

Theological Imperatives for Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Introduction

George Fox University is a Christ-centered institution that values diversity as an essential dimension of what it means to be human. As a community we believe that racism and other forms of division are destructive to redemptive community. Scripture is clear that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit following the resurrection of Jesus Christ enacts a form of community that at once embraces and transcends our differences. In Jesus Christ our unique, individual identities are both preserved and liberated to engage in redemptive community and in the reconciling work of Christ in the world. We believe that God values each of us in our uniqueness. Therefore we seek to be a community that celebrates the uniqueness of each of its members, including one's race and ethnicity.

We also acknowledge that our attempts to honor diversity in the present time arise from the recognition that we have sometimes failed to do this as well as we should have in the past. But God, through grace, reaches out to each new generation of human beings and attempts to show us the light of truth. We grasp pieces of this truth but miss others. Our knowledge is partial and incomplete (1 Corinthians 13:9). God lovingly prods us and shows us what we are capable of seeing, and we do our best (intermittently) to respond to the light that we can see. Yet we know from our own history and from the scriptural record of God's relationships with human beings that we also miss the mark in some important ways.

Here we present a theological basis for our commitment to diversity—a statement that grapples honestly with both the high points and low points of our Quaker heritage and with the ambiguities regarding racial and ethnic diversity in Scripture.

Diversity and our Quaker Heritage

George Fox University is influenced by its Quaker heritage regarding matters of racial and ethnic diversity. This heritage—rich and prophetic—also includes actions by early Quakers that were at times misguided and flawed. As members of an evangelical institution arising from this complex heritage, we are inspired by the examples of courage and chastened by the need for continuing grace as we seek to live fully in the light of truth.

George Fox (1624-1691) stressed that God's light was universally available to all people, regardless of their religious, cultural, or national background. Accordingly, the early Quakers acknowledged the light of Christ in all peoples and generally valued equality across racial lines. They understood that every person has the equal potential of a right relationship with God and is worthy of love and respect.

Margaret Fell (1614-1702) advocated indirectly for ethnic equality in her brief pamphlet, *Women's Speaking Justified*. Even though Fell wrote this work to support women's leadership in the church, her arguments on equality and her application of Genesis 1 influenced the Quaker advocacy for racial equality. The Friends' testimony

of equality—equality of races and equality between women and men—led some Quakers to take leading roles in the abolitionist, Indian affairs, and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century.

Many early Quakers tried to preserve a measure of equality by refraining from the use of titles or salutations, and in some instances they welcomed (pre-
emancipation) slaves into their meetings.

Yet there were moments when Quakers embraced the light of God’s truth less consistently, including their involvement with Native Americans and African-American slaves. Their dealings with these groups illustrate both the depth of their convictions and the complexity of their approach to racial and ethnic diversity.

Quakers in America have had a long history of respectful interaction with Native Americans. Like other British colonists, Friends actively endeavored to evangelize, colonize, and trade with Indians. However, they tended to maintain a keen appreciation and respect for the Indians and their various cultures. When George Fox visited the American colonies in 1672, he met with and preached the gospel to many Native Americans, encouraging his fellow Friends to continue these efforts because he saw them as spiritual peers in equal need of a Savior. Unlike the majority of other colonists, Friends never engaged in a strategic plan to alter the cultural practices or eliminate the heritage of Native Americans as part of their missionary endeavors. However, there were exceptions to this rule of fair treatment and respect. For example, William Penn’s ethical legacy was blemished in 1737 by the “Walking Purchase,” a devious—if not fraudulent—scheme whereby the (mostly Quaker) Proprietors acquired a large tract of land from the Delaware Indians. To rebuild moral credibility Philadelphia Friends established the “Friendly Association” that worked with Mennonites and others to assist tribes and to preserve peace, braving the wrath of non-Quaker settlers who wanted the Delaware natives killed.

While Quakers like John Woolman (1720-1772) and Anthony Benezet (1713-1784) were active in the abolition movement, many others owned slaves. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting took an official anti-slavery position in 1759, and by 1784 most of the American Yearly Meetings forced members to emancipate their slaves or lose their membership. From a contemporary perspective, the Quakers’ anti-slavery efforts and their respect for people of African descent fell short of full inclusion. Few freedmen and women joined Quaker Meetings. Although some Meetings and Quaker schools did not admit black members, a large measure of this was due to a social milieu favoring distinct sub-groups and also to differences in worship preferences and cultural backgrounds.

In the final analysis it is fair to say that Quakers exerted a strong anti-slavery influence, which led to the ending of the British slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in the British Empire by 1834. Quakers like Levi Coffin (1798-1877) were important leaders in the Underground Railroad in America, helping runaway slaves

escape to freedom, and they participated actively in the American Anti-slavery Society and in various efforts to provide aid and education for freedmen and women.

