

Stephen A. Rhodes. *Where the Nations Meet. The Church in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998)

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Rhodes' opening question is this: What does it mean for the church of Jesus Christ to live and make its witness in a multicultural world?

He depicts the church as "the bewildered cultural bystander to... multicultural change" and sees this description as legitimated by the fact that "most Christian congregations are still homogeneous and ethnocentric" (12). To Rhodes this reflects churches that instead of rejoicing are threatened and defensive. Churches are faced with the question as to whether they will adapt or, instead, see themselves 'as the last line of defense in a siege by a pluralistic and skeptical age, maintaining the status quo down to the last member" (12).

Rhodes is the pastor of Culmore United Methodist Church, Fairfax County, northern Virginia, just 5 miles from Washington DC. The community surrounding his church is 70% Latin American and 20% Asian. In the local school where his daughter studies over 90% are non-Anglo, with 85% speaking English as a second language and over 40 languages represented in the student body.

The United Methodist Church episcopal denomination is over 95% Anglo and is aging rapidly. Culmore is 40% Anglo, 30% Filipino, 15% African, 10% Latin American and 5% Other (Jamaican, Cambodian, Korean, Indonesian, Asian Indian, etc.).

Rhodes explores the reasons for uncertainties over the practicality of crosscultural and crossracial ministry:

1. The church's dismal record to date.
2. The current divisive debate over race, ethnicity and culture occurring in the US.
3. Xenophobia fed by such things as the magnitude of recent immigration which while primarily an urban phenomenon is also finding its way to suburbia and the rural heartlands.
4. The difficulty of defining what unites us, even if the affirmation of plurality comes easily.

Rhodes notes some bad reasons for pursuing racial or cultural diversity, namely because:

1. It is politically correct (or incorrect).
2. It is the latest theological fad.
3. it is a good conservative or liberal idea.

Rhodes sees the Great Commission (Mt 28:19) as the proper basis for this.

Grenz describes the modern world as one which has rejected "the Enlightenment quest for universal, supracultural, timeless truth in favor of searching out truth as the expression of a specific community" (17). With reference to Berger's contention that our world is governed by plausibility structures, Rhodes contends: In this world, before the church can tell the world that Christianity is true, the church must demonstrate in its common life the plausibility that it might be true (17).

Rhodes observes how, during the civil rights struggle, the church in the US essentially said to its culture: "Do as we say, not as we do." He explains:

We said to culture that it was a moral imperative to integrate our schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods while simultaneously preserving the segregation that we practice in services of worship. By refusing to embody the truth claims of the gospel that we preached to our culture, we lost our credibility (17).

Rhodes believes that in a postmodern world the development of *multicultural congregations* creates the possibility of the world reconsidering the gospel's plausibility: "Before the church can ask our culture to believe the gospel, we must show our culture that *we* believe it by how we live together."

While commending the above I would add one qualification, namely that what are needed are multicultural church *communities* in which unity in Christ is eloquently expressed across linguistic, ethnic and cultural boundaries. Such a model might involve distinct language services. For various pragmatic reasons that are not at odds with biblical theology, there may be strong limitations on what can be achieved with respect to developing multicultural *congregations*, as desirable as such models may be.

Controversially, Rhodes concludes his introduction with the following:

From a postmodern, evangelical point of view, I will maintain that the multicultural church is not only one valid option for the church of Jesus Christ, but is, in truth, its normative model (20).

After the heading for each chapter Rhodes states a principle that captures the thrust of what is dealt with in that chapter. These principles are as follows:

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Principle</i>
1	God's intention for creation has always been multicultural.
2	A multicultural church is a fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the nations.
3	A multicultural church is under the lordship of Jesus Christ.
4	A multicultural church is empowered by the Holy Spirit.
5	A multicultural church accepts God's gift of being "born again."
6	A multicultural church affirms cultural identity.
7	A multicultural church is a contrast community.
8	A multicultural church emphasizes evangelical wholeness.
9	A multicultural church is both conflictual and conciliatory.
10	A multicultural church is a community of perseverance.
11	A multicultural church is composed of God's pilgrim people.
12	A multicultural church is eschatological.

