

FACULTY ESSAY

One Family under God: Church Integration from a Biblical Perspective

“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” 1 John 1:7



It does not escape anyone that the Catholic Church in the United States is undergoing considerable changes in these recent years, especially when one thinks of the number of Hispanic men and women who are joining our dioceses and parishes. The present

reflection is an endeavor to shed some light on the dynamism that is at work here from a biblical viewpoint. First we will examine some passages from the Old Testament that speak of the unity of the chosen people of God and of the ongoing openness to welcome outsiders into the bosom of Israel; then we will turn to a selection of New Testament texts that elucidate the processes of an ever-widening incorporation of peoples into the Church founded by Christ. It is the author's hope that this contemplation will help us today to understand and manage the reality of Hispanic integration into the local churches in America.

I. Old Testament

Genesis 1-11 presents the initial blessing of God in the garden, followed by the rebellion of sin and of mankind, followed by separation and scattering. The Abrahamic narratives in Genesis 12-22 then present the divine solution to this problem: redemption through the Abrahamic promise. That divine solution entails the blessing of “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3) and “all the nations of the earth” (Gen 18:18). Throughout the Bible the theme of the oneness

of God, the oneness of his people and the hope of salvation for God's people always begins with simple doctrinal truths and proceeds to simple practical truths. In the Old Testament this unity begins with the fundamental truth about the oneness of God and the calling out of the one people of God, Israel, to be a witness to the nations of the world of the goodness and love of that God. This belief was emphasized repeatedly in the pages of the Old Testament and was the single most important truth in bringing unity to the Old Testament people of God, Israel. This belief is set forth both in the first commandment (Exod 20:1-3) and in what later became known as the Jewish *Shema* as set forth in Deut 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

This belief in the one true God is the foundation upon which all other biblical beliefs and practices are built. Thus, the Old Testament commands of the Mosaic Law were specifically based on the nature and character of that one true God as exhibited in his covenant relationship with his chosen people, Israel. Man's responsibilities in relation to God and to one's fellowmen were both stated in terms of God's own character and nature which man was to imitate: "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." (Lev 19:2, 12).

The specific question one can address is, how did Israel incorporate non-Israelites into the faith community? Did that assimilation necessarily denote loss of ethnic character? When people of other faiths converted to Israel's monotheism (Yahwism), did they abandon their ethnicity or nationality in favor of Israel's or did they retain it? Was this equally true of men as of women? If assimilation was practiced, did it apply only to individuals who were living within the boundaries of Palestine or also to those within the communities of the dispersion? Were proselytes absorbed into the tribal structure? Even more importantly, were they granted landholding rights in perpetuity like Israelite citizens? In response to all this four criteria would need to be met for full assimilation to occur: (i) male converts would need to be circumcised, (ii) they would be permitted to worship in the inner court rather than be restricted to the court of the Gentiles, (iii) they would have the right to stand in the "assembly of Israel," and (iv) they would have a land grant within the "inheritance of Israel." There are some examples of assimilation of converts occurring to a greater or lesser degree. Caleb, Joshua's fellow spy, is identified as the Kenizzite (Num 34:12; Josh 14:6, 14), suggesting a non-Israelite background. He is a true Yahwist who receives a land grant on entering Canaan (Josh 14:6-15). The Midianite/Kenite relatives of Moses accompany Israel into Canaan and settle there (Num 10:29; Judg 4:11; 1 Chron 2:55). They also appear to have been Yahwists (cf. Exod 18). In neither of the above cases, however, does assimilation

erase their distinctive ethnic identity. That is, they continue to be identified as Caleb the Kenizzite and the Kenites.

Ruth, the Moabitess, is a convert (1:16) and the widow of a Jewish husband. Yet, even after settling down in Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi, she identifies herself as a stranger (2:10). This was the case even though foreign women were much more readily accepted into the nation than men. In fact, Deut 23:7-8 may contain a reflection of the general difficulty men had in becoming fully assimilated. It declares that an Edomite or Egyptian may not be fully accepted into the assembly of Israel until the third generation. Presumably that refers to the third consecutive generation of Yahwists. And, finally, the book of Esther describes an event in which many people of other nationalities "became" or, better, "made themselves" Jews (8:17). The form of the verb implies circumcision as the rite of passage into Judaism.

