus the difficulties that the early church faced as it sought to live in the light of God's purpose of unity in Jesus Christ. The breaking down of the barriers between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, and between male and female, could no more be taken for granted in the first century than the breaking of the barriers between black and white, between rich and poor, and between male and female today. But all the New Testament evidence points to an apostolic P. 252 practice consistent with the aim of forming churches in which God's purpose would become a concrete reality.

JESUS' EXAMPLE

The apostles had no need to speculate as to what a community in which loyalty to Jesus Christ relativized all the differences would look like; they could look back to the community that Jesus had gathered around himself during his earthly ministry. True, he had not demanded a rigidly structured uniformity, yet he had attained the formation of a community that had been held together by a common commitment to him, in the face of which all the differences that could have separated them had been overcome. Members of the revolutionary party (like 'Simon who was called the Zealot,' [Lk. 6:15](#)) had become one with 'publicans'—private businessmen in charge of collecting taxes for the government of the occupying power (like Matthew, in [Mt. 9:9-13](#); cf. [Lk. 19:1-10](#)). Humble women of dubious reputation (cf. [Lk. 7:36-39](#)) had mixed with wealthy women whose economic means made the travelling ministry of Jesus and his followers possible ([Lk. 8:1-3](#)). Women had been accepted on the same basis as men, despite the common view, expressed by Josephus, that a woman 'is in every respect of less worth than a man.'⁵

To be sure, Jesus had limited his mission to the Jews and had imposed the same limitation to his apostles before his resurrection. Yet, as Jeremias has demonstrated, he had anticipated that the Gentiles would share in the revelation given to Israel and would participate in God's people.⁶ Accordingly, he had commanded his disciples to proclaim the gospel to 'all nations'; the Gentile mission was to be the means through which the Gentiles would be accepted as guests at God's table ([Mt. 8:11](#); cf. [Isa. 25:6-8](#)).

THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

On the day of Pentecost, the gospel was proclaimed to a large multitude of pilgrims that had come to Jerusalem for the great Jewish Feast of the Weeks ([Acts 2:1-13](#)). The heterogeneous nature of the multitude is stressed in the narrative by reference to the variety of languages (vv. [6-8](#)) and lands and cultures (vv. [9-11](#)) represented among them.

⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1971), pp.223ff.

⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (London: SCM Press, 1958).

Granted that the ‘devout men’ (*andres eulabeis*) mentioned in verse 5 should be taken as Jews rather than as Gentile God-fearers, the fact **p. 253** that Luke wants to press home upon us is that ‘every nation under heaven’ was represented and that the mighty works of God were proclaimed in the indigenous languages and dialects of many lands. The worldwide proclamation of the gospel—the proclamation to be portrayed in the succeeding chapters of Acts—was thus anticipated in one single event in which even the linguistic barriers were miraculously broken down for the sake of the spread of the gospel ‘to the end of the earth’ (1:8). The point here is that at Pentecost people became Christian with people from ‘every nation under heaven’ (2:5), including ‘visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes’ (v.10). Accordingly, Peter understood Pentecost—the gift of the Spirit—as the means whereby the promise of the gospel (that ‘all the nations of the earth should be blessed,’ [Gen. 12:3](#)) was extended not only to those present but also to their descendants as well as to ‘all that are far off’ (v.39).

The Christian community that resulted from Pentecost was, of course, made up mainly of Jewish Christians. What else could be expected before the Gentile mission? Yet, it would be a great mistake to conclude that it was in their Jewishness that they found their identity. No racial homogeneity, but Pentecost, was the basis of their unity. Only in the light of the outpouring of the Spirit are we able to understand how it was possible for the early Jerusalem church to include in its constituency ‘unlearned and ignorant men’ (*agrammatoi ... kai idiotai*, [Acts 4:13](#); ‘*amme ha-aretz*, people of the land,’ according to rabbinical terminology), and educated priests (6:7), and, at a later stage, Pharisees (15:5; cf. 11:2); poor people in need of help and wealthy landlords (2:44–45; 4:32–37), possibly members of a well-to-do foreign community;⁷ Jews (Aramaic-speaking, most of them natives of Palestine), ‘Hellenists’ (Greek-speaking Jews from the Dispersion) (6:1ff.), and at least one Gentile from Syrian Antioch (v.5).

