

Assimilating Ethnic and Other Minorities into the Local Church

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Because the scope of the title of this paper is so broad, it is only possible to raise some of the issues and identify them then point to some possible directions. Thus we shall consider the following: defining assimilation, defining ethnicity, theological considerations, and practical application.

Defining Assimilation

There are three similar terms that inform us about the process we are identifying as "assimilation." They are: assimilation, acculturation, and incorporation. All three relate to what happens when groups of individuals having diverse cultures enter into continuing contact in which they share experience and develop a common cultural life (Gordon 1964: 61-61). Sociologists tend to use *assimilation*, while anthropologists prefer the term *acculturation*. People working in the church, especially in evangelism and church growth, often use *incorporation* in a technical sense for the process through which new people become full members of a local church.

Assimilation and acculturation may be viewed as directional, as related to two groups in contact: mono-directional or bi-directional. These processes also range over an axis from partial to complete. "Assimilation" in the title of this paper probably means something less than complete acculturation but also something more. The "something more" includes helping people to share a common experience of Christ as Saviour (within their cultural setting), which forms the basic bond between the host people of the church and the target people of the minority group they are trying to reach. The "something less" means that while the target people will no doubt choose to make some acculturation toward the host culture (since contact tends to induce this), the maintenance of cultural identity is generally expected. This latter condition is often reinforced by the host people, who in their mission approach intentionally accommodate themselves in some ways to the culture of the target people in order to develop credibility and win the right to speak. In general, "assimilation" in this sense means (from the standpoint of the host people) trying to develop a sense of belonging at some level which will produce a desire to continue participation in Christian activities with the host people.

Defining Ethnicity

Since treating the concept of minorities is too huge an enterprise for the scope of this paper, we shall limit ourselves to the concept of ethnicity as an example of one of the most common types of minorities in our society. The principle components of ethnic identity as a popular conception are listed by Anderson and Frideres (1981: 37) as: 1) ethnic origin, 2) mother tongue, 3) ethnic-oriented religion, and 4) folkways. The concept of *ethclass*, first developed by Gordon (1964: 51), is more comprehensive and useful. It combines both ethnic group and social class characteristics. In Peter Wagner's model (1979: 62-63), he adds also regional identity and rural-urban orientation. This brings his total list of significant components of ethnicity to the following (62):

Ethnic Group

Race

Religion

National Origin and Language

Assimilation Factors

Social Class

Economic Status

Vocation

Formal Schooling

Regional Identity

Rural-Urban Orientation

The inter-relatedness of these components is indicated by his circular diagram, though it is not meant to indicate that the weighting of these components is equal (that will be different for each individual ethnic group)

The practical significance of such a definition of ethnicity points to the fact that while ethnic groups may be defined as homogeneous culturally in contrast with the Anglo/White population, at a deeper level of analysis they can be incredibly diverse. Consequently, as individuals they cannot be treated as if they were all the same. Unless there is deliberate multiple targeting by the church, the result will be unconscious selective evangelism which will exclude some sub-groups.

Theological Considerations

There are two critical areas theologically which relate to the assimilation of ethnics in a local church:

1. The nature of the church itself

It's defined theologically as having the characteristics of both *unity* and *diversity*: unity at the more universal levels of theological and ethical commitment, and diversity at the incarnational levels of lifestyle and local custom. The central concern here is the issue of unity. Among many, there are three key passages in the New Testament relating to this unity:

Gal. 3:28 (NIV): There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Eph. 2:12-22 (NIV): Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility....His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole

building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Eph. 4:3-6 (NIV): 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.

The unity of the church centers in our common experience of and relationship to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord (individually) and Head of the Body (of Christ) (corporately). The unity is characterized among the members by commonality of belief and experience, by participation in a new identity which supersedes but does not replace our diverse identities (see Rev. 7:9), and by the corporate bond of peace.

2. The needs or rights of ethnics as a minority group

It relate to the necessary diversity of the church. They are primarily to be understood as needs, though at times it helps majority groups to understand them in some sense as rights in order to check our incipient paternalism. Examples of precedent in Acts are given, as the Early Church struggled with diversity in its midst:

1. *The need/right of receiving the Gospel* (Acts chapters 2, 8, esp. 10)
 - 1.1. The need/right of the *mother tongue expression of the gospel* (Acts 2)
 - 1.2. The need/right of a *culturally contextualized Gospel* (Acts 17:16- 34; 19:1-7)

2. *The need/right to be received as full members of the Body of Christ* (Acts 15)
 - 2.1. The need/right of *cultural identity* (Acts 15--conversion with minimal cultural displacement)
 - 2.2. The need/right of *membership group identity* (Acts 6; 15:8-9; Rev. 7:9)
 - 2.3. The need/right of *equality*: equal opportunity, equal participation, and proportionate representation (Acts 6)
 - 2.4. The need/right of *equal responsibility/accountability*:

3. *The need/right to a self-sustaining fellowship/church* (using the three-selves definition)
 - 3.1. *The need/right of self-determination* ("self-governing") (Acts 6; 14:23)
 - 3.2. *The need/right of being self-supporting* (Acts 2:44-46; Gal.6:2)
 - 3.3. *The need/right of being self-propagating* (evangelism and church planting) (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19-24)
 - 3.4. *The need/right of developing a "movement" among one's own people* (Acts 11:19-21; 13:49; 19:20)
4. *The need/right of engaging in cross-cultural mission* (Acts 8:5-40; 11:19-24), as they lay aside their own needs/rights (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

All cultural groups (including majority groups) in the church have these needs/rights, but Christian individuals and groups are called to lay them aside for the objective of mission, in the cross-cultural transmission of the Gospel (evangelism and nurture as well as church

planting). In contrast with Israel's monopolistic practice of mission ("come to us for God's salvation"), the church is charged to *go* and *gather* but *give away* the gospel.

