

Academia Nuts

Official Newsletter for the Christian Reformed Campus Minister's Association (CRCMA)

Connecting With Classis, Youth & Leaders: A Model That Is Working

An Interview with Michael Fallon, By Grace Miedema

Grace: At our last CRCMA conference you mentioned some of the things you were doing with your classis, and the youth in your classis community. We are all looking for ways to connect meaningfully with classis, maybe you can share some of the things you are doing?

Michael: Let me begin by filling in a little bit of the background first. At the end of my third year as chaplain at McMaster, Home Missions did a three-year review of the ministry. They felt that the ministry's most significant weakness was that it was disconnected from classis. While they felt that the ministry was being blessed, it seemed to them that I was not bringing the fruit back to my supporting community. I think that was a fair observation. At that time I would have to say that I was for the most part solely focused on the 'campus' part of ministry.

After that meeting, we, as a committee, decided we needed to be more deliberate about rais-

ing the profile of the ministry in classis and sought ways to do that. The first thing we did was seek a preaching license and get out in the churches. It was a pretty simple straightforward way to let people know who I was and raise the ministry's profile.

G: What were your first points of contact with the youth leadership of your classis? What did your discussion center on?

M: After I had been preaching for awhile, I began to get invitations from youth leaders to come and speak at the classis youth services and then later at some of the youth group's retreats. So initially, I found I was speaking to the youth themselves, not necessarily the youth leaders. As for topics, usually the invitation came with a request to address a particular topic. It could deal with the youth going off to college or university, or it could be directed toward relationships – those seem to be popular requests. Sometimes they would want me to come up with my own topic – something that is current or appropriate

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NEW NAME! Our temporary name of "Good News" is now officially changed to "Academia Nuts". Thanks to Philip Grace for graciously offering us the name, which he so brilliantly coined. Philip is a friend of Scott Erbe's at Western Michigan University. I think it is an appropriate name for us campus ministers who are nuts about academia (and, perhaps, nuts *to minister* in academia?). — Editor

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Interview with Mike Fallon

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to the university setting. I think the most popular workshop I led at one of those retreats was entitled ‘Sex: What does God have to do with it?’ It packed out twice and sparked a pretty amazing discussion.

I have two teenagers myself and so I have young people hanging out around the house, but initially I felt more confident talking about university culture. However, as I discovered, there are challenges related to choosing your own topic. I found I ran the risk of missing a large portion of the youth group because depending on the size of the church and its programs, some of these youth groups range in age from twelve to twenty-five years of age. My dental technician, a twenty-two year old woman is still considered a ‘youth’ in one of the groups I have addressed.

G: How then have you made contact with the leadership?

M: I think what was key here was some deliberate thinking about how to make meaningful contact. I am sure there are plenty of ways to do that but let me just give you a couple of examples of my current approach. When I first started to do youth services I would just show up and do it. I quickly realized that my contact with the youth was minimal. Now, if I get an invitation, I ask for the youth to lead the entire service and I will just give the message. In these cases I try to meet with the leaders beforehand, get to know them and get and give some feedback.

A couple of times I have also attended the youth group night prior to preaching or speaking at a retreat and just hung out. I have also handed out confidential questionnaires where I have asked them about things that they are thinking about, what is important to them, what concerns them, pleasures, etc. ... Those opportunities have been tremendously revealing for me.

G: At the conference we also heard about something you are doing with the high school. Tell me about that.

M: Yes, along with our Classical Youth Day this is the most structured thing I have going on with classis – although the high school is of course inde-

pendent of classis. I call this HDCH Day @ Mac (Hamilton District Christian High). It came out of a conversation I had with a teacher who was teaching ‘Society’ (a high school worldview course). In a nutshell it went from that conversation to now, where each semester I host anywhere between fifty and seventy-five high school students for a day. I arrange for them to hear three presentations from someone who represents another worldview. I have had Muslims, Jews, Bahai, Secularists, Gay, and so on, speak at these days. After the presentations we have lunch and then I send them on a tour of the campus led by some of my student leaders from the Chaplaincy Centre. Later that week I go to the high school and do a debriefing with the classes that came down.