Luke’s record shows that the basic ecclesiastical unit for both preaching and teaching was the house church ([Acts 2:46](#); 5:42; cf. 12:2, 17; 21:18). But there is nothing in Acts to support the view that ‘the mixed church at Jerusalem divided along homogeneous unit lines,’⁸ or to lead us as much as to imagine that there were different house churches for the educated and for the uneducated, for the rich **p. 254** and for the poor, for the Palestinian Jews and for the Jews from the Dispersion. All the evidence points in the opposite direction. One of Luke’s main emphases as he describes the church growing out of Pentecost is, in fact, that the believers were ‘together’ (*epi to auto*, with a quasi-technical sense; cf. 2:44); that they had ‘all things in common’ (2:44; 4:32); that they were ‘of one heart and soul’ (4:32). The burden of proof lies with anyone who, despite Luke’s description, continues to hold that the early church in Jerusalem was organized according to homogeneous units.

A problem that soon arose in the early Jerusalem church was due precisely to the heterogeneous nature of the community—the ‘Hellenists’ complained against the ‘Hebrews’ because their widows were not receiving a fair share from the common pool that had been formed ([Acts 6:1](#)). No clearer illustration of the way in which the apostles faced the problems of division in the church can be found than the one recorded here. A modern church-growth expert might have suggested the creation of two distinct denominations, one for Palestinian Jews and another one for Greek Jews. That would have

⁷ E. A. Judge, *The Social Patterns of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), p.55.

⁸ C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind Of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), pp.122–23. If both Jews and Gentiles were divided into ‘numerous important homogenous units’ (*ibid.*, p.114), why does Wagner argue that the Jerusalem church was divided into only two groups, the Hellenists and the Hebrews?

certainly been a *practical* solution to the tensions existing between the two conflicting homogeneous units! We are told, however, that the apostles called the community together and asked them to choose seven men who would be responsible for the daily distribution (vv.2-6). The unity of the church across cultural barriers was thus preserved.

THE CHURCH IN SYRIAN ANTIOCH

Following Stephen's martyrdom, a great persecution arose against the Jerusalem church, apparently mainly against the Hellenist believers with whom Stephen had been identified ([Acts 8:1](#)). A result of the persecution, however, was that the first large-scale evangelization outside Palestine was launched by exiles who travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch ([11:19](#)).

According to Luke's report, these exiles, aside from a few, shared the gospel with 'none except Jews' (v.19). Why so, one may ask. No explicit answer is given in the narrative, yet this statement is used by Donald McGavran to support the claim that in the years following Pentecost the church made 'early adjustments' that favoured the spread of the gospel and resulted in 'one-race congregations' that 'arose by the dozens; perhaps by the hundreds.'⁹ Luke's record, however, does not substantiate the thesis that the apostles deliberately p. 255 promoted the formation of 'one-race congregations' and tolerated Jewish prejudices against the Gentiles for the sake of numerical church growth. In order to claim that it does, one needs to come to Scripture with the preconceived idea (1) that the apostles shared the modern theory that race prejudice 'can be understood and should be made an aid to Christianization,'¹⁰ and (2) that the multiplication of the church invariably requires an adjustment to the homogeneous unit principle. Without this unwarranted assumption, one can hardly miss the point made by Acts that the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles was such a difficult step for the Jerusalem church that it took place only with the aid of visions and commands ([8:26ff](#); [10:1-16](#)) or under the pressure of persecution ([8:1ff](#); [11:19-20](#)). No suggestion is ever given that Jewish Christians preached the gospel to 'none except Jews' *because of strategic considerations*. All the evidence points to the fact that restrictions placed on the proclamation of the gospel even by Greek-speaking Jews was due to scruples that would have to be overcome (as in Peter's case when he was sent to Cornelius) if the Gentiles were to receive the Word of God and if the Jews were to see that 'God shows no partiality' (as in the case of those in Judea who heard that Cornelius and his kinsmen and friends had believed). As long as Jewish Christians allowed inherited prejudices to persist, probably because of their fear that this contact with Gentiles might be interpreted by fellow Jews as an act whereby they were 'traitorously joining a strange people' (to borrow McGavran's expression), they could only preach 'to none except the Jews'. Who would have thought that their approach, based on such a limited outlook, would be used as a pattern for evangelism in the twentieth century?

The evangelists who took the new step of preaching the gospel to Gentiles in Syrian Antioch were unnamed 'men of Cyprus and Cyrene' ([11:20](#)). The importance of this step can hardly be overestimated. Antioch was the third largest city in the world, 'almost a microcosm of Roman antiquity in the first century, a city which encompassed most of the

⁹ Donald McGavran, *The Clash between Christianity and Culture* (Washington, D.C. Canon Press, 1974), p.23.

