An investigation into the socio-historical influences overcoming ethnicity in the early New Testament Church

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Abstract

Ethnicity, tribalism and xenophobia could be found inside and outside church walls. Ethnicity and racism are natural, learned and nurtured in human beings. However, ethnic identity and relations exist whether the ethnic groups are competing or not. The first challenge of the early church in the New Testament Church was to overcome ethnicity and hostile divisions between Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans. This study aims at exploring how socio-historical influences and nature of the message of the New Testament managed to overcome ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the early New Testament Church. The study will also reflect on how the contemporary church could manage ethnicity within its structures and redefine its position on what it means to be one in Christ within the diverse church.

Key words

Ethnicity; ethnic divisions; influences; church government

1. Introduction

This study will investigate the question of how ethnicity was overcome in the early New Testament Church. Racial divisions and hostilities between Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans in the New Testament had their roots in deep-seated differences of the Old Testament times. Usually they were traced back to the invasion of 722 BC when the Assyrians carried away captives the ten northern tribes of Israel and repopulated the cities of Samaria with foreigners who intermarried with the remaining Jews (2 Kings 17:24, Figart 1973:89).

The aim of the study will be to indicate that the early New Testament Church faced recurrent problems of ethnicity and cultural divisions between Jews believers who spoke Aramaic and Hellenist believers from the diaspora who spoke Greek. The New Testament Church managed to overcome the vices through socio-historical influences of plurality from the Greeks, Romans and Jews. The nature of the message of church also played a major role in overcoming ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the early New Testament Church.

The main questions stated for this article will be: which cases of ethnicity and ethnic divisions existed in the early New Testament Church? What was God's purpose for ethnicity and ethnic groups in the history of the world? How did the socio-historical influences overcome ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the early New Testament Church? How can the contemporary church manage to overcome ethnicity and ethnic divisions today? To assist in the research the following structure will be used: overview of hostile cases of ethnicity in the New Testament Church, understanding God's purpose for ethnicity and ethnic groups, the socio-historical influences overcoming ethnicity in the early New Testament Church and analysis of nature of the message of the New Testament Church. The study will then make a summary and conclusion.

2. Definition of terms

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby 2010:509), the word 'ethnicity' is defined as the fact of belonging to a particular race or tribe: many important factors may be related for example class, gender, age and ethnicity. Ethnicity will be used in this article in the sense of boundary markers that separate one ethnic group of people from another. Ethnocentrism is produced by one's culture. In that sense, ethnocentrism is natural (Nukunya 1992:223). It refers to the social ideology of human division sorted according to common culture (Acosta 2009:3f).

Negatively, it is a 'syndrome' characterized by a tendency to discriminate against a stranger, an alien, and the physically different. Ethnocentrism is a consequence of our human finitude: "We cannot stand utterly free from our culture and our place in history" (Acosta 2009:3f). Ethnocentrism is therefore, a virtually universal phenomenon in-group contacts obviously including Christians (Matsumoto & Juang 2001:61f, 91).

This study will however, explore the historical existence of ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the context of the early church, *ekklesia,* and its divine calling to carry out God's mission to the world. The goal is not necessarily to stop people being who they are ethnically and culturally, but to understand how the contemporary church could manage ethnicity and redefine its position on what it means to be one in Christ within the diverse church.

3. Overview of hostile cases of ethnicity in the early New Testament Church

3.1 The case of ethnicity in the Church in Jerusalem

Scriptures hold that with the rapid growth of the New Testament Church, it experienced critical challenges of combining the former Jewish culture and what seemed appropriate to the new way of life in Christ. Cultural, language and ministry segregation were cited to be some of the factors that raised ethnic tension and conflict in the early church (Act 6:1-ff, 15:1ff, Elwell & Yarbrough 1998:202). The problem in the Church of Jerusalem was that the Greek – speaking widows among the converts were being neglected in the distribution of relief food. Wedderburn (2004:44–45) asserts that the Hellenist widows were left out on ethnic and religious grounds rather than just on practical and logistical grounds. The Hellenist widows were discriminated against simply because the distribution of items took place within the gatherings of Aramaic-speaking Christians; and the Hellenist widows did not take part in those activities because they could not follow what was said. Instead, they attended their own Greek-speaking gatherings elsewhere; just as Greek-speaking Jews would gather in their own synagogue and conduct their worship and their affairs in ethnic Greek. Perhaps the aid resources took the form of meals which were held within the two linguistically separated and intolerant communities (Carson & Moo 2005:32).