G: What do you talk about?

M: Usually I address two main topics – tolerance and being a Christian in a secular academic environment. Of course, as they have now witnessed first hand, underneath that secular arch it is very pluralistic – multi-faith. I try to keep my talk short as I find the most interesting part of the classroom visit is question generated. If I can say more, I generally find this day exciting and fun. Because the day revolves around both academics and pluralism, I feel I have a unique opportunity to play to this ministry’s strengths. How often do we get a chance to do that?

G: You also mentioned a Classical Youth Day. What does that involve?

M: Beyond being Chaplain, my other ‘classical appointment’ is to sit on the Classis Youth Committee. We do a few things, but our main baby the last two years has been a mini Conference/ Training Day for all the Youth Leaders in Classis. This is my best opportunity to interact with the Youth Leadership within classis.

The purpose of the day is to inspire and equip the leaders for their respective ministries. We have several workshops going on presenting things like the ‘Walk with Me: Model of Ministry,’ ‘Equipping Leaders’ and so on. I did one on ‘Outreach’ last year and I am scheduled to do another this year.

Last year our guest speaker was our own Bill Van Groningen. Interestingly, no one on the committee

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had even heard of him before I raised his name. On the day of, Bill joined the committee for breakfast and intimidated them with his beard. To make the story short, Bill gave a very inspiring talk - I laughed and cried as I listened. One of the committee members said that when he saw Bill he was a little taken aback and wondered "what we have gotten ourselves into" but afterward he was telling me "why haven't we heard this guy before - he should be out speaking in our denomination all the time."

In any case, after Bill it was like I could do no wrong, so they asked me for a suggestion for this year. So, we again have one of our own coming. A very fit Peter Schuurman will be biking down to Hamilton this year. I will let you know if they ask me to suggest a speaker for next year.

G: It sounds like there has been a change from the beginning. Maybe, a few words about your relationship with classis now?

M: Just to get back to what I indicated before. I now see that my ministry is not strictly bound by the parameters of the campus. That it includes and needs to include, my supporting community, Classis Hamilton. I have talked before about the need to nurture our committees, I don't think we can have that same intimacy with classis; it is a bigger, ever changing body. But I find that I have assumed the role - along with my committee of course - to be the educator of classis about campus ministry. The ministers on my committee are excellent in promoting our McMaster ministry, so I find my role is more directed toward educating them about the overall status of CRC Chaplaincy.

The last time I addressed classis I distributed the attendance sheet Geoff had made up that listed everyone's

name and ministry. I told them about some of the things going on and our recent growth. That Tom is no longer wandering the oil fields of the west alone. That we now have Paul in Alberta and Neil and Virginia in BC. That Brian had recently published a book.

I describe CRC Campus Ministry as a movement and I believe that it is good for the classical reps to know that there is more to it than just me. That is why in an indirect way it was good for them to hear Bill and it will be good for them to hear Peter. To bring it closer to home, it was a blessing for some of my student leaders to come to Toronto last spring and participate in our conference. Up to that time, in the eyes of those students, I was CRC campus ministry. Despite my high opinion of myself, it was pretty clear that it was beneficial for my students to see the scope and diversity of our ministry and to hear what God has been doing through the CRC on other campuses.

G: Thanks Mike, I appreciate catching a bit of what you are doing here - showing young people how to be tolerant Christians, growing and learning in the secular university - how subversive - tolerant, open to growth, yet steadfastly rooted in Christ and his community. I really appreciate your efforts to display the cloud of witnesses - not only the fellow saints in campus ministries in other locations, but also the wise and healthy voices in our denominational offices. Community, one in Christ, what a breathtaking idea!

