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# Following Jesus as his Community in the Broken World of Ethnic Identity

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## I Defining Ethnicity

This paper arises from a deep conviction that the relationship between the community of the church and the ethnic community has been neglected in evangelical ecclesiology and missiology to the detriment of the church's life and mission. It is a pity that there is no noun such as the French ethne so I am going to adopt ethne as an English noun for this paper. The following definitions reflect current thinking in the academic world:

a) Ethne: This term refers to a type of community that has a majority of the following characteristics: (1) a common proper name; (2) a myth of common ancestry; (3) memories of a common past; (4) elements of a common culture[1]; (5) a link with a homeland; and (6) a sense of solidarity. Ethnic groups that for various reasons, such as migration, are dispersed in a state that is remote from their homeland are called 'ethnic minorities'.

b) Nation: A 'nation' is a 'territorially concentrated' ethnic group. Where nations have been oppressed or marginalized in their ancestral territory they are called 'national minorities' or 'indigenous peoples'.

In light of these definitions, the term 'nation state', implying a state ruling over an individual nation, is almost a complete misnomer. Korea (North and South) and Lesotho are rare examples of states that are almost coterminous with an individual nation.

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**1** This includes language, material culture, customs and religion.

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The overwhelming majority of the world's states have a plurality of ethnes/nations. In many of these multi-national or multi-ethnic states one nation or ethne is dominant. The simplest way to illustrate what the definitions mean for an individual state is to look at an example. Since the consultation was in Africa I shall take an African example.

c) Uganda: Fifty ethnes or nations in four major divisions are represented in Uganda. The largest division is the Bantu of the southern half of the country who make up over 60 per cent of the population and represent almost half the ethnes in the country. The largest ethne, Baganda, dominates the area around the capital, Kampala, although they represent less than a fifth of the population of the country. The Bagandans are more than twice as numerous as any other single Bantu ethne although some of them, such as the Bankole, Bakiga and Basoga, number between one and two million.

The second largest division is the Nilotic who are concentrated in the northern half of the country and have around a quarter of the population divided among 18 ethnes including the Iteso, Acholi and Karamajong. The third division, representing only five percent of the population, is the Sudanic ethnes of the northeast but even they are divided into eight ethnes. The final division of around two percent is made up of immigrants from neighbouring countries and also a growing Asian community once again.

Uganda is a fairly typical example of a post colonial state established on the basis of modernist political philosophy under which ethnic identity is considered, at best, a nuisance to be tolerated

and English, the language of the former oppressor, has become the official language of the state.

## II Ethnes in Modern Thought

Modernist historians and political philosophers believe that nation-states emerged in the eighteenth century when Enlightenment political philosophy was put into practice in the formation of the United States of America and post-revolutionary France. But the freedom and equality that these new nation states offered was equality to engage in the political process and freedom to engage in economic activity. Abandoning ethnic diversity, it was believed, was part of the price that had to be paid for this freedom and equality. In the United States, native Americans were denied freedom and equality. In France the Bretons and Basques, for example, who had preserved their identity within the monarchical French state were brutally suppressed by the brotherhood of revolutionaries. The same pattern was adopted as other European states adopted the Enlightenment philosophy. In the United Kingdom there was a renewed move to suppress Irish, Scottish and Welsh identities.[2]

The elimination of ethnic diversity was believed to be altruistic. Diversity was believed to be a hindrance to the development of a democratized and industrialized society that would lead to greater prosperity and happiness for a greater proportion of citizens. Under-

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2 The suppression of these identities predated the eighteenth century but was given new impetus by modernist political philosophy.

lying this belief was the conviction that people's primary needs are physical and that once people received the material benefits of uniformity they would be more than happy to jettison their ethnic identity. Many succumbed to the pressure but others experienced it for what it really was—oppressive ethnocentric nationalism. This modernist political creed in its left and right manifestations confidently predicted the demise of ethnic identity in the wake of material prosperity. In light of what is happening in the world at the moment both sides are open to the charge of false prophecy.