The second problem in the Church in Jerusalem was extreme ethnic prejudice. According to Rah (2010:114–116), the historical background of prejudice started very early in Jerusalem, when Christianity was viewed as a sect of Judaism. When Gentiles began to make their way into the Christian community in large numbers, due to Jewish history of separatism led to a sense of racial segregation and hostility toward Gentiles. A common prayer

of the Jewish male thanked God 'for not making me a Gentile, a woman, or a slave.' That perspective had historical roots that informed how the Jewish Christians received Gentiles believers. In Acts 15:1–5 the Jewish believers "came down from Judea to Antioch" and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said: "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses." The Jews were insistent on the Gentile believers becoming circumcised as Jews before becoming Christians. In that way the Jews would be in majority and therefore maintain the spiritual power in the Church of Jerusalem.

Ethnic prejudice was not the only driving force in the Jewish insistence on dietary laws and circumcision for the Gentiles. A second common characteristic between the context of Acts 15 and the contemporary church is fear of losing authority and political power. The Jewish believers wanted to set the high standards for the early church and therefore insisted on the maintaining of power through those strict standards. A way to define racism from a biblical-theological framework is the establishment of human standards that replace the standards of God. The Jews sought to maintain their authoritative power by asserting their racial preferences above and beyond the standards set by God. The Jews believed that they had the right to demand a physical likeness (via circumcision) above the spiritual likeness demanded by God. The Jews were asking the Gentiles to 'become like us in order to belong to the church.' In contrast to the initial response of the Jews was the positive response expressed by the whole of the Council of Jerusalem. The leadership of the Council of Jerusalem demonstrated wise leadership in asserting a position that highly stood up against the ethnic position of the Jews (Carson & Moo 2005:40ff). In Acts 15:2–3, the segments of the church called Paul and Barnabas to confront the church leadership and spread the good news about the conversion found among the Gentiles:

> This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles

had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad (Acts 15:2–3).

Peter holds that we are all saved by grace and that there is nothing distinctive about us that merit God's love. Therefore, there is a unity and commonality in our salvation experience through the cross of Jesus Christ. James, the leader of the Pious Jews, revealed the strength of his spiritual integrity in his response. In fact, as key leader of the Jewish faction, he had much at stake on the issue of diversity and spiritual power. James wanted to keep the faith pure and would seek to maintain spiritual authority in order to maintain that purity (Rah 2010:119).

3.2 The case of ethnicity in the Church in Rome

According to Cowan (2004:85–90f), historical records show that Paul's letter to the Romans was addressing an extreme ethnically divided church. Some years later, Emperor Claudius had expelled Jewish people from Rome. Jewish Christians such as Aquila and Priscilla had settled elsewhere (Acts 18:2). Due to the expulsion, the Church in Rome was probably composed largely of Gentiles for a number of years before Emperor Claudius died and the Jewish Christians returned. Therefore, both Jewish and Gentile congregations with different traditional practices and values then had to coexist, but their differences created ethnic cultural tension, animosity and conflict. The Jewish people often held ethnically extreme feelings of their origin and culture. They believed that they were saved because they were Abraham's special children, and that they were part of exclusively saved people because they had the covenant of circumcision (Cowan 2004:85–90f).

Paul frequently wrote letters to the churches in Asia Minor. Paul reminded the believers in Rome that what matters was faith-based spiritual circumcision of the heart. The Jewish special privileges did not guarantee salvation (Rom 9:4, 5). He reminded the Christian members in Rome and elsewhere, that their unity and diversity in the gospel should transcend their differences (Rom 1:16, 10:12, 13). He established that Gentiles as well as Jews are all lost (Rom 1:18–17, 2:12–29). All people are sinners before God's judgment (Rom 2:9, 3:9, Carson & Moo 2005:40ff).

3.3 The case of ethnicity in the Church in Corinth

According to Plueddemann (2009:177), the frustrating problems in the Corinthian Church were ethnic divisions and lack of harmony. Members of the church in Corinth were extremely divided and infighting ensued as to what religious leader they should follow (1 Cor 1:10–17; 3:1–9). Social cliques or factions had been formed and were very much evident at the gatherings of the church (1 Cor 11:17–19). For whatever reason, division exists when something essential is lacking in the life of the church (Plueddemann 2009:177).