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MARK YOUR CALENDARS!!

**CRCMA Regional Retreat (Eastern)
November 3 & 4, 2005
St. Bernard's Retreat Guest House
685 Finch Ave. West, Toronto, ON, Canada**

Look Out For More Details to Follow!

The Hell There Is

By Peter Schuurman

If Paul Marshall's book *Heaven is Not My Home* needed a complimentary text that on the subject of Hell, Brian McLaren's latest *The Last Word and the Word After That* would be a prime candidate. As Marshall maintains that some Christians focus on an after-life heaven at the expense of God's kingdom on earth now, so McLaren suggests that a fixation on tomorrow's Hell obscures the call for justice today.

McLaren's novel is the third book in a trilogy called "A New Kind of Christian," which is a story about a pastor Dan on the verge of burnout. He finds he can no longer preach the same old propositions, and in his heart of hearts, he doesn't really even believe them. The books chronicle his re-investigation of the nature of church, inter-faith relations, science and evolution, and in this latest book, hell, and to a lesser degree, homosexuality.

This next chapter in Dan's reinvigorated faith life begins when his daughter starts to ask questions about hell. She says to him "If Christianity is true, then all the people I love except for a few will burn in hell forever... what's the point of God even making the world if so much goes to waste? And do you think God planned to have some people tortured forever from the very beginning? Or was hell a kind of unexpected plan B that God couldn't anticipate and is now stuck with?" (5,6)

These kind of questions launch Dan into his first real investigation of the theology of hell. He quickly discovers that hell is nowhere in the Old Testament. There is *sheol*—the land of the dead, but no hell as we know it today. How did it get into the New Testament?

Dan reads on and finds that the New Testament references to hell, since they did not come from the Hebrew Scriptures, must have come from the Babylonian, Egyptian, Zoroastrian, or Greek myths. They crept into Israelite language and life as cultures traded and mixed.

Now this is McLaren's key argument through Dan's readings: *use of hell imagery does not imply an endorsement of its existence in reality.* Just like talking about the four corners of the earth or the mustard seed as the smallest seed—these are linguistic references, not facts about the universe. Jesus uses the hell language that the Pharisees have picked up to condemn the tax collectors and sinners and uses it in a kind of judo move turning it back upon them: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" he yells in Matthew 23.

"You tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders... You shut the kingdom of God in men's faces... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

Hell is really besides the point, says McLaren. The point is living for God boldly and compassionately today—"seek first God's kingdom and justice." Hell, whenever it is used in Scripture, is intended to reinforce the good news: God is restoring the world to himself, and you are invited to join him in his mission. Don't miss it! Hell communicates that the stakes are high, that consequences are real, that choices matter, that God can be angry at sin. We can create a hell on earth as much as we can heaven, and we must decide every day which community we are moving towards. Every choice we make is towards a heaven or hell.

This is McLaren's method: by showing that hell is a language and imagery that was constructed by human beings over time, it should therefore also be possible for human beings to deconstruct it and reconstruct something different. The process of deconstruction and reconstruction is nothing less than the work of hope.

The question that begs for me then, is this: what imagery would we employ for similar rhetorical use today? My feeling is that what captures the imagination today is not only after-life fires, but environmental catastrophes brought on by our own abuse of the creation. Holes in the sky, global warming, nuclear meltdown, economic collapse, biological warfare—these are the apocalyptic images that captivate people today. These are the hells that threaten, the images that frighten, the consequences that loom with weight today. They are more "this-worldly" in their construction, but they suggest deeply spiritual truths and consequences. And only God's grace can save us from them.

This short article is part of an "unchurch church service" called Strange Waters that we have been doing at Jubilee CRC in St. Catharines, Ontario for a number of years. It is an odd evening service committed to asking more questions than giving answers, and explores different themes through the use of drama, CDs, and DVDs. It invites those on the fringes of faith to come and taste and see and talk.

