

## ***SOME IDEAS TO HELP SOMEONE PURSUING CROSS CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS AND MINISTRY.***

***Humbly submitted by Randy Nabors, pastor of New City Fellowship.***

We don't know where you might be starting from in your desire to minister cross culturally, but let us provide some very elementary and foundational insights. We hope then to build on these to give you some practical help as you pursue ministry across social, cultural, and economic barriers.

### ***CULTURE***

First you have to recognize that people, all people, exist in culture (s). This is the way God made us, and it became especially true at the Tower of Babel. Some folks seem to resist this notion because they think it divides people. We are not interested here in preserving division, but in helping you to understand the differences that might perpetuate division, in order to help you bridge the divide.

### ***ESSENTIAL UNITY***

The next thing we want to remember is our essential unities; the things that bring us together. The first point here is the way all humans were created; that we are created in the image of God. All human beings, no matter their race, ethnicity, language, or socio-economic group have dignity because we are all image bearers of God. All of us are also fallen creatures, we have sinned against God, and no one is immune from how this will affect our behavior as individuals, and as nations.

Those who are in Christ also have one common Holy Spirit who indwells us, and this makes us one with God through Christ, one with Jesus, and one with all the other believers in Jesus, all over the world. This unity means that this is our essential identity, we are children of God, and it surpasses all other points of difference.

### ***But remember this...***

Because of the rebellion of man God did send division (Genesis 11:6-9), so we would not unite in our fallen condition and become powerful in our arrogance. This sinful condition leads us to sins and passions such as pride of race and racial superiority (racism), indifference to, hatred, and exploitation of those who are different than us, nationalism, ethnocentrism, class consciousness, etc.

Aspiring to unity and peace does not mean we can afford to deny the reality of differences, of culture, and of history. Those who are in the position of being a majority culture in a given country are often unaware that they have made cultural assumptions. They often think that what they do is normal, and therefore "right." What minorities do is not normal, therefore "wrong." They can associate difference with moral or value judgments. We know (I am making an assumption about the reader) that there are things in all cultures that can be sinful and wrong, as well as things that are God honoring and beautiful. One of the failures in missions has been to make cultural judgments upon whole peoples that were not based on Scripture, but simply cultural prejudice.

Aspiring to unity and peace between Christians means we can't afford to deny the reality of differences, or culture, and of history. The wonderful verse in Galatians which teaches us our essential unity (Galatians 3:28) "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" ((ESV) is in the context of a book that fights for the protection of Gentiles from being culturally assimilated by Jewish culture. The concept of neither male nor female does not prevent the Apostle who wrote it to spell out

differences in function according to gender in his other letters. How would I feel if someone told me “I don’t think of you as a man?” Admitting that I am more than just my gender it is still very important to me.

The Apostle Paul writes in Acts 17: 26 “*And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,*” (ESV) In this passage we are not only taught our unity but also our historical and geographical difference.

### ***We need some awareness...***

To resist the idea of differences robs us of the awareness that we must make changes and adjustments to reach those different from ourselves. Paul, as a great missionary, understood this principle very well as he explained it in I Corinthians 9:19-23. He teaches us there that he could see the difference between Jews and non-Jews, between those under the Law and those not under the Law. He says that he made himself a slave to all, that he might win more of them. This is love, evidenced by a cultural sacrifice and commitment to assimilate or at least to attempt to communicate in a culturally appropriate way to others.

What would we think of an American missionary who arrived in a foreign land, only to find that the people there did not speak English, and became insistent that everyone there learn to speak English? We would think he was arrogant and ignorant. If we go to some other place, to some other people, we must go in humility and love, so we can win them. What about if they happen to come to us? While it might be wise for them politically and economically to learn our culture and language, what does love require us to do if we seek to win them to Christ? There is a difference between politics and missions, and it might be hard to distinguish them in our emotions, but it is imperative for Christians to think “missionally.”

America has a dominant majority culture and many minorities. While many minorities seek to assimilate into American culture thinking missionally mean for those from the dominant culture? It means asking how can we be sensitive to them, so we might be able to become their friends, so we might show them love? In America we have often felt we could afford to demand that minorities do the changing. We have acted as if we could afford to stay apart from them, even treat them as if they don’t exist. Socially and economically many of us Americans could afford to do just that. That is just the problem, treating social and cultural minorities as if they don’t exist, even as if they were invisible. Though minorities have had to become cross-cultural in their understanding so they could survive among us, our marginalization of them has lost us many opportunities for sharing Christ.

If we are Christians we can afford to act in a superior and separate way only so long as we fail to realize what it costs those who will never hear or see Jesus because of our superior racial, ethnic, or linguistic attitudes.

We have classified their difference as ignorance, and have asked them to forsake what was unique about themselves so they could fit in with us. Ironically, we have not understood when they seem to stay in their own communities and retain some sense of separateness from us, while at the same time refusing them entrance into the institutions and context of our cultural life. ***That used to be called segregation.***

Our challenge in cross cultural ministry is to grow out of our determined ignorance about culture, people, and history. Some of the history we must come to grips with is the history of racism, alienation, and its attendant pain. Pain is something we would all like to avoid, but to deny it has existed is to again smack other racial and ethnic groups in the face with the coldness of our indifference. This is not to advocate wallowing in sorrow or indulging ourselves in group guilt. It is to acknowledge reality, and to begin to understand what others might be thinking about us.

If you want to relate to someone different than yourself then you might have to acknowledge how offensive your very presence could be. The color of my skin might imply to someone who doesn't know me that I am the enemy. This may not be fair, but nonetheless, we all come to a cross cultural meeting with some previous assumptions.

### ***STRATEGY***

- *Become humble*
- *Become a learner*
- *Listen*
- *Appreciate*
- *Pursue relationships*

To relate to someone cross-culturally means I have to become humble, to become a learner, to listen, to appreciate, and to pursue others on their terms as long as it does not compromise the teachings of Christ. If I do not do this then I am not following the missionary and cross cultural pattern of the New Testament and the early church. The people with the advantage, (in this case those who know Jesus and the Gospel), are the ones who have to be the ones reaching out toward groups different than themselves.

### ***It would be easy if they weren't so needy...***

While this is a challenge racially, ethnically, and linguistically, it is also a huge hurdle economically. There is a culture of poverty, and it can be very uncomfortable to pursue the poor. It isn't that they are just different, but that they always need something. Some of their needs are so great that there seems to be nothing I can do to help them, or change them. It is easier for me to not deal with them. In all ministry, especially across cultural or economic lines, it is foolish to depend on your own gifts or resources. How can the power of God be evidenced if you don't need God to do it?

**So, here is the simple challenge; attempt what is impossible, difficult, and often frustrating for the glory of God, by the power and grace of God, to accomplish the will of God. That is, that people from every tribe, tongue and nation might be gathered around his throne in heaven.** Pursue others different from yourself and become their slave in order to win them. Don't come to them from above, but from below. Show yourself to be a friend, one that is willing to take a risk in the relationship, one willing to sacrifice, one that will be loyal, even across racial, ethnic, economic, and social lines. May the world marvel at how we love one another.