

BLACKHAWK CHURCH AND GOD’S VISION FOR A MULTICULTURAL KINGDOM

Adopted by the Elder Board on April 23, 2024

We, the Elder Board, believe that God has called our church on a journey toward becoming a multicultural community. As we have taken steps on this journey, we know that there is much more for us to know, to learn, and to experience. So the posture of this paper is not to set out a definitive statement of what is God’s vision and how it’s to be actualized, but to create a working document that captures what we have seen so far and insights that the Spirit has offered us along the journey. The hope is that this document keeps us oriented toward the vision and invites others to join us on this divinely-appointed journey.

The goal of this paper¹ is therefore to set forth our current understanding on two issues. Part One lays out our convictions concerning God’s vision for a multicultural kingdom as revealed in the Bible, and Part Two lays out the implications of this vision as it applies to Blackhawk Church.

PART ONE | GOD’S VISION FOR A MULTICULTURAL KINGDOM

This is our summary of the Bible’s teaching on this topic:

God envisions a multicultural kingdom, one people worshipping him and in loving community with each other while expressing their distinct ethnic cultures (e.g. language, etc.).² As a “tribe of tribes,” we corporately image God’s love for those who are different. This kingdom is God’s answer to the ethnic hostility in our world.

1. “God envisions a multicultural kingdom, one people worshipping him and in loving community with each other...”

The Book of Revelation proclaims God’s vision of a multicultural kingdom on this earth:

⁹ *And they sang a new song, saying:
“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:9-10)³*

¹ The Elder Board commissioned Dr. Charles Yu, Blackhawk’s Lead Teaching Pastor and Pastor of Multicultural Ministry, to write this paper. It is an adaptation and expansion of his published article, “A Multicultural Vision for the Church,” in *Evangelicals Magazine*, Winter 2023/24, Vol. 9, No. 3.

² In this document, the word “culture” is used interchangeably with “ethnicity.”

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural passages are from the NIV 2011.

This passage makes it clear that one day, God will take individuals from every tribe, every language, every people, every nation and create a single kingdom. This multicultural, multilingual, multinational kingdom will serve God by becoming his priests and exercising authority in this world. This is God's vision for the future; this multicultural kingdom is God's final design for humanity for all eternity.

But God's kingdom does not merely culminate in a future multicultural community, it also begins its life as a multicultural community. The story of Pentecost (Acts 2), the birth narrative of the church, makes this clear, specifying that the three thousand "added to their number that day (v. 41)" are drawn from "every nation under heaven (v. 5)," and provides an exhaustive list of these nations in Verses 9-11.

Thus, the story arc of the Church is one that begins as a multicultural community and continues through all eternity as a multicultural community.

2. "While expressing their distinct ethnic cultures (e.g. language, etc.)"

Acts 2 does not merely note the church's multicultural composition at its birth; it makes two other points: 1) the church is given the mission and is empowered to cross cultural boundaries, and 2) the community maintains its cultural diversity. We see the church's mission and empowerment in this pivotal scene.

¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is symbolized by "tongues of fire" coming to rest on the disciples. Some readers have speculated that the tongues of fire represent God's holy presence, akin to the fire in the burning bush from the Exodus narrative. While that is a possibility, the text does not make that reference explicit. Rather, the more immediate context in verse 4 says that the disciples begin "to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." This salient connection between tongues resting on the disciples and their speaking other tongues is not to be overlooked. This is a wordplay in the Greek that happens to work in English. In Greek, it's *glōssa* in both instances. *Glōssa* comes down, and then the disciples can speak *glōssa* across language, cultural, and ethnic barriers.

As Pentecost marks the debut of the Holy Spirit as the driving force behind the life of the Church, it is, then, a defining moment. Thus, we cannot miss the fact that at this pivotal moment, the Holy Spirit chooses to give God's people the ability to speak across cultural boundaries. This decision speaks volumes about the mission of the church as well as the focus of the Holy Spirit in his work. The Church is given the power to accomplish the mission of becoming a multicultural community.

The next passage in Acts 2 shows us that the community maintains cultural diversity:

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

The multicultural composition of the crowd is clear, but beyond that, the narrator repeatedly reminds us that the multicultural gathering is hearing their “own language being spoken (v. 6),” questioning each other about how “each of us hears them in our native language (v. 8),” and expressing awe that the wonders of God are declared “in our own tongues (v. 11).” The author is making a clarification via this repetition. The power of the Spirit does not involve erasing cultural differences; people continue to hear in their own language. That is because the unity of the people of God is not achieved through uniformity, but through the Spirit’s ability to bring together different peoples and knit them into a single community without blurring their cultural differences.⁴

3. “As a ‘tribe of tribes,’ we corporately image God’s love for those who are different.”

As we have seen, God intends a multicultural community and specifically set out to build the church as a multicultural community. The more important question is why? Why does God want a multicultural kingdom?