In the Corinthian Church, something else had been allowed to usurp the place of Christ, as though He were no longer of decisive importance. The common denominator was factions based on favourable preachers: the 'carnal mind' which was the fallen and corrupt nature of all humanity (1 Cor 3:1). Individual ethnic and racial loyalties tended to glory in personal preferences: leaders were appointed into office for example because they belonged to Apollo's ethnic party or Pauls. And it is this that divided the church, for certainly Christ could not be divided. The Apostle Paul contends that such brethren were not spiritual, but carnal, just babies in Christ (1 Cor 3:1).

4. Understanding God's purpose for ethnicity and ethnic groups

What was God's purpose for ethnicity and ethnic groups in the history of the world?

4.1 Abraham was called from an ethnic group

Historically, God called Abraham from an ethnic group. God called Abraham to begin a 'nation' or 'new ethnic group' that would embrace all the other different ethnic groups in God's kingdom (Gen 12:1–8, 15:1–7, 17:1–16). The LORD said to Abram:

> Leave your country, your relatives, and your Father's home, and go to a land that I am going to show you, will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing. And through you I will bless all the nations (Genesis 12:13).

The Lord made a covenant sign of circumcision with Abraham and his descendants. The people of Israel lived in Egypt as a distinct community (Sule-Saa 2000:32). In many respects the people of Israel were unique in the sense that God created a people distinct from all others, nurtured it in wilderness isolation, and granted it through conquest arable land in which to dwell. Israel knew itself to be both continuous with and radically separate from other people groups (Mcbride Jr, 1988:14). The people of Israel were called to be God's agents of his mission to the rest of the people of God in the world. They were chosen not because they were special. The choice was entirely dependent on God's love and mercy. Deuteronomy 7 eloquently expresses Israel's election as one of sheer grace.

4.2. God's call extends to other ethnic groups

The call of Abraham was to be considered later with other ethnic groups such as Gentiles, by his descendants, the Israelites (Sule-Saa 2000:29f). The people of Israel lived in Egypt as a distinct community of 'ethnic groups. The Old Testament covenant affirms the importance of kinship or lines of descent, while not excluding foreigners from the people of God. God has always been very involved in the histories of all ethnic people groups. Through His mercy God has left his imprints on ethnic groups as revealed by their cultures. The blessings of God on ethnic groups were not limited to Israel alone. Israel herself benefited immensely from her neighbours (Gottwald 1985:55f).

Therefore from the inception of God's election of Israel, Abraham the founder of the nation of Israel was made aware of the responsibility to be a holy people to redeem the world and establish God's Kingdom. Abraham was to be the father of nations and not only of Israel. The prophets often impressed on their fellow Israelites that they were meant to be witnesses to the Gentile nations (Aboagye-Mensah 1999:21).

In choosing to honour Israel over other nations, God demonstrates that he can utilise particular ethnic groups for particular purposes. An ethnic background is the raw material God works on in his transformation of his people. In calling Israel to be his people, it was God's purpose to use them to reach and serve others. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham

(Sule-Saa 2000:29f). Therefore, Gentiles do not become part of the people of God on their own. Gentiles have been part of the people of God all along on the same grounds of grace of God that justified Abraham by faith (Rom 4:16–24, Rom 9:8–11, Col 3:11–12).

4.3 God's purpose for ethnic identities

God's purpose for calling Israel is that all the ethnic groups would be brought to worship Him in their diversities (Sule-Saa 2000:38). God longs for all ethnic groups to be converted. It is in this context that some foreigners could become part of the chosen people of Israel. In fact the people of Israel who returned from Egypt were a 'mixed crowd', not ethnically homogeneous. One of the largest tribes, Manasseh, and also the tribe of Ephraim, were in origin half-Egyptian. Furthermore, Israel's experience in Egypt is taken as a reason for the showing of mercy to aliens (Sivasundaram 2008:3).