This was the political creed on which the post-colonial states of the twentieth century were established and that came to dominate the political philosophy of the nineteenth century post colonial states as well. So Uganda's independence was premised on the elimination of ethnic diversity and its failures are often blamed on its ethnocentrism or tribalism. I believe that it is high time to challenge this unbiblical and unchristian philosophy that has caused so much suffering in the world.

## III Contemporary Explosion of Ethnic Consciousness

The need for a critical assessment of the perception of ethnic identity is becoming acute because it is a reality that is showing no signs of going away despite predictions to the contrary. In fact, as globalisation surges ahead, so does the rediscovery of ethnic identity. This is because there are aspects of the culture that is being globalised that encourage the appreciation of diversity.

One aspect is the extreme individualism and relativism of post-modernist culture, which says that there is no religious, political or any other creed that can make universal claims. The individual's freedom to choose any 'creed' is the creed of post-modernity. It is debatable what freedom of choice can mean in the light of genetic and historical endowment or if an individual chooses to identify with a strong collective identity that limits the freedom of others, but this approach undoubtedly opens the door to affirming ethnic diversity. If someone chooses to emphasize their Yoruba or Karen identity then their choice must be respected. People can be what they want to be.

Another aspect is the spiritual-ecological manifestation of post-modernist culture, which has strong links with New Age religion. Having rejected the materialistic meta-narrative of scientism, it has gone on a quest for spiritual reality to the exotic East and the 'primitive' jungle. As a result, the defence of Tibetan identity from the assimilationist policy of China, or of indigenous tribal peoples in the Amazon basin from logging companies, have become popular causes in the part of the world that is driving globalisation. This manifestation of post-modernity sees the preservation of the identity of at least some ethnic groups as essential to the future spiritual and physical well being of humanity.

Thirdly, globalisation is also about a revolution in communications, which is not just about Coca Cola, McDonald's, MTV and Hollywood. When coupled with the growth in education worldwide it makes possible the empowerment of ethnic groups through dissem-

ination of information about their struggles to survive. Knowing that others are facing the same problems is a great encouragement but the communications revolution also makes possible the formation of networks of ethnic groups to defend themselves from the threats against them. An example of this is the way a network of indigenous peoples successfully lobbyed the United Nations to begin a process of formulating international law to defend their rights. The drive behind this effort came from Latin American indigenous peoples and Native Americans but the movement could impact the future prospects of the so-called tribal peoples of countries like India, Myanmar and Thailand.

So while globalisation is unquestionably a powerful force for uniformity, the post-modernist view of freedom, the New Age and ecological movement and the communications revolution create a current that is flowing in the opposite direction and makes the climate much more amenable than it was, compared to even ten years ago, to a reassertion of ethnic identity.

The collapse of the communist 'empire', especially in the former USSR and Eastern Europe, has also pushed ethnic identity to the fore. Once Russian domination had been removed, the ethnic consciousness that must have been simmering under the surface is bursting into life again. Moldova, which was seized by Stalin from Romania in 1940 and divided between the Ukraine and a new Moldovan republic, has descended into chaos, which is largely driven by old tensions between its majority Romanian and minority Slavic peoples. The united Russian Federation that

remains faces an uncertain future as a number of its republics demand independence with Chechnya in the forefront. In Eastern Europe Czechoslovakia divided peacefully along ethnic lines into the Czech and Slovak republics but there is continuing tension between Romanians and Hungarians in Romania. Yugoslavia exploded in terrible ethnic conflict that continues to simmer and the Gypsies (Romany) suffer persecution and discrimination throughout the area. The heightened sense of ethnic identity seems set to be a significant factor for the foreseeable future.