When it comes to questions concerning the purpose of humanity, Genesis 1:26-28 is almost always the rightful starting point for the discussion:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

*²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

We are familiar with the idea of humans being created to be the image of God. The phrase “image of God” in Hebrew is *selem elohim*, and this phrase refers to something physical that represents the essential qualities of a deity. Thus, as a human being who images God, I have eyes, God can see; I have ears, God can hear; I have a mouth, God can speak. My personhood tells us that God is a person. To be God’s image means I communicate his essential qualities.

It is important to recognize that this imaging function is not limited to the individual; that is, we also image God in community. Genesis 2 recounts God’s institution of marriage between a man and a woman as part of humanity’s imaging function; specifically, a marriage between a man and a woman images God’s love for his people. This theme is repeated throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, God is the husband, and Israel is the wife; in the New Testament, Christ is the husband, and the Church is the bride. This is Paul’s understanding of marriage. In Ephesians 5:31-32, he quotes Genesis 2:24 while referencing the imaging function of marriage:

³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

A marriage images God’s love for his people. The physical union of two different sexes represents God’s love for a people very different from Him. It is a love that overcomes the barrier of rebellion and brokenness so that God can become one with the people He loves.

⁴ Acts 6:1-7 reminds the readers of the struggles that attend a multicultural community.

The theological basis for the Bible's sexual ethics serves also as the basis for God's vision for a multicultural kingdom. God wants his people to be multicultural, multilingual, multinational because He wants different ethnic groups joining together as a community to be a physical representation of a God who crosses barriers to love those who are different.

That the essential nature of God's love is about crossing boundaries is made clear by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matthew 5:43-47).

What Jesus says is profound: Love, per se, does not distinguish God and His people from this world; this world loves plenty – but selectively. What Jesus says is that it's not whether you love, but whom you love that distinguishes God's people from the rest of the world. Because God loves across boundaries, our loving across boundaries is what makes us "children of [our] Father in heaven."

A multicultural church, a community with different ethnic groups manifesting different cultures, that loves across the myriad of barriers is one that represents God on earth. It is by becoming a "tribe of tribes" that a church fulfills its imaging function.

4. "This kingdom is God's answer to the ethnic hostility in our world."

God wants His love across boundaries physically manifested in a Spirit-empowered community because we live in a broken world that does not love across boundaries; on the contrary, this is a world wired for tribalism.

For so many of us, when we walk into a room full of strangers, our instinct is to scan for someone whom we think we can connect with – someone our age, our background, maybe someone in our ethnic group. This is basic to who we are as humans. But this most basic of human instincts, repeated billions of times, over millennia, leads us to form groups of similar people and look down on and fear those who are different. The consequences of this basic human instinct have been nothing short of catastrophic.

Andrew Sullivan writes, "Tribalism, it's always worth remembering, is not one aspect of human experience. It's the default human experience. It comes more naturally to us than any other way of life."⁵ This tribalism is responsible for some of the greatest atrocities in our world; it is the leading cause of injustice, cruelty, violence, and warfare – and it is utterly intractable. Our world has no solution for tribalism; all we have are tribes vying for dominance. This most basic of human instincts is one of the most destructive parts of our sin nature. It is sin with a capital S.

In response to this tribalistic world, Jesus enters it, and on the cross, he brings an end to ethnic hostility:

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (Ephesians 2:14-18).

⁵ Andrew Sullivan, "America Wasn't Built for Humans," *New York Magazine*, September 18, 2017.

Here, Paul addresses the tension and hostility between people groups, specifically Jews and Gentiles. He declares that on the cross, Jesus puts an end to ethnic hostility. By inviting people from all nations and ethnic groups to become one with him, Jesus creates “one new humanity,” a new tribe that is empowered by the Spirit of God to overcome our broken tribalistic tendencies, thereby revealing his essence and his power.

But Paul takes it one step further and makes the astounding claim that God’s multicultural community does not just reveal his essence and power to the broken human realm, but establishes his wisdom to the rebellious spirits that rule the systems and powers of this world:

⁸ Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:8-11).

This is an amazing claim. The Church’s ability to come together and love across cultures and ethnicities proves to the spiritual beings that God is wise. The very existence of this one tribe of tribes is the sign to the watching world, and particularly to the watching powers of this world, that Jesus is Lord. This is basic New Testament ecclesiology.

In other words, as God’s children, we are called to be God’s visible, tangible, embodied alternative to this broken world that cannot love across differences. We’re called to be a new breed of humanity, called the Church. It is to be the coming together of different peoples, different languages, different cultures, a place where we maintain our differences and love each other precisely for those differences. A multicultural kingdom images God for the sake of his mission to the world; for this reason, God’s multicultural vision is not only to be emphasized as an eschatological vision, but as a present-day reality.

PART TWO | IMPLICATIONS FOR BLACKHAWK CHURCH

As far as it is possible, we (Blackhawk Church) aim to reflect the multicultural vision of the kingdom of God as a community. We want to image the distinctive love of God by becoming a community of many peoples who love each other precisely because of the differences that we recognize. We seek to move toward this vision through the following:

1. We teach God’s multicultural vision appropriately

God’s multicultural vision is not the entirety of the gospel, nor is it at its periphery. Specifying the importance of this vision and how it fits within the overarching biblical story is an important part of our teaching.