If you want to explore this more, Nik Ansell, Neal Punt, and Jan Bonda have all been working on this doctrine from a Reformed perspective for many years. Richard Mouw, leaning in a similar direction but more cautiously, confesses hesitation with the "L" in TULIP—limited atonement—in his latest book *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*. One thing we don't want to say about the cross, he says, is that it is

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Baby Steps: Reflections on a First Year

By Paul Verhoef

In a world of risk management, risk assessment, rising insurance premiums and the like, there's something wonderfully refreshing about watching a 14 month old take his first steps. With legs wobbling and body teetering, our little son Noah has become a boy-on-the-move. As he alternates between the gentle sway when both feet are planted to that sudden lurch forward with his next leg, Monique and I have found ourselves decidedly happy to be living in a house of carpet.

It really is a wondrous thing – to watch a child learn to walk. I continue to ask myself, “How many times does he have to tumble over, bump his head, scratch up his knees, before he learns that walking just isn't worth it? Go back to crawling.” But he never gets there; he refuses to revert back. He perseveres through the pain of bruised knees and endures an oft-bumped head in order to keep trying out those new legs of his. Up the stairs, down the stairs, over grass, over sand, over rocks, sidewalk, carpet, and linoleum. He's a little boy-on-the-move, and he wants more and more of the world to be his playground.

And as I watch him, I'm struck that in comparison to my 14 month old boy, I've gotten quite wise. I've played just enough soccer to know how hard I can run before I pull a hamstring. So I stick to my position, and take a necessary breather when the ball is on the other side of the field. And I've played just enough squash to know that if I smash every shot, I go home with a really sore shoulder. So I'm working to master the perfect touch for that drop-shot. And certainly I don't dive much for the ball – who wants to bump their head when you're thirty? In my own way, I've become a wonderfully competent risk-assessment specialist. Now that's wisdom, eh?

It's this same wisdom that made me a good student. I came to understand what my professors wanted. Sometimes all it takes is one good thought in an immaculately organized essay (watch that spelling and punctuation!) and I ended up with an easy A. And I learned to take wonderful notes, and to compile my notes with those of others, so that I knew exactly what my professor had said. And once I had that down, the tests were fairly simple. Much of the time, all I had to do was give their thoughts right back. And waalaa! – 4.0 – well, not quite. Wisdom.

But this past year, as I took up a front-line position in the creation of a new campus ministry, some of that well-learned wisdom was thrown out the window. Like my lit-

tle boy, I started the wobbly process of learning to walk. And I began to discover the beautiful risk (no, I haven't yet read James Olthuis' book titled with those words).

The beautiful risk. Risky – because I don't have a professor to tell me the right answers and to grade my attempts at mimicking his language. Risky – because I'm almost guaranteed failure, almost guaranteed some scraped-up knees and a few lumps on my noggin.

And in that risky business, I've rediscovered the security, the beauty, and the power of grace. I've grasped at grace again and again – grasped at it as I'm falling over. Or sometimes after I've already hit the ground. Grasping at grace – and being reminded that I don't have to survive by my successes, that no one's keeping a score-card of wins and losses. A life lived under the banner of grace. Emphasis on 'lived' – because there's something about risk-walking and grace-grasping that makes life become more vigorously alive.

And yes, Noah has learned not to step down a stair with his tottering body and wobbly legs without also holding firmly onto a hand, or wall, or rail (not that the hand, wall, or rail always help, mind you). And there's bound to be parallels in my risk-walking adventures – there's moments where wisdom does creep in quite effectively and... well..., wisely. But it has been so good to take some risky steps again.

Thrilled by His grace, Paul Verhoef

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at U of Calgary, Calgary, AB*

God and the Grad Student

By Michael Fallon

Is it September already?

Where has the summer gone? Those mornings of writing, while sipping coffee on the back porch.

Now it is all hustle and bustle. Jostling in the halls, crowded classrooms, new class lists and new co-workers with unfamiliar faces.