The reception of foreigners may be studied alongside the conditions of marriage to outsiders. For instance, Moses married two outsiders, the Midianite, Zipporah, who was the daughter of a priest, and a black African Cushite (Sivasundaram 2008:3–4). From God's judgement against Aaron in Numbers it is apparent that he approved of Moses' second marriage. The issue is shared faith in God, differences in ethnicity are not objectionable in God's sight. Yet the danger of too much contact with neighbouring peoples of other faiths was keenly felt, particularly in the return from exile. Ezra's prayer confessing the sin of intermarriage led to communal weeping and the shaming of those who had married foreigners (Sivasundaram 2008:3–4)

The Old Testament Scriptures always pointed to how the New Testament gospel would be open to all (Sivasundaram 2008:1ff). God always calls different people from an ethnic background. An ethnic background is the raw material God works on in his transformation of his people (Sule-Saa 2000:38f). God's call always implies that certain aspects of ethnicity would have to be moderated. Ethnicity is central in the salvation history of God and humanity (Aboagye-Mensah 1999:21f).

5. The socio-historical influences of pluralism from Greece, Rome and Jerusalem on the New Testament Church

How did the socio-historical influences overcome ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the early New Testament Church?

5.1. Influences of religious syncretism from the Greeks and Romans

The Roman religion originally being animistic involved the spirits of the woods, springs and mountains. The Romans also worshiped diverse anthropomorphic gods such as Jupiter, Juno, Mars and Minerva whom they identified with their Greek counterparts (Reid 2004:991). They came successively under the influence of the Etruscans, the Greeks and various Eastern peoples and imported foreign cults including those of Cybele, Isis and Mithras, so long as these were compatible with state policies.

The two remarkable aspects of Hellenistic religion were syncretism and the role of the mysterious religions. People came to know one another's gods and accepted them as their own, because they no longer regarded them as alien forces (De Villiers 1998:195). They were simply worshiped under other names and with different rites in the various countries. So the Greek goddess Artemis and Cybele of Asia Minor were equated: they were no longer regarded as two different goddesses, but as one and the same divinity with various names (De Villiers 1998:195f). People felt themselves threatened and took refuge in superstition, astrology and witchcraft for protection against demons, sickness and fate's unforeseen blows. The problem of how to save oneself from ruin and anxiety demanded a solution. Religion therefore became more private concern than that of the state. The mystery of religions entering the Roman Empire from the East offered a partial answer to human longing: the powers to enable them resist suffering, death and the uncertainty of human existence (De Villiers 1998:195f). Roman religion and state's policies toward religion, therefore affected the reception that the Roman people gave to foreign religions including Judaism and Christianity since Roman religion was closely bound up with the civil government of Rome (Reid 2004:991f).

5.2 Influences of political civil government from the Romans

Reid (2004:991) holds that in public and in private, the Roman religion was in essence the performance of ritual; hence there was great emphasis on the

proper observance of ritual. The priesthoods were closely linked with the civil legislative government: leading to the fact and elaborate rules within Roman religion pointing to the essential legal character of religion. The Roman religion taught that if one followed the ritual correctly, a contract would be made that obtained the 'peace of the gods' (*pax deorum* cf Rom 5:1–2, Reid 2004:991).

In the provinces and later at Rome also the Emperor often shared his cult with the goddess Roma, personification of the power and spirit of Rome (Reid 2004:991). The Romans adopted Greek democratic political system where the citizenry participated in government open debate of matters affecting their city, participated in international Greek athletics, held their own athletic meetings, built gymnasia, theatres, and running tracks and exchanged their traditional life. In Roman times, the Greek cities of Trans-Jordan were known as the Decapolis (De Villiers 1998:134).

Under Greek influence, Greek buildings were constructed, Greek theatres and baths introduced into the towns, and Greek customs imitated because of their impressing appeal. De Villiers (1998:88) argues that Hellenism's cultural influence persisted much longer since the Romans were deeply impressed by the Greek culture, adopted and promoted it to a large extent. Everyone sought to master Greek and so be accepted as a Greek, and not doing so was despised 'barbarian.'

5.3 Influences of the Jewish world milieu

The impact of the Jewish world milieu on the New Testament was also very strong. Du Toit and Breytenbach (1998:216ff) contends that the Jewish world milieu of the New Testament was firstly influenced by diverse Persia, Rome and Diaspora facets. Judaism could be categorized as Judaism inside Palestine and that beyond its border known as the diverse Judaism of the Diaspora (dispersion, scattering) or Hellenistic Judaism. The Jewish communities secondly dispersed over large sections of the Roman Empire were more strongly exposed to Hellenizing influences than those inside Palestine (Du Toit & Breytenbach 1998:216).

