

# Ethnicity and Discipleship



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**“I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22, NRSV).**

# He Is No Fool

## INTRODUCTION

2 Cor. 5:20

Five young missionaries and their families chose to move to the jungles of Ecuador to make contact with the Waodoni, a tribe that was known for its vicious attacks on other tribes and even on members within its tribe.

Patiently the missionaries reached out. They dropped gifts to the Waodoni from a plane. They prayed for success to bring the gospel to this tribe.

Then it seemed as though the moment had arrived. The five men landed on a sandbar in the middle of the Curary River and set up a base camp. Soon they made friendly contact with three Waodoni, even giving short plane rides to them.

However, there was evil lurking, and soon the five missionaries lay dead in the Curary River. Would their desire to disciple the Waodoni tribe die with them? Eventually, Rachel Saint, a sister of one of the missionaries and Elisabeth Elliot, the wife of another one of the missionaries, were able to reach out again to the

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Waodoni. They ministered to their physical needs—breaking down barriers that no one else had been able to reach across. As the Waodoni learned about the God who had left trail markings for them to follow (the Bible), they chose to follow Christ.

Today, the Waodoni are a peaceful tribe. The courage it took for five young men to reach outside of their comfort zone ultimately led to their deaths. In response, the movement of Christian mission grew. The families of the martyrs have heard from countless other missionaries that the story of the Waodoni inspired them to reach out to other people groups and disciple them.

Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian were ready to lay their lives on the line to cross ethnic divides. Their desire to disciple anyone who needed to know Christ was more important to them than life itself.

Jim Elliot wrote the following in his journal: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” As you study this week’s lesson, spend time thinking about how God is asking you to step out of your comfort zone and disciple someone you might otherwise pass over. He might not be calling you to disciple a group like the Waodoni, but He’s calling you to disciple someone. Are you willing to give so you can gain?

# Xenophobe or Xenophile?

## EVIDENCE

Deut. 10:19; Matt. 25:31–46; 28:19; Luke 5:30–32

The key to understanding transcultural discipleship is the Greek word *xenos*, meaning “strange,” “foreign,” and “alien.” The apostle Paul unnerved many people with his chameleonlike “all-things-to-all-people” approach to soul winning. Even today, many Christians are more comfortable with a homogeneous congregation where physical, cultural, and philosophical differences do not intrude.

This kind of xenophobia is not unique to our time. New Testament Judaism had refined the notion of a chosen people into a homogeneous culture. The *xenos* were tolerated because, as Moses had reminded them, the Jews had once been strangers in Egypt (Deut. 10:19). But these foreigners were outsiders who would not experience full participation in Jewish society.

From this context, Jesus revisited the relationship between the chosen people and strangers. In the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31–46), the King and Judge claims to have been visited as a stranger (*xenos*). Those represented by the goats can’t figure out when that visit happened. For them, acknowledging their Lord as *xenos* was inconceivable, for surely they would have recognized Him. Even at the judgment, there apparently will be those who find it impossible to personally accept cultures and traditions different from their own.

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In our contemporary world, we have secular disciples of Paul’s strategy. Microsoft has customized their software to interact with people in many different languages. In doing so, they have expanded their reach to customers who are not proficient in English. Coca-Cola has found many ways to adapt their branding and advertising for each of the countries where they sell their portfolio of beverages.

If they can embrace the foreign in order to sell more colored sugar water, then surely we must be willing to do the same for the gospel.

## REACT

1. Is xenophilia a spiritual gift that enables foreign mission service, or is it an obligation for every disciple?

2. When does a culturally homogeneous church become a liability to full discipleship?

## Ethnic Contacts and Discipleship

### LOGOS

Matt. 15:21–28; Luke 7:1–11; John 1:3–14; Acts 10:9–35; 11:14–30

An ambassador is a representative for a sovereign government, trained in culture and diplomacy. Ambassadors deliver messages in a variety of ethnic settings. To be effective, they need to build relationships and influence country leaders. They lay the ground work so that crucial messages will not be rejected out of hand when delivered during times of stress. We are called as ambassadors for Christ. So we should be prepared to come in contact with people who are different from us.

### Ambassador Training 101 (Matt. 15:21–28; Acts 10:9–35)

Both of the stories in these texts reveal the importance Jesus places on reaching out to people of different backgrounds. In the first story, the Canaanite woman is from an ethnic group that is despised by the Jewish leaders. Jesus enters into debate with a group of Pharisees over their views on defilement. Many believe that

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contact with a foreigner brings defilement. After this discourse, Jesus journeys up the coast to illustrate an important point on ethnicity and discipleship—God’s kingdom is inclusive!

The woman cries out to Jesus. The teachable moment has arrived. But Jesus refuses to answer her as she pleads for help. If we stop reading at verse 23, we have justification for our own intolerant tendencies. We don’t have to talk with, sit with, or be with people who are different than we are.