It looks like it is a new beginning for everyone, but for me, it always seems like the same old person comes along. I do okay - not bad actually - in the eyes of the world, but you know the truth - you give me so much - and I give so little back.

How can I move forward, grow in this gift of a fresh start you grant to me.

This year, at this time, I raise my eyes and petitions to you.

I long to grow as a spouse this year. Help me be more attentive and loving when those deadlines - those busy times threaten to overwhelm.

I want to be a better parent. Grace me with patience I pray. Let me bring laughter and a refreshing joy into the lives of my children and family.

I yearn to be a better teacher. Keep me just and humble Lord. Give me a portion of your wisdom. Energize me to share the awe and wonder I feel about the world you have blessed us with.

I would be a better student. Give me joy in my studies. Grant me the strength and energy to do my research to the best of my abilities.

I strive to be a good co-worker and friend. Make me aware of those around me. That I can grasp those I work with, with the firm handshake of brotherhood and friendship.

And most of all Lord. Draw me closer to you this year. Help me to create - amidst all these programs - the time I need for our relationship to grow.

Father, the trees are beginning to changing color - Fall is going to be so beautiful.

Michael Fallon

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Is This Hell?

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“limited”. If 1 Timothy 2:4 says God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” he says, we can embrace that. It is God’s desire.

Mission is a call for people to join God in his loving act of reconciliation in the world. To miss out on that is hell. To participate in it is a taste of the already in the midst of the not yet. McLaren writes with a missional urgency that focuses on engaging the kingdom forcefully in a sinful world rather than rehearsing post-death scenarios that leave us only judging the status quo. As one convert at the University of Guelph recently puts it: “I was attracted to your faith because it was a theology of life, not a theology of the knife.” Mission is an invitation to life with the One who offers it freely and may our practice demonstrate that as much as our theologies.

*Peter Schuurman is the Educational Mission Leader
for CRC Home Missions.*

Some Thoughts on Diversity

By Shiao Chong

I am a Chinese 'born-again' Christian and raised in Malaysia but now Canadian, and Campus Chaplain for the Christian Reformed Church with its Dutch roots, serving on one of the most multicultural North American campuses in York University in Toronto. Somehow, I find myself thinking a lot about the issue of diversity and multiculturalism. At the encouragement of some folks, I am sharing some, albeit not totally developed, ongoing thoughts on the issue from a biblical-theological perspective. For what it's worth:

The Triune God and Diversity

The Christian Trinity, or Tri-unity, is a concept of God that is inherently a unified diversity. How does a Trinitarian concept of God affect our worldview? Lesslie Newbigin provides some food for thought: "But it seems reasonable to argue, as some have done, that [the concept] of a unitarian God in the area of public discourse corresponds to (and is perhaps responsible for) two very obvious elements in the reigning public truth. One of these is our prevailing individualism. If the ultimate reality is this solitary, monarchical God, it is natural (some have argued) to think that human beings are essentially separate individual units, to be understood in terms of their individual selfhood and not, in the first place, as members in society. In this way of thinking, the autonomy of the individual self is the highest value, and the business of politics is to safeguard and extend this individual freedom against the pressures of the collective. ... If, as is said, the unitarian model of deity responds to, and perhaps encourages, the atomic [individualist] view of human society, plainly the trinitarian understanding of God, in which relatedness is constitutive of the divine being, corresponds to a view of society that understands the human person in his or her relatedness to others. The other way in which a unitarian model of deity may correspond to and perhaps influence human society is in respect to the role of power. Jurgen Moltman has suggested that the unitarian model tends to validate patterns of domination in human affairs. A model of ultimate reality in terms of a monarchical figure of unlimited power tends – it is argued – to validate a conception of human affairs in which sheer power is the ontological basis of everything. Those who argue in this way can point to the influence of a kind of evolutionary theory that sees all

things in terms of the battle for survival and supremacy, a view reflected in the horrifying escalation of violence as a normal part of life in "modern" societies. Against this, it is argued, a trinitarian understanding of God provides us with an ontology of love to replace an ontology of violence. The ultimate reality is the eternal mutual self-giving-in-love of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity." (Newbigin, "The Trinity as Public Truth" in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*. Eerdmans, 1997, p. 6)