## IV Ethnes in the Biblical Story of God's Mission

The biblical 'book of origins' (Genesis 1-11) ends with an account of the origins of ethnicity in Genesis 10-11:9. Here the existence of ethnic identities is presented as a direct result of the outworking of God's command to the original human beings to multiply and fill the earth.[3] The fulfilling of this command is twice interrupted but God's purpose eventually prevails. The first interruption was the flood that destroyed most of humanity. After the flood God, in his covenant with Noah, reasserts his command to 'be fruitful and increase in number' and 'to multiply on the earth and increase upon it'.[4] The evidence that this command was effective is found in Genesis 10. As the families of Noah's sons became more numerous a process began which has

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**3** Gen. 1:28
**4** Gen. 9:7

persisted ever since. Greater numbers created economic pressure that drove some clans to go in search of a new place where they would be better off. Very early in the history of humanity some even crossed the sea in this search.[5] Distance and geography led to the development of an identity different from that of the place of origin. Consequently, in time distinct peoples come into existence 'spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language'.[6]

The impression that we get from Genesis 10 is that the development of ethnic identities as a result of the spread of human beings over the earth was simply the fulfilment of the divine mandate to Noah and his family after the flood. There is no hint of evil in this development. Then, as soon as the genealogies are finished, we have the story of the Tower of Babel that many have understood to be teaching that the formation of ethnic identities was a judgement of God. But the story of the Tower of Babel is primarily not about the origin of languages, which is one of the features of ethnic identity, but about human wickedness and pride and God's judgement upon it.

The building of the Tower of Babel is the second interruption in the story of the God who ordained the scattering of humanity. We find humanity early in its history after the flood, with one common language, moving east from Ararat until they come to the broad and fertile plain of Mesopotamia. There

they settle down and multiply in numbers and skills as they establish the world's first civilization. Soon they feel that they can usurp the prerogative of God so they set about building a tower reaching to heaven in order to make a name for themselves. In this first attempt to establish an empire, one city seeks to dominate the whole of humanity and in the process usurp a position that belongs only to God. The city and its tower were to be a magnetic centre of power that would keep people from moving apart from each other and filling the earth as God had intended they should.

Seeing that a united humanity with one language would have an endless capacity for rebellion, God confuses their language. This linguistic confusion renders collaboration impossible, so the tower is abandoned and the people scatter 'over the face of the whole earth'. The final outcome is precisely what God had intended for humanity in the first place and the process which we saw at work in Genesis 10 continues. The only conclusion we can draw from reading Genesis 10 and 11 together is that the formation of different ethnic identities is a part of God's providence but, like everything else since the fall, that process is marred by sin.

The rest of the Bible witnesses to God's sovereignty over the destiny of the communities of peoples with common names, history, culture, homeland and sense of solidarity which, in English translations, are called 'nations'.[7]

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**5** Gen. 10:5 'From these the *maritime* peoples spread out….'

**6** Gen. 10:4, cf. vv. 20, 31, and 32.

**7** These biblical 'nations' are usually what modern English would call 'ethnic groups' rather than political communities as is implied in the modern understanding of 'nation'.

Deuteronomy 2:9-12, 19-23 contain what, on first sight, seem like obscure notes about the movements of nations in the area east of the Jordan which the Israelites passed through on their way to the promised land. Chris Wright comments:

> These notes unambiguously assert Yahweh's multinational sovereignty. The same God who had declared to Pharaoh that the whole earth belonged to God (Exodus 9:14, 16, 29) had been moving other nations around on the chessboard of history long before Israel's historic exodus and settlement. This universal sovereignty over the nations mattered a great deal to Israel in subsequent centuries as they themselves joined the ranks of the dispossessed. Later prophetic understanding of Yahweh's 'use' of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians as agents of Yahweh's purposes in history is in fact consistent with this deeper theme of God's ultimate, universal direction of the destiny of nations (cf. Deuteronomy 32:8; Jeremiah 18:1-10; 27:1-7).[8]

Two further points need to be made on the basis of passages like Deuteronomy 2. First, it is clear that in the long view nations are not permanent entities. They begin, grow, flourish, decline and die like human beings.[9]

There is no room for the idolatrous totalisation of the nation as happens in ideological nationalism. Second, God has a moral purpose in his dealing with nations. For example, repentance can save a nation from oblivion (Jeremiah 18:7-10; Jonah 3) and one nation can be used by God to punish another nation for its sin. As Deuteronomy 9:4-5 states, the wickedness of the Canaanite nations was a key reason for their expulsion and destruction by the Israelites. Later on the Persians drove the Israelites themselves out of Israel as punishment for their sin.