5.3.1 The pluralistic nature of Judaism

Judaism itself does not present a uniform picture; conversely, the pluralistic nature of Judaism of the New Testament must not be exaggerated, as if the

existence of varying Judaism represented completely different milieus (Du Toit 1998:216ff). Despite their different variations, the respective Judaism, including that of the diaspora, possessed a religio-ethical and national bond which distinguished the Jews from all other nations, thus justifying the use of the term Judaism. There can be no denying that there were many influences which acted upon Judaism such as Hellenism and eastern syncretism (Du Toit 1998:216ff). The Jews outside Palestine were always exposed to the influence of their environments, though they succeeded to a great degree in maintaining their identity. But the situation changed when Hellenism made its entry into the Jewish territories. An indelible mark was imprinted on the Jewish communities in foreign parts, of which Alexandria is perhaps the clearest example. Judaism's confrontation with Hellenism in that city brought into being a distinctive Judaeo-Hellenistic culture, and Plato with his extensive literary activities was its most important representative. He was possibly the first scholar to expound the Bible on the basis of Greek philosophy (De Villiers 1998:134ff).

6. Analysis of principle nature and message of the New Testament Church

6.1 The New Testament Church was pluralistic in system of government

The New Testament Church was characterized by influences of pluralism from Greco-Roman system of governments. Du Toit (1998:103) argues that people felt the gods were the same world over, so the Aphrodite was easily equated with Astarte, Athena with Anath, and the chief god Zeus, the Olympian Zeus, with Baal-Shaman, the deity the Syrians worshiped as 'the Lord of heaven.' It was not only a Graecizing which took place in that way; there was also a fusion or syncretizing of the gods of the East and the West.

Du Toit and Breytenbach (1998:216ff) also holds that the Jewish world milieu of the New Testament was also influenced by pluralism from Persia, Rome and Diaspora facets. Judaism itself did not present a uniform picture; conversely, the pluralistic nature of Judaism of the New Testament must not be exaggerated, as if the existence of varying Judaism represented completely different milieus. Despite their variations, the respective

Judaism including that of the diaspora possessed a religio-ethical and national bond which distinguished the Jews from all other nations, there could be no denying fact that there were many influences which acted upon Judaism such as plurality of Hellenism and eastern syncretism (Du Toit & & Breytenbach 1998:216ff). The process continued until the reign of Emperor Hadrian in AD 117–138, who was also inspired by the Greeks and did his best to maintain that open plural culture.

Du Toit and Breytenbach (1998:55) hold that during the early apostolic period many Samaritans accepted the Christian message. The large numbers of Christians later fled to Samaria to escape the Jewish ethnic attacks. In the New Testament, congregations in Acts, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia and the entire Asia Minor were both 'heterogeneous' and 'multi-generational' comprising younger and older people ministering in fellowship, unity and self-sacrificial service (1 Tim 4:12, 5:1–16, Tit 2:1–8, 1 Jn 2:12–14). Therefore, the influence of Greek politics, government, religion, and culture were very strong in the New Testament Church (Du Toit & Breytenbach 1998:88). Plurality here is preferable for the church, since it exists among all peoples, languages and nations (Du Plooy 1982:5ff).

6.2 The New Testament Church was *presbuteroi* in system of government

The New Testament Church was characterized by the *presbuteroi* (elders) system of government as key leverage point of transformation (Act 6:1–6, 1 Tim 3:1–12). Du Toit, & Breytenbach (1998:257) hold that presumably in the Maccabean period there was mention of two groups of dignitaries: the *archontes* (rulers) and the *presbuteroi* (elders). Presumably the rulers were officials with special functions and the elders were the heads of the leading aristocratic families. The New Testament Church's plurality of eldership system found its concrete representation in the unity and connection of churches and their elders in regional and trans-regional bodies called courts where discipline is undertaken (Hall D. W. & Hall, J. H. 1994:3f, 21). However, that arrangement was in sharp contrast to the hierarchical Roman military organizational philosophy (Viola 2008:156ff). Hierarchical system of government is undesirable to God's people because it reduces human interaction into command-style relationship. Such relationships are foreign to the original New Testament world of thinking and practice

(Viola 2008:226). Mono-ethnic establishment or homogeneity is a strange phenomenon to the New Testament doctrine (Viola 2008:156, 296). Christ warned the disciples against the Gentile view of leadership: 'It shall not be so among you!'(Mt 20:26).