If Newbigin's arguments hold up, their application to multiculturalism seems clear. Christians, of all people, have a ready-made metaphor in the Trinity to shape their imagination in creatively dealing with multicultural issues with love rather than power, with relationships rather than individualism. Self-giving love and community must need be the central themes in any Christian approach to multiculturalism.

Creational Diversity

Creation, similar to the Trinity, is also a diversified unity; being distinct without being divided, being united without being fused, are inherent characteristics of creation. I suggest that genuine diversity is diversity that seeks unity, and genuine unity is unity that seeks diversity: diversity is not division, disintegration or fragmentation; unity is not uniformity, homogeneity or fusion. Diversity and unity are not opposites but intrinsically related. Creation is an inter-related, inter-dependent, solidarity of creatures that all ultimately hang together in Christ (Colossians 1:17).

Unity in Christ is *ultimately* a unity of relation, not a unity of substance. There are different forms of unity: unity of structure (substance), unity of truth, unity of action, unity of love (relation). Our fallen trajectory tends towards first, unity of structure (we are substantially or structurally the same), to unity of truth (we share the same answers and thoughts), to unity of action (we act or practice the same) to unity of love (we share the same love and commitment). Thus, how we relate to those who differ from us often starts with this process of, first, trying to find substantial unity before we could have relational

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More Thoughts on Diversity

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unity. But I believe that biblically, the fundamental unity is first and foremost a unity of relation. Because we are united by love, we can move towards unity of action, truth and structure. Mind you, as human creatures in God's image, all of us already have some levels of unity in structure, truth, action and, yes, even love.

I think that we can have unity without having substantial "common ground" – we can have unity of "common relation". In other words, we should not make unities of substance, truth and/or action as pre-requisites to unity of love. Rather, it's the other way round.

In a multicultural community, or any community for that matter, there are bound to be differences of opinions, perspectives, behaviours, actions, and values. I don't believe it is incumbent for a community to first iron out all the differences, even all the major differences, between its members before seeing themselves as united. In fact, I think that is the surest way to bring disunity and to destroy community. Rather, I think we should first and foremost assert and affirm the unity we already have, as Christians, from our common relationship/commitment to Christ, and through that, a common relationship to each other. And from within this confession and ground of unity, we humbly and graciously stumble towards unities of thought, action and structure.

Distorted Diversity

In Reformed philosophy, there is the concept of *structure* and *direction*. (See Albert Wolters' *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, Eerdmans, 1985, 49-52, 72-73.) Structure is the order of creation, what makes it the thing that it is. Anything in creation, however, can be directed in obedience to God or misdirected in disobedience to God. Therefore, we can speak of *structural diversity* and *directional diversity*. Structural diversity is the diversity in creation – hence, human diversity (gender, ethnicity) is structural, is part of God's good creation. (Some may cite the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel to suggest that ethnic or racial diversity is not structural, is not rooted in creation.

I will address this later.) Directional diversity is the diversity of sin or redemption – hence, religious diversity is directional, and is *not* part of God's original design.

Hence, the fall has brought about directional diversity. Because of the fall, humanity tend to put asunder what God has joined together – God's diversified unity is constantly being torn apart by fallen humans into either division, fragmentation or disintegration (individualism, pluralism, relativism) or uniformity, fusion or homogeneity (collectivism, fascism, absolutism). Racism partakes of this brokenness in this polarization of uniformity (only those like us) and division (those not like us). Racism also partakes in the sin of Adam & Eve – creating our identities apart from God (to be like gods) inevitably leads us to defining ourselves by means of uniformity (we are the same) and opposition (we are not like them).