At Blackhawk, we proclaim a comprehensive gospel that goes beyond individual salvation. We believe that the Bible tells a story of God creating a beautiful world and humans to rule the world alongside him. But the humans’ rebellion places the world under the dominion of spiritual forces in opposition to God, thereby introducing violence, injustice, corruption, and death into the world. The gospel, therefore, is the proclamation that God, as Jesus the King, has entered into the world to restore it to his dominion. To do so, Jesus recruits a new people called the church, and empowers this people so they can both individually and corporately image God in order to draw the rebellious world to himself.

God’s multicultural vision is interwoven into the story in two ways. First, it informs our essential call to image God corporately. To image God as a community means revealing God’s distinctive love for the other. As *agape* is defined as boundary-crossing love, we desire to be a church filled with people from different ethnic groups who love each other.

Understandably, churches in particular times and places may not be able to do this practicably, but for a church in a place like Madison, to not do this is to miss one of our core functions.

Second, for the sake of our mission to reach the world, we need to be a visible, embodied alternative to the world's tribalism. Our existence as a multicultural community where differences are maintained and celebrated, problems are confronted, and grace and forgiveness are offered serve as a sign of the power of God in this world. What the world cannot do, the church will, because we have the power of the Holy Spirit. Our unity demonstrates the power of the gospel to our community.

Teaching the multicultural vision within a comprehensive gospel means that we do not elevate it to the sole concern of the church, nor do we relegate it to a secondary issue. To image God's love for the other is both a core function of the church as well as a critical means for accomplishing the mission.

2. *We re-envision discipleship*

For his vision to work, God needs us to become a people who are drawn toward those who are different. God needs us to become a people, who, instead of becoming uncomfortable and guarded when meeting people of a different background, ethnicity, or nationality, become naturally fascinated, wanting to learn from them, desiring to know how they see God and what that can teach us about how we relate to God. In other words, this starts with the transformation of the heart. We need to grow in our understanding of other cultures, and we need to develop cross-cultural relationships. For his vision to work, growing in these areas needs to become a core part of Christian discipleship.

This means we need to re-envision what it means to be a growing disciple of Jesus. We need to talk about growing in how we relate to other cultures in the same way we talk about spiritual disciplines like reading the Bible or prayer. For us, this becomes an issue of discipleship.

3. *Multicultural means multiple cultures*

As a large, predominantly white church in Madison, we draw a lot of internationals and people of color. For decades, people have shown up: Hmong people, Chinese people, Korean people, Latinos, Africans, African-Americans. They come, they enjoy the music and the sermons. Most of them don't get involved, and after a while many leave.

As we started to move toward God's vision, we talked to Professor Peter Cha, a sociologist at Trinity Theological Seminary, who gave us this insightful anecdote. As part of his work, he and his team were doing interviews with people of color who had gone to predominantly white churches like ours; they would go for a while and then they would leave. The following is a typical exchange in their interview:

Question: "Why did you leave that church? Didn't you feel welcomed?"

Answer: "Oh, we felt very welcomed."

Question: "So why did you leave?"

Answer: "Guests are welcomed. Family members get to move the furniture."

Many people of color are permanent guests who can't figure out how to become part of the family at predominantly white churches. They feel like outsiders. They can't crack the code. They don't have the cultural wherewithal to become people who can participate in shaping the direction of our church. So they would leave. A few do figure it out; they crack the code, by assimilating to the dominant culture and learn to switch between the dominant culture at the church and their own culture.

This is one way to do multicultural church. Michael Emerson⁶ calls it the Assimilationist Model. The basic posture is “Come on in, we welcome you, but we’re not changing our culture for you.” So there are three choices facing people of color: assimilate, float as outsiders, or leave.

We reject that model because we think that model undercuts God’s vision. How can we image God’s love across barriers, when we tell people, you need to assimilate to belong? No. The point isn’t merely that we have people of different races and ethnicities; the point is to become a community where people love and learn from each other’s cultures, and that cannot happen unless the different cultures find a place to manifest in our church. So for us, becoming a multicultural church means becoming a church of multiple cultures.

So we adopt what Emerson calls the Integrationist Model. We have both culture-specific spaces and multicultural spaces. We intentionally foster spaces for people of a particular culture to come together and manifest who they are as Christ-followers (e.g., Chinese Ministry, Asian-American Ministry, African-American Ministry, Spanish Ministry, etc.). Then we bring the different cultures together and create intentional multicultural spaces for mutual learning. These are spaces that are not dominated by one culture, but rather a fusion where nobody feels like it’s their exclusive space.

CONCLUSION

As a church, we believe that God has called us to this journey toward becoming a multicultural community that images His character and reveals His power for the sake of His mission to the world. We have taken steps on this journey: We are changing the way we teach and the way we disciple our congregation; we have created spaces for specific cultural groups to manifest and spaces for multiple cultures to come together; and we seek to have all cultures at Blackhawk represented in robust ways in the leadership of our ministries. We know there is more growth and learning to come, and we look forward to what God will do to glorify His name in our midst.

⁶ The models mentioned in this paper are from DeYoung, Emerson, et. al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 2003.