6.3 The New Testament was anti-ethnic in system of government

The New Testament Christianity polemically attacked ethnicity. Du Toit (1998:251) holds that Herod, an Idumaean governor of Galilee, to meet the Jewish wishes and satisfy them, rebuilt the temple in many respects were equal of Solomon's temple or even superior. The subjects of Herod who included non-Jews under his brought territorial donations by Augustus. Herod did not emulate his predecessors, the Hasmonaeans, by compelling people to become Jews; instead, he treated Jews and non-Jews alike. In many occasions, Jesus offended the ethnocentric pride of the Pharisees by his association with Gentiles, tax collectors and sinners (Du Toit 1998:251).

In the New Testament, the polemic attacks against ethnicity were not only limited to Paul, they were pervasive throughout the gospels as well (Sequeira 2016: 38ff). Figart (1973:93) argues that they are recorded four times in the Gospels that Christ had personal contact with the Samaritans, and from which each of these, it is possible to glean a principle which can serve to govern present day race relations. Some of them are the Samaritan woman (Jn 4), conversation with the Jewish Lawyer hence the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), rebuke of ethnic militancy on burning Samaritans (Lk 9:51–56) and the account of the cleansing of the ten lepers (Lk 17:11–19).

Christ made efforts to overcome racial bigotry of His day. He was showing that the gulf caused by centuries of hatred and animosity could be bridged by one genuine expression of kindness and concern. It is a plea for deliberate effort to make a positive contribution toward erasing racial wrongs. If Christ thought it important enough to supersede an errant of racial tradition with gracious gestures; then we should take heed that we are not swallowed up in the river of ethnicity today. It must also be remembered that the Samaritan woman had accepted Christ as Messiah, along with others in the city. Jesus rejected the whole Samaritan inimical system (Du Toit & Breytenbach (1998:54). He agreed that racial bigotry was wrong. Jesus did on occasion take the Samaritan route, a trunk road from

north to south following the Samaritan watershed (Du Toit & Breytenbach 1998:55). He advocated the need for human sympathy to men of all races, but He rebuked any attempt to solve ethnic racial problems by the expedient of militancy (Figart 1973:102).

6.4 The New Testament was non-political in system of government

The New Testament was non-political in nature and character. Christ refused to be tempted with the glory of the kingdom of the world (Mt 4:8–9). Christ's Kingdom was opposed to the principles of the earthly kingdoms (Mt 20:25–28). Humility and servant political principles were characteristics entrenched in the Kingdom. Political power and authoritarianism characterized the kingdoms of the earth.

Paul radically subverted the political social order of slavery by exhorting slaves and masters to fellowship as brothers in Christ in one congregation (1 Cor 7:17–24, Phm 8–16). Faith in Christ obliterates political social status as a boundary to fellowship. James commands that there be no political partiality or special treatment given to rich persons. James assumes that rich and poor people will fellowship together in unity, rather than being separated in homogeneous units along political economic lines (Jas 2:1–9). The church must show concern above ethnic politics and take action where it sees need, hurt or wrong with love and compassion.

The New Testament Church was also non-political through the means of reconciliation. The disciples went beyond the Jewish borders to preach the gospel to the Gentiles despite persecution. The gospel is for every person, no matter what his or her race, social position or past sin. Christ longs to redeem all ethnic groups so that he could use them to fulfil his mission of salvation. Berkhof (1969:59) holds that in Colossians 1:1ff, Paul advocates for the message of reconciliation saying: 'Christ reconciles all things in heaven and on earth to Himself.' Reconciliation with God necessarily includes the reconciliation of those who are estranged. God has acted graciously in Christ to unite that which is estranged. This happens through the cross, where Jew and Gentile are reunited in diversity. This affects a Kingdom where all can come and all are welcome (Van Ruler 1969:138). The New Testament Church therefore overcame ethnic politics through acts of universal love and compassion.