¹⁰ Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A study in the Strategy of Missions*, (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), p.10.

advantages, the problems, and the human interests, with which the new faith would have to grapple.’¹¹ Soon the church there would become the base for the Gentile mission.

There is no evidence that those who received the gospel in Antioch were relatives to the exiles coming from Jerusalem. Perhaps they were, but this is merely a conjecture and lends no solid support to the idea [p. 256](#) that ‘in Antioch for both the Jerusalem refugees and the resident Christians we have bridges of relationship into the Greek people’.¹² Furthermore, nothing is said by Luke to lead us to the conclusion that the evangelization of Gentiles in this city took place in the synagogue. That might have been the case, but if the correct reading in verse [20](#) is *hellenas* rather than *hellenistas*, Gentile of Greek culture would be meant. Floyd Filson may be right in believing that the evangelized were ‘Gentiles who had had no previous contact with the synagogue.’¹³ The message that was preached to them was centered in Jesus as Lord (*Kyrios*) and was thus cast in terms not entirely unfamiliar to people living in a cosmopolitan city where salvation was being offered by many cults and mystery religions in the name of other lords. God’s power was with the evangelists and as a result many believed. Unless we are to assume that for the sake of numerical growth the ‘great number’ of those who believed were immediately separated into homogeneous unit house churches,¹⁴ the clear implication is that the church that came into being embraced both Jewish and Gentile believers *on an equal basis* and that there was no thought that the latter had to accept Jewish practices as a prerequisite. At a later stage, as we shall see, the question of the place of Jewish ceremonial law in the church was to become a matter of debate. But there is no evidence that at the start of the Antioch church the evangelists resorted to the homogeneous unit principle in order to accomplish their task. How was unity preserved when there were many members who did not keep the Jewish ceremonial law and there were others who did? We are not told. We can imagine that difficulties would arise. ‘But,’ as Adolf Schlatter has commented, ‘the early Church never shirked difficulties; it attacked bravely. So nothing more is said about these difficulties, and we do not hear how intercourse in the mixed communities was secured.’¹⁵

An insight into the degree to which people from a variety of backgrounds worked together in the Antioch church is found in the list of leaders provided by Luke in [Acts 13:1](#). ‘Barnabas, Symeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.’ A more heterogeneous group could hardly be suggested! Barnabas was a Levite, a native of Cyprus ([4:36](#)). Symeon, as his nickname Niger (‘Black’) suggests, was a Jew (or [p. 257](#) proselyte?) apparently of dark complexion, perhaps to be identified with Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus’ cross. Lucius was a Gentile (or a Jew with a Roman name?), a native of the African city of Cyrene, perhaps one of the men who had first preached the gospel in Antioch. Manaen was a ‘foster-brother’ (*synthrophos*) to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, with whom he had been reared. Saul was an ex-Pharisee, a ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’ and (as a Roman citizen) a member of a small privileged minority in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁶ What could glue these men together aside from a common experience?

¹¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), p.114.

¹² McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, p.24.

¹³ Floyd Filson, *A New Testament History* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p.191.

¹⁴ Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, p.124.

¹⁵ Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period*, trans. Paul P. Levertoff (London: SPK, 1961) p.59.

¹⁶ Judge, *Social Patterns*, pp.52, 58.

THE EARLY GENTILE CHURCHES AND THE 'CIRCUMCISION PARTY'

As long as the church was made up mainly of Jews, apparently it was not a great problem for Jewish Christians to accept Gentile converts as full members of the church without demanding that they become Jews. Peter's report on the way Cornelius and his household had received the Word of God was enough to silence the criticism that the circumcision party in Jerusalem had raised against the apostle ([Acts 11:1-18](#)). Later on, the news concerning the numerical growth of the church in Syrian Antioch was welcomed in the mother church, which then sent one of its most outstanding leaders with the commission to instruct the new believers ([11:22ff.](#)). When the leaders of the Gentile mission (Barnabas and Saul) visited Jerusalem in connection with the relief sent from Antioch for the brethren in Judea ([11:27-30](#)), they had a meeting with James (Jesus' brother), Peter, and John, as a result of which they were given 'the right hand of fellowship'; the understanding was reached that 'we,' says Paul, 'should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised' ([Gal. 2:9](#)). The presence of a young Greek convert, named Titus, with the delegation from Antioch at that time could be taken as a further confirmation that the Jewish Christian would not expect Gentile converts to be circumcised ([Gal. 2:1-3](#)).