As a community rooted in this rich and complex heritage, we are convinced that the theological understanding of our mission compels us to recognize the essential equality of every person, fight against prevailing racism, and strive to give voice to the marginalized. This commitment is based on both the best of our Quaker heritage and the teachings of Scripture, particularly as the Spirit of Jesus Christ illumines them. Our forebears remind us of the very real possibility that courage and weakness may exist in the same moment, and that we continually need God's grace as we attempt to show respect, love, and unity in the midst of diversity.

Diversity in Biblical and Theological Perspective

We declare in our Blueprint for Diversity that George Fox University is a Christ-centered community that collectively embraces the belief that God has uniquely, “fearfully, and wonderfully made” all human beings (Psalms 139:13–16). As such, every human being is of infinite value and worth. The story of God’s work is one of reconciling people to himself (Romans 5:11) and each other (Matthew 5:23-24). We are called to be agents of reconciliation as we reach people from every tribe, tongue and nation (Revelation 5:9).

Since Scripture is the principal authority upon which our commitment to diversity is based, it is important to acknowledge that the Bible appears to present differing viewpoints on diversity. Moreover, it is a matter of fact that some have used certain events recorded in Scripture to justify later acts of xenophobia.

We believe that Scripture is the inspired record of a perfect God reaching out to all humanity in redeeming love. In some instances, we “get it right” (however imperfectly and inconsistently); at other times we miss the mark. Instances of ethnic exclusion occurred among the community of ancient Israel, the followers of Jesus, and the early church. Scripture also includes many examples of racial and ethnic inclusion. We must face these tensions honestly as we offer a brief assessment of diversity from a biblical and theological perspective.

Diversity in the Old Testament

The book of Genesis opens with a description of God’s diverse and wondrous creation, emphasizing the unique goodness of each created element in its “own kind.” Yet despite the fact that each created entity is unique, together they intertwine and interrelate, forming a whole—*together* creation is “very good.” The initially created state of the world embodies unity amid diversity.

As the story of God’s relationship with human beings unfolds, there is an increasing emphasis on the need for God’s covenant people to set themselves apart from other nations (which some have inappropriately used to justify racial and ethnic divisions). Abraham and his sons struggled to maintain their ethnic identity as

foreigners residing in vast lands. As their descendants increased and multiplied, they found themselves under the heavy hand of a Pharaoh who was worried for the survival of his own nation. After the conquest of the Promised Land, Moses and his successor, Joshua, commanded the people to wipe out the indigenous ethnic groups of the Canaanite lands. Afterwards there emerged a monarchy, which lasted more than four centuries. Eventually, God allowed a foreign nation to overpower and exile Judah, which ended the monarchy and began a 2,500-year era in which other nations subjugated the Jewish people, beginning with the Babylonians, then the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. During this period, many post-exile works—particularly Ezra-Nehemiah—emphasized the need for racial and ethnic separation in order to preserve the nation’s ethnic identity, going so far as to break up marriages between Jewish men and foreign women.

Hebrew Scripture presents dozens of mandates for ancient Israel to make special provisions for “the foreigners” living among them. Israel was to permit them to celebrate Passover if they desired to (Exodus 12:48). The same rules of sacrifice applied to both Israelite and foreigner (Leviticus 17:7-9; 22:17, 18). The Bible declares that God shows love to the foreigners in Israel’s midst, giving them food and clothing, and requiring Israel to do the same, “for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

The book of Jonah, though brief, seems especially concerned to teach Israel that the God of Israel cares for and extends mercy to foreign nations—even nations such as Assyria, which often opposed Israel.

Amid a culture of strident patriarchy, Scripture highlights the woman, Deborah, as one of Israel’s strongest and most upright leaders (Judges 4, 5). Biblical writers remember the Gentile prostitute, Rahab, as a woman of faith because she protected the Israelite spies in Jericho (Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31). She is named among the Davidic/Messianic lineage, as is Ruth, the Moabite woman, who assured her mother-in-law, Naomi, “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16; 4:13-22; Matthew 1:5).

Collectively, these and other Old Testament accounts suggest that we must keep the narratives of ethnic exclusion in theological tension with the narratives of inclusion and grace. In truth, Israel relied on extreme measures to preserve its identity. It did so primarily by emphasizing the community over the individual. Ancient Israel read Scripture together and conducted worship as a group. Members of the community were responsible for each other’s wellbeing. Ultimately, they composed and compiled a Psalter, which they used primarily for communal worship, implying that praise, lament, thanksgiving, and worship are to be conducted in concert with others. These actions underscore the centrality of community as God’s covenant people, which holds significant implications for racial and ethnic diversity, especially as the Messianic people of God opened to all nations and people.