This does not mean that any nation can adopt a position of judge over other nations on the grounds of inherent moral superiority. All nations are 'bent rods'.[10] There is no biblical justification whatsoever for ideas such as 'manifest destiny', which justified the terrible treatment of native Americans in the United States, or apartheid, which justified the horrible abuse of blacks in South Africa.

In the New Testament two major themes emerge. On the one hand there is the theme of the nations being offered and welcoming the good news of the kingdom of God. This is a continuation of the Old Testament prophetic theme that in the last days the nations would flock to Zion to present their gifts to God.[11] The climax of this process is seen in John's vision of heavenly glory in Revelation 21:24-26. On the other hand, there is the counterpoint theme of the nations conspiring together to destroy the kingdom of God. In Revelation, again echoing Old

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**8** Christopher Wright, *New International Biblical Commentary, Deuteronomy* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), p. 36. Some other passages that make the same point are Deut. 26:19; Job 12:23; Ps. 22:27-8; 47:8; 86:9; Dan. 12:1; Acts 17:26-28.

**9** Paul affirms this in Acts 17:26.

**10** Wright, *Deuteronomy*, p. 133.

**11** Is. 60:1-11.

Testament prophecy, this is pictured as the battle of Armageddon that ushers in the end of the world. Reconciling these two themes seems impossible. All we can say is that while wars and rumours of wars abound we are yet free to invite the nations to bring their treasures to Zion. The day of the redemption of nations is not passed.

Something needs to be said at this point about the collectivist view of humanity in the Bible that is so alien to our individualistic western culture. The Bible teaches that the meaning and purpose of human life is worked out in the relational context of collectivities—of family, tribe, people, nation, and humanity. In the Old Testament 'all nations' is probably the commonest phrase for expressing the whole human race beginning with the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his seed in Genesis 18:18[12] and ending with the prophecy of the coming of the 'desired of all nations' in Haggai 2:7. In the New Testament humanity is divided between the people of God—meaning Israel first and then the church—and *ethnoi*, which is translated by 'Gentiles' more often than not but really means 'nations other than the nation of God'. It follows that Christians have dual citizenship. On one hand, they belong to the heavenly kingdom which is already manifested in Jesus but which is yet to be revealed in all its glory. On the other hand, they also belong to earthly nations and have a responsibility to ensure that when the kingdom is revealed those nations will be able to make a worthy contribution to the praise of the Lamb.

## V Ethnes in Modern Evangelical Missiology

It is surprising that with the heavy emphasis on unreached people groups in the last few decades there is hardly any evidence of thinking about the significance of the collective identity of the groups that need to be reached with the gospel. Even the deep thinking in evangelical missiology about contextualisation and the significance of culture that could be very helpful in developing a theology of ethnic identity does not seem to have penetrated very deeply into the lifeblood of this movement. There is some evidence of more positive interest in indigenous peoples in the Coalition on the Support of Indigenous Ministries and the World Christian Gathering on Indigenous Peoples. The latter held its sixth meeting in the Philippines on 11-17 September 2006. The following encouraging affirmation of ethnic identity was in the description of the gathering:

> Indigenous roots are part of the identity of Filipinos. God will use his church to redeem the Filipinos' calling to the world, but they need to be free. In many ways Filipino churches are still enslaved to other cultures and ideas. The World Christian Gathering on Indigenous People will make Filipinos look back to their indigenous roots and reclaim their identity and true

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**12** Interestingly when this promise was first made to Abraham in Gen. 12:3 it was all the 'families' of the earth that would be blessed through him. The term used here could be translated 'clan'—a collective unit that was bigger than a 'father's household' but smaller than a 'tribe'.

virtues as Filipinos. This gathering of cultures will provide a venue for all peoples in celebrating their oneness in Christ and rediscovering their uniqueness as a people.

However, there is no coherent biblical view of ethnic identity/nationhood in current evangelical missiology. What I observe is an uncritical acceptance of modernist political philosophy that is contradicted by some missionary practice. The persistent, though not universal, condemnation of 'tribalism' by evangelical leaders in Africa is evidence of acceptance of modernist political philosophy and the continuing drive to translate the Bible into all languages is the key example of missionary practice that cuts right across this philosophy.