### **Chapter 1. With Their Own Languages, Families and Nations**

Rhodes asks whether the story of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) implies "that human differences, language, cultures - even nations themselves - are the result of God's judgment" (24). But he observes that the Table of Nations narrative of Genesis 10 indicates that "linguistic, familial and national diversity are not curses of divine wrath but fulfillment of the blessing of creation" (24). Consequently, "God's judgment on Babel is the fulfillment of what humanity hoped to prevent: its scattering" (26).

In his book *The Disuniting of America*, Schlesinger has argued that multiculturalism has produced a "cult of ethnicity [which] has reversed the movement of American history, producing a nation of minorities" (30). As Rhodes rightly points out, the problem is not with minority or majority status. There is nothing wrong *per se* in having a reasonable level of pride in one's ethnic heritage. But what is tragic is the

perception that the basic American experience is membership in one or another ethnic group, with the result that instead of trying to seek common ground with the majority culture, it has been more normative "to declare one's experience of 'alienation from an oppressive, white, patriarchal, racist, sexist society'" (30-31). This cult of ethnicity "further isolates us in our ethnic enclaves and 'nourishes a culture of victimization and a contagion of inflammable sensitivities" (31). There was a time when America celebrated the great "melting pot." Now it praises "the unmeltable ethnics." Ironically, as Schlesinger observes, multicultural ideology as a reaction against the ethnocentrism of the majority culture has developed its own ethnocentrism, increasingly referring only to non-Western, nonwhite cultures.

To help his readers understand modern America, Lind invites them to take a walk through an imaginary museum. They find in it

many beautiful and ornate rooms, each celebrating a distinct heritage and culture but with no entrance or exit to any of the other rooms. In order to go to another room, you first must go into the main gallery. But when you come to the main gallery, to which all the rooms are connected, there is nothing at all - it is absolutely empty, much in the way there is nothing at the center of Multicultural America to unite it (32-33).

Rhodes finds that the story of Babel helps us to understand the modern state of America, though:

...now, instead of just one walled city and one tower, there are many. Human beings are once again afraid of being scattered, so we are busily erecting our cities, our towers, our walls to prevent this scattering. To protect our linguistic, cultural and racial identities, we are sealing ourselves off and imposing a self-styled uniformity to ensure homogeneous purity. Once again we seek to speak the same language, but only within our tribal confines. As the T-shirt says: "It's a Black [or Anglo, Latino, Asian] Thing. You Wouldn't Understand" (33).

Also mirroring the Babel experience:

...we refuse to listen to one another. In fact, we no longer care whether others understand the idiosyncratic nature of our cultural and linguistic communities, just so long as the members of the tribe do. Much has been written about the perceived threat of the 'balkanization' of American life, but in actuality it is the 'Babelization' of our society that we must worry about: each group shouts more and more loudly, seeking to make a name for itself. This chorus of angry, defensive voices has no harmony, much less melody. The only sound to be heard is babble. There is speaking, but there is no listening. There is ideology, but there is no understanding (33).

## **Chapter 2. To Bless the Nations**

Nothing much to comment on in this chapter. A fairly standard and predictable treatment of the call to Abraham and its implications for the church.

## **Chapter 3. Just Give Them Jesus**

Rhodes, following Hauerwas and Willimon, rightly points out that the church is misguided when it assumes its first task is to help people, for this places the spotlight on our efforts and power instead of God's. Further, it assumes we already know what people really need.

Much of the chapter again is a fairly standard and predictable treatment of the nature of unity in Christ. There are some helpful, but again standard distinctions made between cultural and religious pluralism. He adds some standard considerations of religious relativism, including comments on the openness as a

new cultural and religious virtue, the postmodern blurring of the distinction between facts and values and the universal claims of the Christian metanarrative.

#### Chapter 4. Be My Witnesses

Again a fairly standard consideration of Pentecost, though involving an overly positive and uncritical appraisal of Pentecostalism.

Following Hunsberger, Rhodes observes that “for too long the church in the United States has not considered itself ‘a field for mission’ but ‘only a launching pad’ for missions to other parts of the globe” (79) with few churches prepared to consider inviting an African or Asian pastor to be a founding pastor in a new church start.

#### Chapter 5. Choosing Life

Rhodes describes his own church as one that has chosen to adapt in ministry, that is, it chooses to live. Choosing life presupposes congregations that want to change their futures.