The spread of the gospel throughout south Galatia brought about by the travels undertaken by Paul and Barnabas, with the resulting increase of Gentile converts, finally raised the whole issue of the basis on which the Gentiles could participate as full members in the People of God. Was faith to be regarded as sufficient, as the missionaries were preaching? Granted that the gospel was meant to be preached to all men and women, whether Jews or Gentiles, should not the Gentile converts be circumcised? Should they not be required to conform to Jewish ceremonial laws and food regulations? Should they not be expected to 'take upon themselves the yoke of the commandments,' [p. 258](#) like the proselytes to Judaism? The issue was pressed by a circumcision party within the Jerusalem church, made up of people who had previously been associated with the Pharisees ([Acts 15:1, 5](#)).

It is likely that the episode that Paul narrates in [Galatians 2:11-14](#) should be viewed in connection with the visit that according to [Acts 15:1](#) these members of the circumcision party made to Antioch. Before their coming Peter had felt free to share a common table with Gentile Christians, for he had learned in Joppa not to call anything 'common' (or 'unclean') if God had purified it. When they came, however, 'he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party' ([Gal. 2:12](#)). His attitude can best be understood when it is viewed in the light of a historical context in which those Jews who sat at a table where food would not be kosher thereby opened themselves to the accusation of 'traitorously joining a strange people.' According to Paul, those who induced Peter to act inconsistently with his Gentile brethren had been sent by James. Paul's words need not mean that they had been personally commissioned by James to spy out the Jewish-Gentile relations, but from all we know the conservative party may have forced James to take action against a practice that went against their own taboos.

Peter's action, however justified it may have been in his own opinion, was strongly opposed by Paul, who saw in it a 'play-acting' (*hypokrisis*) that compromised the truth of the gospel ([v.13](#)). To be sure, Peter had not agreed with the conservative party on the question of keeping the law as a Christian requirement. His failure had been to give up table fellowship with his Gentile brethren, not because of his own convictions but because of a fierce pragmatism in the face of the danger of being regarded as a traitor to his own race. Although he himself believed with Paul that 'neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' ([6:15](#)), prompted by fear of others he had adopted a course of action that was totally inconsistent with that conviction. And

because of his influence, he had carried with him the rest of the Jewish Christians, including Barnabas (2:13), thereby destroying Christian fellowship and denying the truth of the gospel, according to which for those who have been incorporated into Jesus Christ all the barriers that separate people have been abolished (3:28).

Peter's action showed how real was the danger facing the apostolic church to be divided into two 'denominations'—a Jewish Christian church and a Gentile Christian church, each with its own emphases, serving its own homogeneous unit. The situation was so serious that a meeting was held in Jerusalem in order to discuss the problem, with p. 259 the apostles and elders of the local church and with Paul and Barnabas as delegates from Antioch (Acts 15:ff.). The circumcision party that had provoked the Jewish-Gentile incident in Antioch presented its case, but the 'council' vindicated Paul and Barnabas and sent them back to Antioch with a letter summarizing the decision that had been reached (vv. 2-29).

The 'Jerusalem Decree' provided the basis for Jewish and Gentile Christians to live in unity, as equal members of the body of Christ. It clearly exemplifies the apostolic practice in the face of problems arising out of racial, cultural, or social differences among Christians. In the first place, the Gentile converts would not have to be circumcised in order to be accepted as full members of the People of God. Faith in Jesus Christ was thus affirmed as the only condition for salvation. And the repudiation of the attempt made by the conservative party of the Jerusalem church to impose circumcision on Gentile Christians was archetypical of the Christian rejection of every form of 'assimilationist racism' (to use Wagner's expression). Clearly the apostles would have agreed with the claim that 'any teaching to the effect that Christianity requires a person to adapt to the culture of another homogeneous unit in order to become an authentic Christian is unethical because it is dehumanizing.'¹⁷

In the second place, it was taken for granted that Jewish and Gentile Christians would continue to have regular social intercourse as members of interracial local congregations and provision was therefore made to prevent conflicts arising out of cultural differences. There is nothing at all in the book of Acts or the epistles to lend support to the theory that the apostles ever contemplated the idea of adopting Peter's approach as described in Galatians 2:11-14: the separation of Jews and Gentiles in different one-race churches that would then endeavour to show their unity in Christ exclusively in 'the supracongregational relationship of believers in the total Christian body over which Christ himself is the head ...'¹⁸ *The apostles rejected imperialistic uniformity but they also rejected segregated uniformity.* It was precisely because they assumed that Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, would normally eat and worship *together* that they took measures to remove the most obvious obstacle to Christian fellowship in interracial churches.