In a modern nation state ethnic diversity is supposed to melt away in the warmth of material prosperity. It is not surprising, therefore, that even many Christians see 'tribalism' as the reason why the economic miracle of industrialisation has not happened, resulting in the fact that most African states remain mired in poverty. But the cause of the problem may be modern political philosophy rather than ethnic identity. To say this is not to affirm ethnocentrism but rather to reject it. Ethnocentrism is at the root of the modernist nation state. That is why even in a country like Uganda the state can function only by retaining English as an official language because it finds the residual ethnocentrism of the colonial oppressor more palatable than the ethnocentrism of any one of the Ugandan ethnes.

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

## VI Globalisation, Urbanisation, and the Ethnic Cauldron of the Contemporary World

The modernist idea that the growth of industrialism will inevitably erode ethnic diversity does contain some truth. Industrialism leads to urbanisation and the city is always a cauldron for mixing ethnic identities. This urban mixing is now happening at an unprecedented rate within states and on an international scale.

A question that arises in view of this reality is whether as Christians we should be committed to preserving the identity of ethnic minorities in cities. By choosing, for whatever reason, to leave their ancestral territory for the industrial city, people are prepared to contemplate a new identity in co-operation with many others who have taken

the same step. That is not to say that, at first, they will not try to preserve their ethnic identity. In fact, historically, people who migrate into the city begin by recreating something of their own community within it. However, as time goes on, the ethnic dividing lines become weaker as a new identity is fashioned in the context of the city.

From a Christian point of view, to respect the difference of ethnic minorities is important from the perspective of mission even in the city. It has been an axiom of evangelical mission strategy for centuries that people are reached more effectively with the gospel in their heart language. The problem in the city, where a variety of ethnic identities live in close proximity to each other, is how to express unity in Christ if diversity is respected.

True reconciliation in Christ will provide opportunity to express difference and unity. One way of doing this would be to encourage ethnic congregations in one church that meets regularly for worship in a common language—which is likely to be the state language of the country where the city is found. Such a policy will have obvious implications for Christian development work as well. There will be a need to understand the ethnic composition of a city and the way groups interrelate to each other generally and as church. Marginalisation, oppression or deprivation may be found to be ethnic issues that need to be tackled in a similar way to the way the marginalisation of an indigenous people is tackled.

With the increasing ease of communication that is leading to an unprecedented movement of people, often across very large distances, there is a growing number of people in the world who find it difficult to identify with any of the key characteristics of ethnic identity. How can they name the people to whom they belong if their parents and grandparents are from different ethnic roots? Which history is their history? The situation for people of mixed parentage can be further complicated if they are brought up in a country in which neither their parents nor grandparents were brought up. If this is the case, even language and custom become problematic. They may feel that they belong to the country in which they were brought up, although their mother tongue may not be the language of that country. To further complicate matters, some people spend a considerable period of their life in more than one country. It is not surprising that feeling solidarity with any ethnic group becomes a problem. Some people in this situation have come to the conclusion that they have no dominant ethnic identity, that they are citizens of the world and that it is enough to have the name of human being. Some even claim that this is the best way to be human.[13]

Multiethnicity often occurs as a result of inter-ethnic marriage following migration. Such marriages are more common today than they have ever been; in the United States in particular the progeny of such marriages is increasingly resistant to being categorised into one of the five official categories of racial origin—Euro-American, Asian American, African Ameri-

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**13** I suspect that this type of person is strongly represented among evangelical missiologists, which could go some way to explaining the lack of interest in ethnic identity among them.

can, Hispanic and Native American. They want to be Pakistani/African American; Colombian/Scottish/Irish American; Filipino/Italian/Russian American etc.[14] From a biblical perspective this is not at all surprising because migration into a new place is one of the key reasons for the development of new identities. The picture that we have of people scattering in the early history of humanity was more a case of families, clans or tribes moving and growing a different identity. But in a world with a vastly bigger population, there is no reason why people from different families, clans and tribes should not gather to the same place to establish a new identity. It is such a process that can be observed happening in the United States, although 'American' in each identity listed above indicates that what happens in the United States is assimilation into a dominant 'American-English' identity.