Rhodes describes the initial “small turning points” in his own congregation’s life that enabled them to choose life:

1. *The ability of the church to value its past without getting stuck in the past.* A first generation Cuban couple began a Latin American fellowship, helping fellowship members with English and to find work, housing, etc. Also three prior pastors had positively reached out to non-Anglos, though the church was in rapid decline when Rhodes himself arrived. In this way various pastors and lay leaders enabled the congregation to catch glimpses of the future and value it, as expressed by a long-standing member who saw the ethnic diversity of the church as its greatest strength.
2. *The assent and cooperation of the congregation’s oldest members.*
3. *While avoiding tokenism, a commitment to full inclusiveness within the total range of leadership positions, including the promotion of more young adults to key leadership positions.*
4. *Not being shy in asking people to share themselves in ministry.* This recognizes that one of the determinative factors in the decision of many people to become part of the church is whether they feel they can make a difference: “individuals and families who want to belong to a congregation not simply because it meets their personal needs, but because the church needs them to make a difference” (95-96).
5. *Realizing there is no one correct profile of membership in a multicultural congregation, since it is God who chooses who is and who is not called to be part of each congregation.*
6. *Missions means our doorstep:* the world should not only be our parish but *in* our parish. “Because multicultural ministry is a relational ministry, personal invitation is one of the most effective ways to reach new people. And because of the familial nature of the immigrant community, those most likely to be reached have a great likelihood of being at least distantly related” (98). “For evangelism in a multicultural church, it is important to use the already established familial and cultural networks to reach those who have no church home” (99).
7. *Ministry in any congregation, not just multicultural ones, must be a reciprocal movement.* “For ministry to have integrity, congregations cannot segregate people into givers and takers. Being a multicultural congregation means learning to receive the gifts, offerings, stories and talents that we may have not known we needed; by accepting these things, however, we may change the course of our life and ministry” (101).

8. *A commitment to no longer just sponsoring missionaries, but receiving missionaries to advance the cause of Christ in the parish.*
9. *The adoption of the principle that the church's pastors and staff members are not to be segregated or limited to ministry within a particular ethnic or language ministry. "It is both common and expected that all pastors and staff minister crossculturally in Culmore" (105).*

### Chapter 6. No Partiality

Rhodes cites Mouw and Griffioen: "the Bible...takes cultural differences seriously without becoming fixated on those phenomena." Rhodes comments: "Christian identity, while transcending culture, will nonetheless incorporate and value human culture.

Rhodes observes that the Bible does not use the term culture, but argues that the words most specifically corresponding to culture have their root etymologies in what we would call *home, house, or family*.

#### *Old Testament Terms*

1. "Tribe" (*sebet*) as a subculture of one's identity, denoting status, geography and history.
2. "Clan" (*mishpahah*) as usually composed of groups of families, reflecting territorial identity.
3. "Father's house" (*bet 'ab*) as denoting the most basic and intimate social structure within Israel, the immediate and extended family - the level "in which the individual Israelites felt the strongest sense of inclusion, identity, protection, and responsibility" (C.J.H. Wright).
4. *Betah/betach* as a word which sometimes conveys the idea of Israel as the covenant people who live in God's house.

#### *New Testament Terms*

1. *Patria* as reflecting "the more genealogical understanding of family, that is, one's lineage: who is related to whom, both biologically and spiritually" (109).
2. *Oikos* as akin to *bet 'ab* and connoting the intimacy of immediate or extended family and household (e.g. Eph 2:19).

Rhodes next seeks to clarify the meaning of culture:

1. Newbigin: "by the word *culture* we have to understand the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings and handed on from generation to generation" (110). For Newbigin language is central to culture and via this conduit is transmitted immanent knowledge - visual and musical arts, technologies, law and their social and political organization - plus transcendent knowledge - "beliefs, experiences and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty" (111).
2. Willowbank Report of the Lausanne Committee. Culture is defined as:
  - 1) an integrated system of beliefs (about God, or reality, or ultimate meaning), 2) of values (about what is true, good, beautiful and normative), 3) of customs (how behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, farm, eat, etc.) and 4) of institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs (governments, laws, courts, temples or churches, family, school, hospitals, factories, shops, unions, clubs, etc.) which bind a society together and give it a sense of identity, dignity, and continuity.
3. Thom Hopler. Culture:
  - a. Is a mental road map.
  - b. Represents the sum total of our lived experience.