The New Testament Church overcame ethnicity through the ministry of worship of God (Jn 4:23–24, Mk 11:17 cf Is 56:7). Milne (1982:224) holds that the early church was committed to worship service, a further means of bringing glory to God beyond nationalities. Worship, the praise and exaltation of God was a common Old Testament practice, as can be seen particularly in the book of Psalms. Beardslee (1965:136–37) suggests that the purpose of the church is to glorify God and after this our salvation. The worship is rendered to God in the outgoing of our hearts to Him in gratitude through prayer and praise. But worship consists also in service. True worship involves 'devoting the will to the purpose of God.' Worship, thanksgiving, praise and exaltation of God, was a common Old Testament practice, as can also be seen in the books of Psalms, Revelation and elsewhere; the people of God are represented as recognizing and declaring His greatness. The church is a worshiping community, whose worship is designed not for what we may get out of it, but that we may return to God the love we owe (Rev 19–21). Therefore, the church is a unity in diversity, and diversity amid unity (Du Plooy 1982:5ff).

7. Study summary

This study investigated the question of how ethnicity was overcome in the early New Testament Church. The aim of the study was to indicate that the early New Testament Church faced recurrent problems of ethnicity and cultural divisions between Jews believers who spoke Aramaic and Hellenist believers from the diaspora who spoke Greek. The New Testament Church managed to overcome the vices through socio-historical influences of plurality from the Greeks, Romans and Jews of the diaspora. The nature of the message of church also played a major role in overcoming ethnicity and ethnic divisions in the New Testament Church.

How can the contemporary church manage to overcome ethnicity and ethnic divisions today? In the context of ethnicity and ethnic divisions, the church needs a new pluralistic paradigm to characterize the system of government practically adopted in the enterprise. This study established that the New Testament Church was pluralistic in nature and character from the socio-historical influences of religious syncretism of the Greeks and Romans. The New Testament Church was characterized by the *presbuteroi*

(elders) system of government as key leverage point of transformation (Act 6:1–6, 1 Tim 3:1–12). The New Testament Church was anti-hierarchical in system of government in sharp contrast to the Roman military philosophy (Viola 2008:156ff).

However, Jesus Christ positively managed ethnicity. Jesus crossed all ethnic and cultural barriers to share the gospel to the Gentiles. The ministry of Jesus was inclusive. He advocated the need for human sympathy to men of all races and He rebuked any attempt to solve ethnic racial problems by the expedient of militancy. The polemic attacks against ethnicity were not limited to Paul, they were pervasive throughout the gospels as well (Sequeira 2016: 38ff). The church must take the precedence from Peter, who initially reluctant against his traditional, ethnic and cultural persuasion, but led by the Spirit, proclaimed in Cornelius' house:

> I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right (Acts 10:34).

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study established that the New Testament Church was principally pluralistic in nature, character and practice under the socio-historical influence of Greco-Roman cultures of the first centuries. The New Testament was strongly anti-ethnical and non-political in orientation. Ethnicity had been a challenge not only to society in general but to the Christian church in particular (Sanou 2015:94). The function of the church was to reproduce itself in the lives of others through the propagation of the gospel to the unconverted everywhere (Figart 1973:158). Walden (2015: xi) holds that the world is becoming increasingly diverse with the United States as one of the most diverse countries on the planet. Diversity encourages critical thinking and helps people to communicate with those of varied backgrounds. It fosters mutual respect and teamwork.

The contemporary church needs this premise or worldview regarding the meaning of the body of Christ, a new plural perspective for the *ekklesia* and a new framework for governing the church. Christ is universal, He, the Messiah of Israel is at the same time intended as the Lord of the whole

world (Berkhof 1969:80). Of course, boundaries exist: national political frontiers, language barriers, cultural and historical differences and racial colouring. Broocks (2002:93) holds that the ministry of reconciliation is the only driving force strong enough to tear down the walls of ethnicity and racism that still exist in our world including the church. The church is the new people of God, made possible by belief in Christ and the confessions. Christ is the new identity for Christian believers. The diverse nature of the church must be reflected in the local church. The local church must manage ethnicity and ethnic divisions based on the new identity in Christ. The contemporary church is a unity in diversity and diversity amid unity. The contemporary church has a new identity based on Christ.

The contemporary church must adapt to changing situations by willing to serve the body of Christ. In the biblical context therefore, diversity is acknowledged, supported and celebrated in this world and beyond (Walden 2015:26). Therefore, the New Testament Church overcame ethnicity through socio-historical influences of Greco-Roman system of government, the message of the Scripture and practice of the Apostles. This is how the New Testament Church positively overcame ethnicity for its health, enrichment and greater capacity for growth.

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