Distorted diversity also means that humans have misunderstood diversity and unity and created misleading ideologies/concepts under the labels of "unity" and "diversity". For instance, "diversity", "pluralism" and "multiculturalism" currently tend to be labels for ideologies that ultimately favour division, fragmentation and tribalism. But these ideologies (directional diversities) are rooted in structural, creational diversities (gender, ethnicity). Hence, we need discernment to not "throw out the baby with the bath water."

Similarly for cultural diversities. Cultural diversities (e.g. Chinese culture, Dutch culture, etc.) are shaped over time by both directional and structural diversities. Religion plays an important role in the shaping of cultures, as well as languages, geography, history, some biology, etc. Hence, not everything about cultural diversity is either entirely good or bad. Discernment is needed.

The same, I believe, also goes for Christian diversity. Simply being Christian in religion does not mean that everything about the church, and the sub-culture that flows from it, is directionally good. However, Christian diversity leads to a question: Does directional uniformity mean there must be cultural, or for that matter theological, uniformity?

I believe that linguistic and cultural diversity is not inherently sinful. Even though the Bible contextualized the origins of languages and cultures within the

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sin of Babel, John's vision of the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language in the New Heaven and New Earth in Revelation suggests that linguistic and cultural diversity will not be erased in the new creation (Rev. 7:9, 21:24, 26). Furthermore, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2 with the resulting outcome of the speaking of foreign languages/tongues suggests that God sees every language and culture as legitimate bearers and witnesses of God's truth and gospel. In fact, going back to Babel, one can even say that the best antidote or prevention of the sin of a certain form of imperialism (uniformity, gathering the world to one place, building upwards to storm heaven) is an increase of human diversity in linguistic and cultural terms. In other words, the judgment of Babel is also a blessing in disguise. This is especially so when you consider that the scattering of the human race at Babel actually helps fulfill the mandate of Genesis 1:28 to "fill the earth", which was what the Babel builders' expressly feared—they did not want to be "scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4).

If cultural diversity is not sinful, then it is possible that we can be faithful in our devotion to God and still have different cultural and even religious (and/or theological) expressions/embodiments of our common devotion. Thus, Christian diversity (multiple denominations) is not necessarily a sign of faithlessness or misdirection (in all or some aspects) but could simply be a sign of being faithful to God, differently. In other words, faithfulness to the Christian God (and to Christ) is precisely the kind of faithfulness that does not enforce uniformity but allows for diversity (which fits perfectly with the unified diversity of God and the diversified unity of creation).

This, however, is NOT saying that ALL forms of Christian diversity (denominations) are therefore natural and okay. As stated in the previous point, discernment is needed. But the point here is that denominational diversity is not by definition caused by sin, as many contemporary Christians are wont to think.

Restoring Diversity

Distorted diversity is restored in Jesus Christ. As creation is originally united in Christ, fallen diversity is restored by redirecting it back to Christ.

Unity in Christ does not mean that ethnic and cultural differences will be erased. Rather, ethnic

and other categories (economic, gender, etc.) are no longer definitive of our identities. Galatians 3:28 — "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" — is not a call to erase ethnic, class and gender diversity in an ontological or absolute sense. Rather, it is a call to break down any existing barriers and inequalities between them.

If Galatians 3:28 suggests that Christian social practices need to change to reflect the breakdown of divisions, then Christians need to intentionally work out justice and equality for all ethnicities (and genders and class). The Christian church is not a place for any kind of social barriers.

Hence, unity in Christ does not mean that there is only ONE Christian culture. It is not that in Christ, the distinctions between Jew and Greek are erased but that those distinctions no longer act as inequalities or barriers.