- c. Provides a system of values that directs our activities.
  - d. Defines the limits of possibility.
4. Rhodes' Conclusions:
- a. Culture is collective and generational in nature.
  - b. Culture expresses beliefs and practices determined to be of transcendent ultimate worth and concern.
  - c. Culture teaches customs, traditions and values that shape our behaviour toward what we have defined as having ultimate worth.
  - d. Culture shapes collective behaviour in how we organise ourselves to express our beliefs.
  - e. Culture constitutes a kind of knowledge about what is both known and knowable.

As Newbigin recognizes, "There can never be a culture-free gospel. Yet the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one in which it originally embodied" (112).

Newbigin argues that "trying to criticize one's own culture is like trying to push a bus while you're sitting in it" (113).

Newbigin also helpfully remarks:

We are to cherish human culture as an area in which we live under God's grace and are given daily new tokens of that grace. But we are called also to remember that we are part of that whole seamless texture of human culture which was shown on the day we call Good Friday to be in murderous rebellion against the grace of God. We have to say *both* 'God accepts human culture' *and also* 'God judges human culture' (114).

Rhodes: "our culture may tell us where we've come from, our identity in the family of God tells us where we are going" (121).

### Chapter 7. The Alien Among You

Rhodes inveighs against the national intolerance he sees in the US toward the stranger and sojourner in the land. The current economic fortunes of the US are in part dependent on the cheap labour provided by the immigrant population. Yet it says to this same community that they are the reason for national decline: scapegoating. National political rhetoric echoes the need for "family values", but targets immigrant families for separation under new deportation regulations, solely because they are immigrants. The undocumented worker is expected under the law to pay all US taxes if he or she works, yet is prevented from legally working under those same laws. "The government is more than willing to receive tax revenue from undocumented workers, but compliance exposes the workers to the risk of deportation; in addition, they are unable to receive benefits from the taxes they pay. If they do not pay the taxes, they are criminalized further" (125).

Rhodes explains the ethical problem confronting Christians:

If a church is in ministry with the undocumented, it is increasingly forced to choose between following the letter of the law and actively encouraging persons not to reveal their status and to remain here in a hidden capacity. Why not simply encourage them to go home? some ask. For many, political or economic factors eliminate going home as a viable alternative. Options for what was once the middle way - encouraging the undocumented to become documented - have all but disappeared. What is our Christian duty in this case? How should we respond? (127)

Rhodes especially appeals to Leviticus 19 by way of noting the Bible's injunction to treat the immigrant with mercy. He goes on to argue that "the most important virtue any church can embody is the virtue of hospitality" (134), not as an expression of being nice, but as an expression of holiness and justice.

For the church to accept its calling to be the church means being a community of people in the process of being conformed to God's image, that is, being holy - the "contrast community", the colony of heaven (Phil 3:20), which is "sectarian" without withdrawal into tribalism, since it "is the one political entity in our culture that is global, transnational, transcultural" (136).

We learn by example and teach by example and so we must not "divide ourselves into strangers and friends, residents and aliens" (138).

#### Chapter 8. Someone to Guide Me

Rhodes maintains that "[m]ulticultural congregations understand that the ministries of evangelism and social justice go hand in hand" (142). Ironically, given the chapter heading, I found the rest of the chapter to be purely anecdotal and lacking in concrete direction for the shaping of a multicultural church.

#### Chapter 9. Ambassadors for Christ

This chapter is really concerned with matters that cause conflict in a multicultural church. Rhodes presents a brief summary of conflictual problems in the church at Corinth and reflects on a period when his own church was dealing with conflict. He identifies the following factors as needing to be recognized as members in the church pursue unity and harmony:

1. *How to say hello.* Rhodes gives examples of differing expressions of greeting, involving such things as different attitudes towards physical and eye contact.
2. *What did you say?* Rhodes briefly comments on the fact that "[w]hen a congregation uses a second or third language as its means for communication, misunderstandings are going to arise" (168).
3. *Passing me by.* Rhodes regards class as more divisive than race/ethnicity. Here Rhodes makes a number of pertinent observations:
  - a. "Many societies highly value elitism and gentility. In such societies braggadocio and machismo are seen as signs of personal strength and dignity" (169).
  - b. "Class distinctions I have noticed in our congregation have been based on factors such as where one comes from (the city or the countryside), how much education one has had, whether one is a professional or a manual laborer, the shade of one's skin color, one's regional accent, one's family connections back home, and how well one knows English..." (170).
  - c. "Most of these distinctions have tended to manifest themselves *within* ethnic groups... rather than between groups" (170).
  - d. "...much of the conflict resolution I have been involved in has been ethnocentric" (170).
4. *When yes means yes.* Rhodes observes that "[i]n many cultures pleasing a person is more important than being completely candid" (170). Rhodes is up front in saying that he finds this a difficult issue for him personally, e.g. getting "yes" commitments to help with a church clean-up but failing to turn up.

5. *Kimchi in the kitchen*. Rhodes comments, "I have found that in most congregations, change is accepted until that change forces concessions from the majority culture" (172).
6. *Pastor as patrón*. Rhodes reflects on his church's operational structure and operating system, noting a reduced dependence on committees, a tendency among members to avoid activities and meetings perceived as supporting and maintaining the institution, and a cultural pressure from many church members for him to act like a benevolent dictator.
7. *Worship wars*. Rhodes has found worship to be almost as divisive as class in the multicultural church, given the myriad worship styles favoured by the members of his multiethnic congregation, including different attitudes towards liturgical components (e.g. the Apostles' Creed), congregational participation and appropriate service length.

Rhodes finishes this chapter with a reflection on the conflict-resolution style modeled by the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15.

### Chapter 10. By the Rivers of Babylon

This chapter is about first-generation immigrant experience. Rhodes observes how the "life of first-generation immigrants is marked by change, adaptation and struggle" (183).

Rhodes corrects some of the fallacious stereotypes among Americans concerning immigrants, giving examples from his own congregation of various immigrants who fit particular categories, e.g. educated and skilled migrants who "accept menial jobs well below their abilities because the wages offered are still lucrative compared to what they can receive at home" (185).

Following Adeney, who in turn builds on the work of Gittins and van Gennepe, Rhodes describes three different stages of assimilation typically experienced by immigrants, adding illustrations from his own church:

1. *The preliminary stage*. This is exploratory, "marked by formality and tentativeness"; with the immigrant perhaps being "treated with exaggerated politeness and respect" by those of the host culture.
2. *The transitional stage*. Reality has begun to set in. The immigrant is less fascinated by the new culture and more concerned about who he or she is in relation to this culture. The immigrant's major needs are those of cultivating flexibility and commitment. Some get stuck at this point and remain on the periphery. Some become "liminoid", alienated from the new culture while remaining in it. Others begin to find their place within the new culture and are "adopted" into it.
3. *The incorporation stage*. This presupposes acceptance and the integration of the immigrant, involving a reciprocal commitment.

### Chapter 11. Into the Fiery Furnace

Rhodes observes that answering "Who am I?" is a difficult question not merely for adolescents and young adults but for those born to immigrant parents following migration (second-generation/2G) or migrating at a very early age (1.5), who are often caught somewhere "in between", that is, between two languages and two worldviews. Rhodes recalls Young Pai's description of a deep-felt alienation among many 2G youth, with a "high percentage of Korean-American youth who said they very often wished they had different parents" (204). The problem is aggravated by the reluctance of many 2G youth and



young adults to look to others for help in addressing the problems they face, a clear expression of their "aloneness", dependence on self alone.

Rhodes notes the problem of 2G and 1.5 youth being called upon to serve as translators for their families, with some youth resenting this.

After giving some examples of the differing experiences of 2G youth in his own church, Rhodes concludes by noting that while the marginality of the 1.5 and 2G youth poses a threat, it also provides an opportunity in encouraging them to see themselves as a pilgrim people.

#### **Chapter 12. Every Knee Shall Bow and Every Tongue Confess**

With Revelation 7 in mind, Rhodes comments, "Multicultural congregations are not God's kingdom come on earth, but they are a foretaste of that kingdom" (223). Recognising this time of consummation will be festive, Rhodes concludes the book expressing his eagerness for the party to begin.