Women captured in war and given in marriage to Jewish sons were not necessarily proselytes (Deut 21:10-14). Nor were wives who were partners in political marriages, such as Solomon's wives, Jezebel, or the women from other nations who were encountered by Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9-10; Neh 13:23-38). And the sojourner (*ger*) was not necessarily a proselyte, even though he was expected to keep the basic laws of the land (Lev 17:10-15; 18:26; 20:2; 24:16). He was a resident alien who held a "green card" (immigrant's visa), so to speak, rather than citizenship papers (Ezek 44:6-9). If circumcised, he received, together with all the other males of his family, full acceptance into the assembly of Israel and was qualified to celebrate the Passover (Exod 12:43-48).

The evidence from Israel's practice suggests converts were assimilated into Israel through marriage or circumcision. However, they faced social hurdles. Inasmuch as there is only one reference to the issuance of a land grant, it may be that proselytes often experienced social and economic discrimination. Perhaps this is why the *gerim* were listed with the "widows, orphans and Levites" as economically distressed and those discriminated against. There is, however, no indication as to what the status of the Yahwistic *ger* was in contrast with the *ger* who worshipped other gods. It is possible that after conversion to Yahwism he and his family were no longer viewed as *gerim*, as in the case of Caleb. The evidence from Ruth's experience suggests that religious converts from other ethnic groups experienced social discrimination for a considerable period of time.

But then the prophet Isaiah announces that the new covenant people will be served by a mixed Israel gentile priesthood (Isa 56:6-7; 66:19-21). Everyone who names the name of Yahweh will worship the Lord without distinction as to nationality (Zech 14:17-21). The promised new Davidic kingdom will be governed by a king of the Davidic line (Isa 11:10-16; Amos 9:12; Zech 9:7). This

king will marshal the remnants of both Israel and the gentiles (Isa 11:10,12) beneath his banner. He will conquer and take possession of the people of God throughout the world (Amos 9:12). Thus the collocation of the remnants of Israel and of the gentiles introduces an ideal of the people of God to be realized under the new David, by a new covenant, in the form of a new creation which we recognize in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man, and divine founder of the Church. This new people of God made up of every nation is fused into a whole new being.

All peoples are called to worship God. Psalm 68:28-29 & 31-33 illustrates how the cultures and riches of distant peoples are joining Israel's worship of their one true God: "Take command, my God, as befits your power, the power, God, which you have wielded for us, from your temple high above Jerusalem. Kings will come to you bearing tribute. From Egypt nobles will come, Ethiopia will stretch out its hands to God. Kingdoms of the earth, sing to God, play for the Rider of the Heavens, the primeval heavens."

II. New Testament

As we now turn to the New Testament let us first explore a few passages that urge the need for unity in the Church: "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." (Phil 2:2). One of the signs of apostasy (falling from the truth) in the Church is the bickering and disunity among Christians. Christ says the world would know that we were His disciples by the love that we have for one another (Jn 13:35). In Colossians 3:14 it says that love is the perfect bond of unity. The New Testament speaks about us being unified in Christ (Eph 4:5). In response to those Christians who follow after individuals other than the Lord Jesus, Paul says that Christ is not divided (1 Cor 1:12-13). Though Christ is not divided, His body of believers is: "when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it; for there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may become evident among you." (1 Cor 11:18-19).

What is it that unites us? Primarily, it is the saving work of Christ that unites us, that is, knowing Christ Jesus in a personal and intimate way as members of His Body (1 Cor 1:9). Secondly, it is the essential adherence to the truth as proposed by the infallible magisterium of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, we have the body of Scriptures which are the word of God, enlightening us about the essentials of the faith. Romans 14:1-12 speaks about accepting Christians of differing opinions and not to judge them because: "to his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him

stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God." The whole point is that we need to be united, not bickering. Each member of the Church is called to love one another as Christ commanded us: "Love is the perfect bond of unity." (Col 3:14).

The sacred mystery of the Church's unity has its source and highest exemplar in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, as declared by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (cf. 813-822). Moreover, the oneness of the Church is derived from her "soul", the Holy Spirit: unity is of the essence of the Church. From the beginning, this one Church has been characterized by a great diversity which comes from both the variety of God's gifts and the diversity of those who receive them. Within the oneness of the People of God, a multiplicity of peoples and cultures is gathered together. Among the Church's members, there are different gifts, ministries, conditions, and ways of life, a marvelous richness that is not opposed to the Church's unity. Christ always gives his Church the gift of unity, but the Church must always pray and work to maintain, reinforce, and perfect the unity that Christ wills for her. This is why Jesus himself prayed at the hour of his Passion, and does not cease praying to his Father, for the unity of his disciples: "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may know that you have sent me." (cf. Jn 17:21-24; cf. Heb 7:25). The word "one" is repeated a striking number of times within a few lines: it occurs six times in four verses, and it stresses the paradoxical connection between the divine unity and the unity of all those who believe in Christ. The divine oneness covers every aspect of ecclesiastical life, and although "we have many members in one body," "being many we are one in Christ" (cf. Rom 12:4-8).