4. Practical Application

We are now ready to apply the *descriptive input* of the sociological/ anthropological understanding of assimilation and ethnicity and the *normative input* of our theological understanding of the nature of the church and the needs/rights of cultural groups. We shall ask several key questions.

1. Who are the responsive among the sub-groups of a particular ethnic minority?

Not all individuals of an ethnic minority are equally responsive to assimilation in a local church, whether they become Christians or not. On an acculturation axis, individuals and sub-groups range in a scale from non-acculturation to strong acculturation, from stressing cultural identity and contrast (Black power blacks) to nearly complete cultural and social assimilation ("oreos"). It is the potentially acculturating individuals and groups that can be assimilated most easily by a local (Anglo/White) church. Here are some of the varieties of ethnic identity, as presented in a model by Jerry Appleby (Church Planting class presentation at N.T.S., May 2, 1984):

[Types of Ethnic Identity in an Open Society: Figure 2](#)

Our mission responsibility to the responsive is to try to bring them to Christ while they are responsive, while trying to develop readiness for the gospel among the resistant. Assimilation of individuals depends upon the successful identification of the target person with one or more individuals and/or groups with which that target person feels a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is fostered through conversion, establishing of relationships, baptism and membership, participation in the life of the church, and through service.

Ministry can be extended to both responsive and resistant people and groups by responding to their basic needs (this is especially true of recent immigrants), such as:

- a. Physical needs: housing, furnishings, clothing, food, jobs, health care
- b. Psychological needs: acceptance, support, friendship, respect
- c. Survival needs: language learning (ESL), culture learning, learning modern and urban skills (driving, shopping, finding directions), literacy
- d. Spiritual needs: evangelism, follow-up, discipling, ministry skills

2. How can ethnics be best evangelized and nurtured in the local church?

The clues are found again in terms of receptivity. People tend to be responsive to the gospel

1. When we start where they are in spiritual understanding and attitude. Cognitively, some people/groups need more information before they can understand the issues of

- salvation. Affectively, some people/groups must change their attitudes and develop appreciation for the gospel and what it can do for them. Behaviorally, some people need help in coming to decision (closure) at the moment when it is appropriate in their lives to accept Christ as Saviour.
2. When the right person brings the gospel witness to them. The right person is someone they can trust. That person may be a foreigner to them who has won the right to speak for the Lord by friendship, service, or cultural and/or linguistic adjustment. But in the long run ethnic ministry must become self-propagating, since people that are already related to each other through social and cultural ties have the greatest credibility and access to each other.
 3. When we use the right approach: one which is suited to their world-view, their value system, their motivational pattern, and their decision-making patterns.

3. Is there a place for ethnics in a local church?

There are two hidden assumptions in the title of this paper. First, it assumes that we start with a relatively homogeneous congregation of one sort or another and have not yet tried or have not yet succeeded in reaching and assimilating minorities (which is probably true of the vast majority of local churches). Second, it assumes that there is a genuine sense of mission and desire to assimilate minorities. There is a hidden consequence to this second assumption that is very important. It must be realized that if the church does assimilate minorities this includes the necessity of developing a pluralistic congregation in culture, in relationships, in function, and in program. If the congregation is not yet ready to accept becoming a pluralistic congregation, then it would be disastrous to begin an ethnic or other minority ministry until people have been motivated to see the need for change and gladly accept it for the sake of fulfilling mission.

Total assimilation in ethnic ministry is seldom possible in a local church unless it involves only small numbers of token ethnics. If a real harvest of ethnics develops, the ethnics must have and will need points of ethnic identity in the structure and program of the local church. While they may be expected to make some adjustments to the host group, somewhere there must be the possibility of their having an indigenized and contextualized experience of the gospel in their own cultural framework or they are likely to move out of the local church to find identity and satisfaction. Some kinds of activities (especially celebration type) can be done in integration with the host congregation, but other groups (Sunday school classes, prayer cells, evangelistic activities, discipling groups) will be needed which are targeted specifically for their ethnic group and which need ethnic leadership as soon as possible, or adequate nurture cannot take place. If the ethnic group grows large enough, a multicongregation church structuring may be necessary.

4. When is separate church for ethnics needed?

This is where self-determination enter in—a separate church is needed when they feel the need. In case of language difference, people may choose to remain in the host church in order to learn English, provided they have their own language groups in addition. But they may ultimately decide they need their own church in order to preserve their language and cultural identity and to increase their evangelistic effectiveness. Non-assimilators of their ethnic group

will probably only be reached in a separate church, at least most effectively. When the growth and size of the ethnic congregation reaches a certain point, especially if there is a strain on the use of the facilities, then an adjustment must be made to multiple time use or moving to another facility, or growth will hit a ceiling and stop. It may be time for the host congregation to consider that they need to plant the ethnic congregation as a separate daughter church. The ideal would be to use this occasion to start a movement of church planting if the general ethnic population is large enough to make this feasible.

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