The decision reached was that the Gentiles would abstain from practices that were particularly offensive to Jews, namely (according to the p. 260 most probable reading), from the flesh of animals that had been offered in sacrifices to idols, from meat with blood (including therefore the flesh of animals that had been strangled), and from 'unchastity' in the sense of the degrees of consanguinity and affinity contemplated in Leviticus 18:6-18.¹⁹ If the Jerusalem 'Council', having set out to deal with the question of circumcision, ended with regulations related to table fellowship, the obvious explanation is that, once

¹⁷ Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, p.99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.287.

the matter of principle was settled, the effort was made to provide a *modus vivendi* for churches in which Jews and Gentiles would continue to have table fellowship together. And it is quite likely that the regulations included in this arrangement were basically the same as those that had always provided a basis for intercourse between Jews and ‘God-fearing’ Gentiles in the synagogues throughout the empire.²⁰

The working arrangement represented by the Jerusalem Decree was entirely consistent with Paul’s attitude expressed later in [1 Corinthians 8:7ff.](#) and [Romans 14:13ff.](#) There was no compromise on a matter of principle, but the Gentiles were asked to forego their freedom with regard to practices that caused offense to their Jewish brethren. At least for Paul the way to solve the conflicts in the church was neither imperialistic uniformity nor segregated uniformity but love, for love alone ‘binds everything together in perfect harmony’ ([Col. 3:14](#)).

THE GENTILE MISSION

A well-attested fact regarding evangelism in the early church is that almost everywhere the gospel was first preached to both Jews and Gentiles *together*, in the synagogues. Luke provides no evidence to support McGavran’s claim that family connections played a very important role in the extension of the faith throughout the Roman Empire,²¹ but there is no doubt that the ‘God-fearers’ on the fringe of the Jewish congregation served in every major city as the bridgehead into the Gentile world.²² That these Gentiles who had been attracted [P. 261](#) to Judaism should be open to the Christian message is not surprising. If (according to the Mishnah) even the proselytes could only refer to God as ‘O God of *your* Fathers,’ how much less would the ‘Godfearers’—who were not willing to be circumcised and to comply with food laws—be regarded as qualified for membership in the chosen people.

It would be ridiculous to suggest that Jews and Gentiles heard the gospel *together* in the synagogues, but then those who believed were instructed to separate into segregated house churches for the sake of the expansion of the gospel. Such a procedure would have been an open denial of apostolic teaching concerning the unity of the church. It would have also meant that the door of the church was made narrower than the door of the synagogue, where Jews and Gentiles could worship together. The suggestion is so farfetched that it can hardly be taken seriously. All the New Testament evidence, however, points in the opposite direction, namely, in the direction of an apostolic practice whose aim was the formation of churches that would live out the unity of the new humanity in Jesus Christ. The apostles knew very well that if the acceptance of ‘people as they are’ was to be more than lip-service acceptance it had to take place at the level of the local congregations. Accordingly, they sought to build communities in which right from the start Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, poor and rich would worship together and learn the meaning of their unity in Christ, although they often had to deal with difficulties

²⁰ W. M. Ramsey, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), p.169. C. Peter Wagner recognizes that ‘Most synagogue communities in the Roman provinces were made up of a core of Hellenistic Jewish residents, some Gentile proselytes who had converted to Judaism and been circumcised, and a number of so-called God-fearers who were Gentiles attracted to the Jewish faith, but who had not wished to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law’ ... (*Our Kind of People*, p. 127). If that kind of pluralism was possible in a Jewish context, Wagner’s thesis that ‘New Testament churches were homogeneous-unit churches’ (p.117) can be discarded *a priori* as an unwarranted assumption.

²¹ McGavran, *The Bridges of God* pp.27ff.

²² Ramsey, *St. Paul* pp.276–77.

arising out of the differences in backgrounds or social status among the converts. That this was the case is well substantiated by a survey of the dealings of the apostles with the churches in the Gentile world, as reflected in the New Testament. For the sake of brevity two examples will suffice.

The Church in Corinth

It is in the context of a chapter dealing with the diversity not of homogeneous unit *churches* but of the *members* of the church that Paul states: 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit' ([1 Cor. 12:12-13](#)). The emphasis on the nature of the oneness of Christians representing various racial and social groups can be best explained when it is viewed in relation to the situation of the church in Corinth.