Do the disciples pass the “ambassador test”? They clamour for a more overt form of rejection toward this Canaanite. Now He has their attention. He speaks some stinging words to the woman. It’s likely that Jesus is repeating “locker-room” language often heard in Peter’s circle of friends. He calls this woman a dog to her face. Given what we know about Jesus and His love, we may surmise that He speaks these words in a questioning form and with a look of kindness.

Notice that this mother finds Jesus by ignoring His disciples’ protestations. Our attitude and response is important when we are on the receiving end of hurtful words and actions. Ethnic insults, silence, or rejection by other church members should not stop us from receiving God’s blessing.

In the second story about Peter and Cornelius, the theme is similar. God reveals that there is to be no partiality in His kingdom. He wants to reach us all. Sometimes

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He sends people to us. Sometimes He sends us as ambassadors to them. Peter was asked to leave his comfort zone and reach out to those who were ethnically and culturally different from himself.

### **Who Is Worthy? (Luke 7:1–10)**

Jesus thinks everyone deserves His compassion. But it is our tendency to judge based on wealth, position, and prestige. In contrast to the Jews, the centurion shows us how to reach across such lines. He displays a genuine interest in and adjustment to another culture. Notice the sensitivity of the centurion to Jewish thoughts on defilement—“Don’t come to my house.” The centurion also downplayed his own importance by stating, “I am unworthy.” It’s hard to win friends if we suffer from a superiority complex.

### **All People (John 1:3–14)**

Jesus created all things—all people, all personalities, all ethnicities! He will not leave us to destruction without trying to reach our hearts. He will try everything. He sent John (verse 7) to call “all people.” He came Himself (verse 11), giving up everything for us.

Some of us listen, and He gives us power to help Him reach our friends. Put your name in the blanks and listen to what Jesus seems to be saying:

\_\_\_\_\_ (*your name*), *you know that student that sits next to you in class? She won't listen to Me right now (pause), and it breaks My heart. Will you become friends with her? My Spirit is in you, and this is how I choose to help both of you grow into My kingdom.*

Your response may well be: *Father, I love You, but I am so tired because I stayed up late last night. I have an exam to prepare for and a paper to write. Besides, she's so different from me. It's obvious she has no interest in spiritual things.*

Jesus speaks again: *I understand how you feel. I came and lived with some unresponsive people, remember? I changed the way I lived and even changed My body and mental capacity to reach you. This is what I ask of you: Become all things to all people that through you, I might save some. Will you follow Me? Figure out a way to be friends with her, \_\_\_\_\_. At least try! Please!*

### **REACT**

1. Who is God sending into your life right now for discipleship training?
2. As an ambassador, what group of people do you come in contact with that others in your church cannot reach?
3. Do you ever try to make friends with people not in your comfort zone?
4. Why can we be more effective witnesses if we are blind to ethnic and cultural differences?

Tuesday  
February 5

## At the Cross—A Level Playing Field

### TESTIMONY

2 Cor. 5:20

“The religion of Christ uplifts the receiver to a higher plane of thought and action, while at the same time it presents the whole human race as alike the objects of the love of God, being purchased by the sacrifice of His Son. At the feet of Jesus, the rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, meet together, with no thought of cast or worldly pre-eminence. All earthly distinctions are forgotten as we look upon Him whom our sins have pierced. The self-denial, the condescension, the infinite compassion of Him who was highly exalted in heaven, put to shame human pride, self-esteem, and social caste. Pure and undefiled religion manifests its heaven-born principles in bringing into oneness all who are sanctified through the truth. All meet as blood-bought souls, alike dependent upon One who hath redeemed them to God.”<sup>1</sup>

“There is no caste with God. He ignores everything of the kind. All souls are of value with Him. Laboring for the salvation of the soul is employment worthy of the highest honor. It matters not what may be the form of our labor, or among what class, whether high or low. In God’s sight these distinctions will not affect its true worth.”<sup>2</sup>

“The Lord desires His chosen servants to learn how to unite in harmonious effort. . . . In every word and act, kindness and love will be revealed; and as each worker fills his appointed place faithfully, the prayer of Christ for the unity of His followers will be answered, and the world will know that these are His disciples.”<sup>3</sup>

“There is no caste with  
God.”

### REACT

1. Even though your society may not have an established caste system, are there ways that people groups are classed, thus making them feel less appreciated? What can you do to change this within your sphere of influence?

2. How do you envision discipleship among many people groups?

1. *Gospel Workers*, p. 330.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 483.

# Looking Through to the Soul

## HOW-TO

Acts 10:9–35; 11:14–30

Every era has its own set of judgments and ways to separate people. We tend to see the struggles of our own era as unique. But Satan has been trying to pit us against each other from the beginning.