This oneness or unity based on God's redemptive work in Christ and brought to fruition through the work of God's Spirit should be the fundamental basis for practical unity amongst the people of God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself." (cf. Mk 12:29-31). Paul set forth this goal of unity based on our oneness as God's people in his Letter to the Ephesians:

As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is, one body, and one spirit,

just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:1-6)

People from amongst all nations throughout the world are united in Christ above and beyond the geographical, ethnic, racial, economic and political divisions of mankind. “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom 15:5-6).

Since Christians are to share a common life, there are numerous appeals for unity scattered through the letters of Saint Paul (e.g. 1 Cor 10:17; Gal 3:28; Eph 1:10; 2:14; 3:6; Col 3:11). 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Ephesians 4:3-6 describe the implications for unity which arise from the fact that the church is a “body”. From these texts it is clear that individual Christians, like the various members of a physical body, are to demonstrate a unity in the midst of diversity. In some situations unity may mean working toward a uniformity of understanding: the apostle makes an appeal for the Corinthian believers to be “perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Cor 1:10b), a concern reiterated elsewhere: “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature” (Eph 4:13). While diversity in spiritual gifts actually enhances the unified functioning of the body, diversity in “mind and thought” is seen as an impediment.

One can easily recognize that the purpose of Jesus’ incarnation was not to dwell only in a geographic region of the world but in the hearts of the redeemed from every corner of the earth. He came to his own (Israelites), but his own did not receive him. But to all who did receive Him and believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God (Jn 1:11-12). When Jesus first enters the scene during the ministry of his cousin John the Baptist, John exclaims, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). The right to becoming a child of God is not due to inheritance, lineage, or deservedness of man (Jn 1:13), but through the universal scope of God’s redeeming purposes, saving grace comes to sinners regardless of geographic location, ethnicity, and background.

In John 1-3, we see Jesus ministering in Jerusalem and Judea; however, in chapter 4, Jesus states that he “had to pass through Samaria” (Jn 4:4; KJV reads “must needs”). This necessity was precisely because salvation was intended to come not only to the Jews, but to the Samaritans as well. These half-breeds and outcasts of Israel were despised by the Jews, but the Son of Man overthrew the cultural, racial, and societal norms with a new ethic which embraces not only Jews but Samaritans as well. Then, in John 12:12-26, we pick up on the scene

where Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem just prior to his death. The Evangelist notes that “among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks” who told Phillip, “We wish to see Jesus” (Jn 12:20-21). When word got to Jesus, he replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn 12:23). What is the relationship between the Greeks seeking Jesus and Jesus’ response? Throughout the Gospel the Lord asserts that His hour has not yet come. But here we see it being inaugurated. Jesus, receiving word that the whole world (Greeks) have sought him, knew that the worldwide redemptive mission had assumed the cosmic scope of including all races and peoples such that John 3:16 would have its soteriological fulfillment in the hour of his glorification and atonement for sinners through the cross.

Now let’s turn our attention to the Acts of the Apostles. Prior to Jesus’ ascension He spoke these words: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Analogous to the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus gives his followers the mandate to make disciples and be His witnesses throughout the whole world. The same Samaria that was a place of geographic necessity would soon become a missionary necessity of the early Church. The gentiles who came seeking Jesus would soon hear the message of reconciliation and Good News of Jesus Christ. The account of the early Church begins at Pentecost in Jerusalem with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-41). After Stephen is martyred and Christians scattered through persecution, we find Christians in Judea and Samaria “going about preaching the word” (Acts 8:1-4). As Phillip “proclaimed to them the Christ,” God began to work miracles among the Samaritans, leading them eventually to salvation (Acts 8:14-17). Later in this chapter we see Phillip evangelizing an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), overcoming racial barriers and geographical lines, taking the Gospel message from Samaritans to Ethiopians, that is, Africans.