According to Luke's report in Acts, the initiation of the church in that city followed the pattern characteristic of the Gentile mission. Paul began his preaching ministry in the synagogue, where Jews and Gentiles [p. 262](#) heard the gospel *together* ([Acts 18:4](#)). Later on he was compelled to leave the synagogue, but by then there was a nucleus of converts, including 'God-fearing' Gentiles like Gaius Titius Justus ([Acts 18:7](#); [1 Cor. 1:14](#)) and Stephanas and his household ([1 Cor. 1:16](#); according to [16:15](#), 'the first converts in Achaia'), and Jews like Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his household ([Acts 18:8](#); [1 Cor. 1:14](#)). Gaius' house was located next door to the synagogue ([Acts 18:7](#)) and it became the living quarters for Paul and the meeting place for 'the whole church' consisting of Jews such as Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, and Gentiles such as Erastus and Quartus ([Rom. 16:21, 23](#)).

There are other hints regarding the constituency of the Corinthian church given in 1 Corinthians. The clear inference from [1:26](#) is that the majority of the members came from the lower strata of society—they were not wise, or powerful, or of noble birth 'according to worldly standards'. At least some of the members were slaves, while others were free ([7:21-22](#)). On the other hand, the community also included a few well-to-do members, notably Gaius (presumably a Roman citizen), Crispus (the ex-ruler of the synagogue), Erastus (the city treasurer, [Rom. 16:23](#)) and possibly Chloe (as suggested by the reference to her 'dependents', who may have been slaves, [1 Cor. 1:11](#)).

It would be absurd to take Paul's exhortation to each Corinthian Christian to remain 'in the state in which he was called' ([1 Cor. 7:20](#)) as lending support to the idea that each one was to belong to a homogeneous unit church representing his or her own race or social class.²³ The whole point of the passage ([1 Cor. 7:17-24](#)) is that in the face of God's call, both race and social status have become irrelevant; the only thing that really matters is faithfulness to Jesus Christ. The apostle is teaching here neither that slaves should remain in slavery nor that they should take freedom, should the opportunity for manumission come, but that the Christian's existence is no longer determined by one's legal status, but by the fact that he or she has been called by God. The slave's slavery is irrelevant because the slave is 'a freedman of the Lord', the free man's freedom is equally irrelevant because he is 'a slave of Christ' (v. [22](#)). This is not a piece of advice to reject or to accept manumission—to leave or to remain in one's homogeneous unit—but an exhortation to see that, whatever one's social status may be, he or she is to 'remain with God' (v. [24](#)). In Bartchy's words, 'Since God had called the Corinthians into *koinonia* with his crucified Son, it was *this* fellowship and not any status in the world which determined

²³ Cf. Wagner, *Our Kind of People* p.133.

their [p. 263](#) relationship to God.’²⁴ This relationship to God was in turn to be the basis for the relationship among Christians.

The racial, social and cultural diversity among the people that made up the church in Corinth goes a long way to explain the problems of dissension that Paul addresses in [1:10ff](#). Although the Christians continued to meet together at Gaius’ house ([Rom. 16:23](#)), they tended to divide into at least four groups, each claiming to follow a different leader ([1:12](#)). We cannot be certain regarding the distinctive claims made by each group, but the least we can say is that the Petrine party was made up of Jews who insisted on the food regulations formulated by the Jerusalem Council (cf. [1 Cor. 8:1ff](#); [10:25ff](#)), while the ‘Christ party’ was probably made up of Gentiles who regarded themselves as ‘spiritual men,’ opposed Jewish legalism, and denied the Jewish doctrine of the resurrection.²⁵ To complicate things even further, the communal meals, in the course of which the believers participated in the Lord’s Supper, had become a sad picture of the division of the church according to economic position. C. K. Barrett is probably right in inferring from the text that ‘the members of the church were expected to share their resources, the rich, presumably, to bring more than they needed and to make provision for the poor.’²⁶ Instead of sharing, however, the rich would go ahead and eat their own supper and even get drunk, while the poor would go hungry. The natural result was that the poor felt ashamed and the supper became a display of unbrotherliness ([1 Cor. 11:20–22](#)). It seems clear that, despite the divisions, the whole Christian community in Corinth continued to come together regularly in one assembly ([11:17, 20](#); [14:23, 26](#); cf. [Rom. 16:23](#)). There may be some exaggeration in Johannes Munck’s description of the Corinthian church as ‘The Church Without Factions,’²⁷ but it is undeniable that all the evidence points in the direction of disunity and bickering, but not of separate churches representing the various positions in conflict.