Jesus appears to be swayed only by a person's relationship with God. He looks through the layers of class, occupation, race, and hometown to see a person's faith. Is that what we see? It probably isn't. In God's eyes, your mother, your coworkers, the Queen of England, a veterinarian, a prostitute, and a farmer in a distant land are all the same. They are all individuals in need of a Savior. God alone sees the desires of our hearts. He really does see the inside.

It is no simple thing to see beyond the stereotypes we have grown into and often don't even recognize. Peter's life-changing experience gives us a good start.

**1. Be willing to change your ideas.** Peter received a vision that seemed contrary to everything he had ever been taught. But as the Holy Spirit revealed this new concept to him, Peter was convicted of God's will.

**2. Follow God's leading with action.** After the vision, Peter received an invitation to teach a group of Gentiles. Scripture says he was still standing there thinking about the vision when they came to him! But Peter wasted no time. He invited them into his home as guests and then went back to Capernaum to speak with the people there.

**3. Think and act humbly.** It is never appropriate for us to think of ourselves more highly than others. The Bible tells us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 5:43, 44). And we know that in God's eyes, not one of us is better than another. Read how Peter handled this in Acts 10:25, 26.

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of our hearts.

## REACT

1. How will these three steps change the way you think and act toward people or groups of people you have thought of as different from yourself?

2. Would you have been able to make the quick attitude change that Peter made after his vision? Why or why not?

Thursday  
February 7

## Praying for the “Common and Unclean”

### OPINION

Acts 10

Like the Jews of Peter’s time, we are abundantly receiving the light of truth. We have been entrusted with not only spiritual food, but also with incredible educational opportunities and economic resources.

But we are so much like Peter—largely oblivious to people in other cultures, languages, and religions. Comparing numbers reveals that the world average is one Adventist to every 454 people, but Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen have one Adventist to every five million.<sup>1</sup> Of the 28 million Burmese people living in Myanmar, only 0.1 percent are Christian.<sup>2</sup> What we do about statistics like these reveals whether or not we consider our neighbors “common” or “unclean.”

Evidence suggests that we can be doing more. Two major commitments are needed to bridge the gap between the “Cornelius” and “Peters” of today. First, disciples must be willing to relocate and accept another ethnic group as their own. Second, there is a need for increased mission offerings. Adventists today give less

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action.**

than \$0.04 to the Sabbath School mission offering for every \$1.00 of tithe. In 1930, Adventists were giving \$0.60 for every \$1.00 of tithe.<sup>3</sup>

Finding disciples willing to dedicate themselves in these two areas is one of the many challenges impeding progress. However, Jesus did not say that it would be easy to overcome cultural and political obstacles. What He does say is, “‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations’” (Matt. 28:18, 19, NIV). Love must manifest itself in action. Who will go up on the housetop and pray daily for a radical worldview conversion?

### REACT

What are some methods of delivering the gospel to economically impoverished ethnic groups? What about to the more prosperous?

1. Homer Trecartin, planning director, Adventist Mission, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. E-mail correspondence, September 15, 2006.

2. Joshua Project. People-in-Country Profile. Myanmar (Burma) Retrieved October 30, 2006, from <http://www.joshuaproject.net/peopctry.php?rop3=101776&rog3=BM>.

3. Gary Krause, director, Office of Adventist Mission, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. E-mail correspondence, September, 25, 2006.

# Expand Your World

## EXPLORATION

Gal. 3:28

## CONCLUDE

Ken Ham, founder of the ministry Answers in Genesis, has the unique perspective that we're not divided into many races. He's fond of saying there's only one race—the human race. Perhaps that's the attitude the Holy Spirit was getting at when He inspired Paul to write, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal. 3:28, NIV). It's easy to keep aloof from people different from yourself. But in order to grow in Christlikeness and to take the gospel to the world, we need to overcome prejudicial, judgmental, and exclusive attitudes in our own hearts.

## CONSIDER

- Visiting a place or event where you know you will be a minority to see what it feels like.
- Becoming a host family to a high school or college student from abroad.
- Going through the Gospels and listing all of Jesus' interactions with non-Jews and women (the two lowest classes in His society). Write out what you learn from each story.
- Checking out the Web sites for Global Mission ([www.global-mission.org](http://www.global-mission.org)) and Adventist Frontier Missions ([www.afmonline.org](http://www.afmonline.org)) and deciding how you want to regularly lend your support. It could be through finances, prayer, encouraging letters to missionaries, short-term mission trips, donating supplies, etc.
- Viewing Ken Ham's DVDs *Where Did the Races Come From?* and *Only One Race* to get an interesting viewpoint on the origins of racism and the unity of the human family.

## CONNECT

Ben Carson, *The Big Picture*; Ken Ham, Carl Wieland, and Don Batten, *One Blood*.