The harmony and unity in the early Church is beautifully expressed in the following summary description:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

A similar passage occurs later on: “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common” (Acts 4:32).

An eloquent example of integration can be found in Acts 6:1-8, where we read about complaints among different ethnic groups in Jerusalem, Hellenists (immigrants) against Hebrews (local people). The apostles react to this tension by appointing seven deacons to help in the distribution of goods. But what is particularly interesting about this incident is that those seven deacons were chosen from among the Hellenists in Jerusalem, men who were culturally close to the sector of the community that felt disadvantaged.

Peter preaches the good news to the Gentiles (Acts 10:34-43) and “the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). The issue of Gentile inclusion became the central issue at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Peter’s proclamation was compassionate and far-sighted. He declared, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that by my mouth the gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:7-9). Every barrier and division between Jews and gentiles were torn down through the advance of the Gospel and the evangelizing work of the Holy Spirit.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we see that the Gospel of justification by faith carries social and ethnic implications. Paul holds forth the vision of a community of faith in which all are one in Christ (2:11-21; 3:26-29). This is not merely a matter of an isolated slogan in Galatians 3:28; it is a central theme of the letter as a whole. Jews and gentiles are no longer divided because Christ’s death brought them together. Therefore, all manifestations of racial and ethnic divisiveness are betrayals of the truth of the Gospel. All of this is expressed with remarkable clarity in Ephesians 2:12-22:

At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we

both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Nowhere is this theology more important for the Church than in dealing with racial hostility. Catholics of other races are part of us, and divisions cannot be allowed to continue. A racial barrier is like a festering wound in the body of Christ. Sunday should not be the most segregated day of the week when Christians worship along segregated lines. The perversion of both active and passive racism must be challenged and stopped. Racism will have to be treated on two levels, both as a general societal problem and specifically within the Body of Christ. Racism is prohibited by the equality of all people before God and by his unrestricted love.

To the church at Colossae, Paul explains that “here” is a place Christians, whether Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, all find equal standing at the foot of the cross and at the heart of God’s redemptive purposes (Col 3:11). The context reveals that Paul is calling the believers to put away the old self and all of its practices and put on the new self which is being renewed in the image of its Creator (Col 3:9-10). Thus the call for destroying barriers is presented in the context of exhorting believers to leave their old ways of the world and move to the new ways of Christ. Racial prejudices and divisions belong to the old man, the worldly culture inherited in the flesh. Putting on the new self means that there can never be an “us versus them” or insider-outsider mentality to the Church. Being in Christ involves a new identity and a new outlook through the lens of the Gospel (cf. Rom 1:14-16; 5:15-21; 1 Cor 9:19-23; Gal 1:16; 2:2, 8; Eph 3:7-12; Col 1:24-26; 2 Tim 4:17). This mission that drove Paul to do all things for the sake of the gospel, all for the glory of God, and all for the sake of the elect, was grounded in God’s purpose from the beginning of time to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among the nations (cf. Rom 1:5; 3:29-30; 9:22-26; 10:12-13; 11:11-12, 25; 15:8-12; Gal 3:8, 13-14; 5:6; Eph 3:6; Col 1:27; 1 Thess 2:14-16).

Not to be overlooked is the apostles’ injunction of ecclesial hospitality. The third letter of John is an excellent example for the apostolic invitation not to exclude good people from the life of the Church. See also Romans 12: 9-13: “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in

hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.”

“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation’ (Rev 5:9). This fourfold formula - tribe, language, people, and nation - occurs seven times in Revelation (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). In Revelation, four is the number of the world, seven the number of completeness. The sevenfold use of this fourfold phrase indicates that the reference is being made to all the nations of the world. In the symbolic world of Revelation, there could hardly be a more emphatic indication of universalism. The consummation of God’s plan for human history includes a reversal of the judgmental aspects of Genesis for those who trust in Christ. The curse is removed; they return to Eden to enjoy fellowship with God; and the scattered ones, once separated from God, are now brought together under the reign of the Lamb, finding God’s blessing as promised to Abraham. The inclusion of all the nations of the earth into the people of God was not an afterthought by God, or a shift in his thinking, but rather was part of his eternal plan from the beginning. Thus the mission of Paul to the nations was the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise as a redemptive solution to Genesis 3-11. However disparate we may be culturally, we are nonetheless joined together in unity by the Spirit of God. The cross of Christ demolishes all barriers between people and God, reconciling people who believe, both to God and to each other.

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.’ (Rev 7:9-12)

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