The Church in Rome

This church, in contrast with the one in Corinth, seems to have broken up into separate groups, some of which may have been made up of people representing diverse homogeneous units in society. In Bruce’s [p. 264](#) words, ‘Perhaps some local groups consisted of Jewish Christians and others of Gentile Christians, and there were few, if any, in which Jewish and Gentile Christians met together.’²⁸ It may well be that it was because of this situation that Paul addressed his epistle to the Romans ‘to all God’s beloved in Rome’ ([1:7](#)) rather than ‘to the Church of God which is at Rome.’ A better sign of this situation, however, is the mention made in chapter [16](#) of at least five house churches, associated with the names of Prisca and Aquila (v.[3](#)), Aristobulus (v. [10](#)), Narcissus (v.[11](#)), Asyncritus (v.[14](#)) and Philologus (v.[15](#)).

If this reconstruction of the situation of the church in Rome is correct, are we then to conclude that it lends support to the theory that the apostolic practice was aimed at the

²⁴ S. Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery and I. Corinthians 7:21* (Missoula, Mont: Univ. of Montana Press, 1973), p.182.

²⁵ T. W. Manson, in *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, pp.190ff.

²⁶ Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1971), p.263.

²⁷ Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM Press, 1959; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), pp.135ff.

²⁸ Bruce, *New Testament History*, p.394.

formation of homogeneous unit churches? So to conclude would be to disregard completely what was undoubtedly Paul's main purpose in writing the epistle, namely 'to bring about the obedience of faith' (1:5) in congregations where, as Paul S. Minear has argued,²⁹ Christians representing a given position would not worship side by side with Christians representing another position. Only by a partial reading of Minear's work can the evidence adduced by him be used as lending support to the theory that the apostolic church consisted largely of homogeneous unit congregations or that the situation of the church in Rome reflected the apostolic practice.³⁰ Quite to the contrary, Minear's claim is that the epistle to the Romans was written with the hope that 'a larger number of segregated house-churches would at last be able to worship together—Jews praising God among Gentiles and Gentiles praising God with his people.'³¹ Accordingly, he shows how the entire epistle develops the idea that through the coming of Jesus Christ all human distinctions have been broken down, and concludes that faith required that the various groups in Rome should welcome one another notwithstanding their opposing views on foods and days. Thus, for Minear the situation viewed by Paul in chapters 14 and 15 was 'the target of the whole epistle.'³²

Paul's approach to the problem in Rome was consistent with the apostolic practice with regard to churches threatened by division. There is no evidence that he would have approved of the modern device to solve the problem of disunity, that is, the forming of segregated congregations open to communications with other segregated p. 265 congregations. All his letters make it overwhelmingly clear that he conceived oneness in Christ as an essential aspect of the gospel and therefore made every effort to see that Christians would together 'with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:5).

Other New Testament writings reflect the same apostolic concern for church unity across all the barriers separating people in society. And no research is necessary to verify that the congregations that resulted from the Gentile mission normally included Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, rich and poor, and were taught that in Christ all the differences derived from their respective homogeneous units had become irrelevant (cf. Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; Philem. v. 16; Jas. 1:9-11, 2:1-7, 4:13; 1 Pet. 2:18; 1 Jn. 3:17).

The impact that the early church made on non-Christians *because of Christian brotherhood across natural barriers* can hardly be overestimated. The abolition of the old separation between Jew and Gentile was undoubtedly one of the most amazing accomplishments of the gospel in the first century. Equally amazing, however, was the breaking down of the class distinction between master and slave. As Michael Green comments, 'When the Christian missionaries not only proclaimed that in Christ the distinctions between slave and free man were done away as surely as those between Jew and Greek, but actually lived in accordance with their principles, then this had an enormous appeal.'³³ In F. F. Bruce's words, 'Perhaps this was the way in which the gospel made the deepest impression on the pagan world.'

²⁹ Paul S. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purpose of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1971).

³⁰ Cf. Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, pp.130-31.

³¹ Minear, *The Obedience of Faith*, pp.16-17.

³² *Ibid.*, p.33

³³ Green, *Evangelism*, pp. 117-18.

III AN EVALUATION OF THE 'HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE'

How are we to evaluate the use of the homogeneous unit principle?