However, the long hand of ethnic history continues to have quite a hold over a great many people. Every year many Americans make the pilgrimage to Europe in search of their roots and rejoice when they find them. In fact it can be argued that ethnic memory has a significant impact in many of the trouble spots in the world. So North Americans of Irish extraction provided substantial support for the IRA, immigrants of Indian extraction in various countries are generous supporters of

the BJP in India, the Sikh separatist movement is largely funded by Sikh's living in Europe and the Tamil Tigers receive financial support from Tamils in Norway. Our ethnic past is not something that is easy to deny. Of course, this can be used to a beneficial as well to a maleficent end. This is precisely what western organisations are seeking to do as they encourage people of Asian origin living in the West to support holistic Christian mission in their countries of origin.[15]

## VII Ethnicity, Mission and the Church: Suggestions for Further Discussion

1. If the modernist view of ethnic identity is biblically inadequate, the way in which the church is viewed in multi-ethnic states (i.e., the overwhelming majority of nation-states) may need to be revised. Particularly in centralised churches there may be the need to affirm ethnic diversity by giving more autonomy to churches in ethnically defined territories. Ethnic bias will need to be taken into consideration when making church appointments. An ethne's language may need to be promoted as the language of worship and Christian education. The church may need to put pressure on government to educate children generally in their mother tongue. Church development departments will need to be con-

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**14** These are real examples. See S. Cornell and D. Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks/London/Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 1998), p. 240.

**15** Though I did not use it in writing this section, parts of the following volume cover the same ground and come to similar conclusions: Stephen Castles, *Ethnicity and Globalization* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000).

scious of the fact that there is often an ethnic element to poverty.

2. The unreached people group movement is to be commended because its brief embraces the aim that every ethne should have a church. But the movement needs a more adequate theology of ethnic identity because establishing a church in an ethne can have a profound impact on the way in which an ethne perceives itself. If establishing a church in an ethne helps to create a greater sense of nationhood, what should (a) the church and (b) the mission agency do when that leads to a desire for greater political self determination on the part of the ethne? The desire for greater self determination may initially be expressed in a desire to have a voice where decisions are taken that affect their lives.

3. Ethnicity is a portable social reality. Migration has always been a human reality but colonialism and urbanization—linked to industrialisation—have made it a defining characteristic of our time. Every large city will have a number of ethnic minorities. There are a number of issues that need to be considered arising from this multicultural and multiethnic situation:

a) Where there are enough people from a particular ethne that are already Christian, it is common for them to want to live and worship within their own identity. This raises the question of how they are to relate to other Christians even in the same denomination.

b) How to balance the affirmation of unity and diversity in multiethnic churches. Should a church encourage worship in different languages and if so how?

c) How to manage the very strong feeling towards the territory/country of origin among migrant communities? This could be a great asset in integral mission.

4. There is a global dimension to the antipathy towards ethnic diversity that is found in the modernist concept of the nation state. Both the right (free market capitalism) and the left (Marxism) see a uniform world culture as desirable for the wellbeing of humanity. Free market capitalism is in total ascendancy at the moment and its globalisation is daily making cultural uniformity a greater reality. This domination of the world by the Anglo-American ethne is undoubtedly the most powerful expression of empire since Babel. What is the church to make of it? As with the early church and the Roman Empire, it provides an opportunity to spread the gospel message. But it is important to remember that in doing this we are riding a tiger that can easily turn on us and devour us. I would say that prosperity teaching, especially as it manifests itself in Africa, is an example of what it means to be devoured by the tiger.

The church must not buy into the philosophy that diversity is bad. We must remember that God's people were the least of all the nations of the earth (Deuteronomy 7:7), and that our Lord belonged to that nation and probably spoke Aramaic only, although some have argued that he may have had some Greek. What is undeniable is that he belonged to a marginalized ethne that had very little significance in the world power structures of his day. This fact alone should spur us on as Christians to preserve the little ethnes of the world so that their wisdom can be released for the blessing of all.