These considerations provide the basis for a theology of diversity that is not guided by exclusive ethnic origins or the presence of superior cultures. Rather the ethnic exclusiveness that occurs in the Old Testament does so during specific chapters of Israel's development as a covenant nation. The Old Testament presents the story of Israel's protecting its identity as the people of the Lord. The theme of God's covenant people continues in the life and witness of Jesus Christ and the early church, but in Christ the story shifts from *protection* to *proclamation*, as the gospel is heralded to all races, ethnicities, and people.

Diversity in the New Testament

In a manner reminiscent of Hebrew Scripture, the New Testament also contains instances of ethnic exclusion among the followers of Jesus and the early church. For example, when Jesus sent out his disciples to preach the Good News, he gave them strict orders not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans, "but only to the people of Israel—God's lost sheep" (Matthew 10:5, 6). When a Gentile woman pleaded with Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter, he replied, "I was sent only to help God's lost sheep—the people of Israel" (Matthew 15:22ff.). Additionally, the early church existed roughly ten years before it witnessed the first Gentile converts (Acts 10) and for years after that the conditions under which Gentiles could be admitted to the church remained in dispute (cf. Acts 15).

Tensions between Jewish and Gentile orientations are also evident in the four Gospels. On a macro level, the Gospel of Matthew appears distinctively oriented towards Jewish listeners, with an emphasis on Jesus as the coming Messiah. Luke and Acts, by contrast, appear to address Gentile audiences. On a micro level, Jesus preaches his gospel within the confines of Palestinian Judaism (John 3). Nevertheless, the uniquely Jewish orientation of Jesus' first-century context did not prevent him from ministering to "rival" ethnicities that lived among the Jews in (Roman-dominated) Palestine (John 4). Moreover, Jesus directly confronted the ideals of ethnic exclusivity that carried over from previous generations by pointing out that God ignored the needs of Israel during a time of famine, and sent Elijah instead to a Sidonian widow and Elisha to a Syrian officer (Luke 4:16-30).

When Jesus was confronted with the question, "Who is my neighbor?" he responded by telling a story in which a Samaritan came to the aid of a man whom thieves had robbed and left injured on the roadside. A priest and Levite both passed by, but neither showed concern for the man. By contrast, the Samaritan applied first aid, transported the injured man on his own donkey to a local inn, cared for the man through the night, and paid in advance for the man's extended stay. The Jews in Jesus' day considered Samaritans to be ethnically inferior. So when Jesus posed the question, "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" (Luke 10:36), it forced the obvious answer: *the Samaritan was the neighbor*.

But it is the Pentecost event that stands as the watershed moment in salvation history when God inaugurates a New Covenant consisting of a people from all tribes,

tongues, and nations. The reference to “devout ones out of every nation” is telling (Acts 2:5), as is the fact that they all heard the apostles speaking in their native languages (Acts 2:6). Pentecost mirrors the Genesis 1 account in describing a creation event that enacts a fusion of unity and diversity.

Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians present a poignant message supporting diversity. Located on a commercial isthmus, Corinth saw a multitude of traffic that consisted of a great diversity of ethnicities both in wayfarers and permanent settlers. Accordingly, the social setting of first-century Corinth offers a helpful analogy for North America in the twenty-first century: a plurality of cultures attempting to live in reasonable harmony. But the letter presumes that the Christians in Corinth were failing at such harmony. Consequently, the letters to Corinth are particularly helpful in constructing a theology of diversity.

First Corinthians 12:12-13—though brief—articulates the message of racial and ethnic inclusiveness. Paul writes, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

This passage is especially helpful in conceiving a theology of diversity. Far from negating the multiple cultural backgrounds of the first-century Christians, the reference to “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” demonstrates that there is *unity* (as we all drink of the one Spirit) *amid diversity* (we are people with unique backgrounds and stories of identity). Those with Jewish affinities and those with Greek affinities, both slaves and free, comprise the Body of Christ. (This argument, by the way, builds on Paul’s earlier admonition to respect each other’s cultural practices [1 Corinthians 10:14-33].)

Ultimately, the context of 1 Corinthians 12 argues that the kingdom of God does not merely sanction diversity, it requires it as a means to thrive. The passage follows a listing of individual gifts and suggests that diversity provides a necessary variety of gifts that serve and enhance the community.

Synthesis and Conclusions

God’s people are called to live in the tension between unity and diversity. When followers of Jesus Christ retreat into racial and ethnic enclaves, the body of Christ is fractured and cannot thrive in fulfilling God’s mission in the world. When, on the other hand, the body of Christ seeks unity through uniformity, it does so by means of the dominant culture’s oppression of non-dominant culture(s). The first path creates unhealthy homogeneity by means of isolation; the latter produces unhealthy homogeneity by means of imperialism. We succeed in living in tension between unity and diversity by honoring the uniqueness of each other’s race and ethnicity, and by discovering the ways in which we complement and enrich each other in Christ’s body.