Before attempting to answer that question, two observations are necessary for the sake of clarity. In the first place, it cannot be denied that from a biblical perspective the (quantitative) growth of the church is a legitimate concern in the Christian mission.³⁵ If God 'desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' ([1 Tim. 2:4](#)), no Christian is in harmony with God's desire unless he or she also longs to see all coming to Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is clear that this longing will have to be expressed in practical terms (which may well [p.266](#) include the use of anthropological and sociological insights) so that the gospel is in fact proclaimed as widely as possible. The issue in this evaluation, therefore, is not the employment of principles that can help in the expansion of the church. In the second place, it is a fact that hardly needs verification that the growth of the church takes place in specific social and cultural contexts and that people generally *prefer* to become Christians without having to cross the barriers between one context and another. This, again is not the issue in this evaluation.

The real issue is whether church planting should be carried out so as to enable people to become Christians without crossing barriers,³⁶ whether this principle is 'essential for the spread of the Gospel' and biblically and theologically defensible.

Let me draw the following conclusions:

1. In the early church the gospel was proclaimed to all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, rich or poor, without partiality. More often than not during the Gentile mission *Jews and Gentiles heard the gospel together*.

2. The breaking down of the barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as *an essential aspect of the gospel*, not merely as a result of it. Evangelism would therefore involve a call to be incorporated into a new humanity that included all kinds of people. Conversion was never a merely religious experience, it was also a way of becoming a member of a community where people would find their identity in Christ rather than in their race, social status or sex.

3. The church not only grew, but *it grew across cultural barriers*. The New Testament contains no example of a local church whose membership had been taken by the apostles from a single homogeneous unit, unless that expression is used to mean no more than a group of people with a common language. By contrast, it provides plenty of examples of how the barriers had been abolished in the new humanity.

4. Each church was meant to portray *the oneness of its members* regardless of their racial, cultural, or social differences, and in order to reach that aim the apostles suggested practical measures. If 'authentic unity is *always* unity in diversity',³⁷ the unity fostered by the apostles could never be one that eliminated plurality in the membership of local churches. Unity was not to be confused with uniformity either among local congregations or among individual church members. In Ignatius' words, 'Where Jesus Christ is, there is the whole Church.' [p.267](#) Each local congregation was therefore to manifest both the unity and the diversity of the body of Christ.

5. There may have been times when the believers were accused of traitorously abandoning their own culture in order to join another culture, but there is no indication

³⁵ Orlando E. Costas, 'Church Growth as a Multidimensional Phenomenon: Some Lessons from Chile', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5, no. 1 January 1981): 2ff.

³⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, pp.198ff.

³⁷ Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, p.96; italics added.

that the apostles approved of adjustments made in order to avoid that charge. They regarded Christian community across cultural barriers, not as an optional blessing to be enjoyed whenever circumstances were favourable to it or as an addendum that could be left out if deemed necessary to make the gospel more palatable, but as *essential to Christian commitment*. They would have readily included any attempt to compromise the unity of the church among those adjustments to which Christianity objects as 'adjustments which violate essential Christian teachings.'³⁸

The analysis above leads us to conclude that the 'Church Growth' emphasis on homogeneous unit churches is in fact directly opposed to the apostolic teaching and practice in relation to the expansion of the church. No missionary methodology can be built without a solid biblical theology of mission as a basis. What can be expected of a missiology that exhibits dozens of books and dissertations dealing with the 'Church Growth' approach, but not one major work on the theology of mission?

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The Priority of Ethnicity

Donald McGavran

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A million Asians live in Great Britain. They are typical of many minorities in other lands. A brief look at the opportunities and problems of their evangelization will illuminate some important principles. We cannot consider the million Asians as a single block. They include dozens of different kinds of Asians: linguistic groups, Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, secularists, and materialists. Some are educated, some are not. Sri Lankans, Pakistanis, Indians, Singaporeans, Ugandans, Kenyans, South Africans, Trinidadians and so on form tight communities. They regard other groups of Asians with almost as much distance as they do white Britishers. If they are invited to join either white or Asian congregations, their response will be minimal.

If 'Come unto me all you who labour' is to be obeyed, it must be heard as an invitation to remain yourself linguistically and ethnically while following the Lord Jesus. In the New Testament church the greatest growth took place when Jews joined Jewish congregations, Samaritans joined Samaritan congregations, and Cornelius's congregations continued to meet in his distinctly Italian patio. The Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household where Peter and his companions were the only Jews among perhaps 50 Italians.

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES WERE MONOETHNIC

³⁸ McGavran, *The Clash between Christianity and Culture*, p.20