Being united in the Word, Christ, also does not mean a uniformity of human words about Christ. This goes for various kinds of "human words" that try to witness to THE WORD, and to God's norms for creation, e.g. ways of thinking, ways of speaking, ways of custom/practice, ways of doing/eating/acting/dressing, etc. Thus, other people do not have to think like us, dress like us, talk like us, act like us, value like us, in order to be united in Christ with us.

This is important because, often, we don't mind having different looking people as part of "us" as long as they "think, act, talk" like "us". In other words, we are willing to tolerate or even embrace superficial diversity (in clothes, looks, skin colour, food, etc.) but unwilling to engage deeper diversity.

Of course, if deeper diversity means directional/religious diversity, that restricts how much unity we can have with them simply because we no longer share a unity of love/relation to God. However, as suggested before, not all diversity is simply superficial diversity. Being directionally faithful, being rightly devoted to God, can still result in diversity of opinions or conclusions to the same questions, e.g. Christian diversity.

This kind of diversity that is united in a common commitment to Christ, but not necessarily united in common answers/conclusions/ideas, may be very helpful in expanding our perspectives beyond our own cultural "blind spots". By engaging with the deeper diversity that cross-cultural unity brings, we can be enriched precisely through being challenged from our

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Diversity Continued

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routine ways of thinking/seeing.

But, let's face it, this kind of diversity is not easy; in fact, it's probably downright painful.

Diversity in Shalom

Only God can bring about the full restoration and reconciliation of diversity in unity. This keeps us humble as we go about being faithful and obedient in being agents of reconciliation for God, knowing that our efforts will not bring heaven on earth.

But God also promises that full restoration will happen. This frees us and encourages us to be bold, creative and even take risks, knowing that the new creation does not depend on our successes/failures. We are called to be faithful agents, not agents who sit on our hands.

Diversity in the Church

I am convinced that God wants a multicultural church.; especially at the universal level. I see Pentecost as equipping a mono-cultural rag-tag band of disciples to engage in cross-cultural work to establish a multicultural church. If God intentionally established a multicultural church at Pentecost, in anticipation of Revelation 7:9, then the Christian church needs to be intentionally multicultural as well, in faithfulness to the Spirit's direction.

And I believe that in a world where racial and cultural divisions are paramount, the local church also needs to work towards establishing a multicultural community that bears witness to God's breaking down of these human barriers, rather than perpetuate those divisions with mono-cultural churches.

But this is where the major issues come in. How do local churches create multicultural communities? What about the issues of homogenization? I am not naïve about the possibilities of a dominant cultural

group assimilating the minority cultures.

For instance, in North America, what language will be used in a multicultural church for worship? Does not that, in itself, indirectly brings one particular culture's ethos into the centre of that local church's life? How do we prevent, as I read somewhere once, the multicultural church from becoming a tossed salad of diverse cultures that, unfortunately, gets drenched in the ranch dressing of White Western and/or North American culture?

On the other hand, is it even possible, or realistic, to have a multicultural church that is a mosaic, or a quilt of many different patterns, as opposed to the melting pot or the above tossed salad metaphors?

I think it is impossible to avoid some assimilation by a dominant culture (be it Western or Eastern, etc.) within a local multicultural church. But I think this assimilation can also be tempered by various means. For example, using songs from other languages/cultures in worship. Using art and visuals from various cultures to decorate the sanctuary. Intentionally cultivating leadership teams with a healthy gender and ethnic mix. And, not the least, having ethnic small groups/meetings within a larger multicultural church context. For instance, if it is legitimate to have women's groups (and likewise men's groups), it is also legitimate to have Hispanic groups, Chinese groups, Korean groups, African-American groups, White Western groups, etc. within a local multicultural church. Within these smaller groups, Christians can explore the dialogue between their faith and their respective cultures, fostering a critical appreciation of one's indigenous culture, but also equipping them for the much needed cross-cultural faith dialogue among Christians to explore Christian diversity, aiming not at uniformity but faithfulness.

But, perhaps, I am too idealistic about this?

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