

Is it reasonable to assert that
evangelists who adopt the homogeneous unit principle are racist?

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Synopsis

This paper discusses and evaluates the validity of the statement that 'evangelists who adopt the homogenous unit principle (HUP) are racist' in the light of a biblically based Christian ethic. Its thesis argues that whilst HUP is a discriminatory strategy employed by evangelists on the basis of discrimination, it is not in itself a racist strategy. The paper confirms biblical grounds for asserting that racism is immoral and that a Christian ethic compels evangelists to reject racism. The paper evaluates the grounds for adopting HUP for the purposes of evangelism, why HUP might be thought to be racist, what are the theological and cultural grounds for adopting HUP, whether the statement is valid and whether evangelists should adopt HUP and with what precautions. The paper concludes that whilst HUP remains an effective strategy for evangelism, we must avoid the promulgation of racist ideologies and should pursue gatherings reflecting the unity and heterogeneity of the eschatological reality of Christ's church.

WHY ALL THE CONTROVERSY OVER HUP?

Some critics of *homogeneous unit principle* (HUP) have asserted that evangelists who adopt the strategy are racist. Moltmann calls it heathenish, Hoole a perversion of the true faith,¹ Stott asserts that churches based on it lack richness and Wasdell likens it to spiritual apartheid.² This paper discusses and evaluates the validity of the statement in the context of a Christian ethic derived from biblical theology. It provides an ethical Christian response as to whether and in what circumstances evangelists might ethically adopt the principle.

The target of the statement is the evangelist. An *evangelist* is a Christian who proclaims the 'good news of Jesus Christ with a view to bringing about the reconciliation of the sinner to God the Father through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.'³ Every Christian is commissioned to this end⁴ and the term *evangelist* embraces every believer,⁵ whether they proactively seek to share the gospel message or simply act as witnesses, living responsively under the lordship of Christ.

A[n] *homogeneous unit* (HU) is a group in society in which all the members have [a] specific characteristic[s] in common.⁶ Members of an HU consequently have less relational and communication barriers to overcome internally than with people outside the unit. The homogeneous unit principle was championed by Donald McGavran⁷ as a means by which to evangelise people groups. The principle rests on his assumption that 'men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers'.⁸

To *discriminate* means 'to detect or draw or make distinctions; to distinguish from.'⁹ Every evangelist will discriminate to some degree, due to their particular spatial, temporal and linguistic constraints.¹⁰ The generic term *racism* involves the classification of people into a category of *race* according to shared externally expressed genetic characteristics or as the

¹ Hoole, C.R.A. 'A Letter to the Editor: The homogeneous unit principle'. *The Evangelical Review of Theology* 8 no 2, 1984. p.262

² Vaughan, E. 'The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the Anglican church'. *Reformed Theological Review* 48 (May –Aug 1989): 41-50.

³ Weber, T.P. 'Evangelism' in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1984) p.382

⁴ I am indebted to Mike Raiter's Mission Foundations course for this understanding of the 'great commission' (Matt 28:16-20 cf. Luke 24:46-9; John 15:16; John 20:21 Acts 1:8; Acts 3:17-21; Acts 8; 2 Thess 3:1)

⁵ This responsibility of *each* believer to share the gospel is an imperative derived from the understanding of a gospel which consigns the unbeliever to hell (rather than the specific gifting of an evangelist cited in Eph 4:11)

⁶ Examples of HUs include Greeks, ABCs, university students, CBD workers and septuagenarians!

⁷ McGavran, D.A. *The Bridges of God: a study in the strategy of missions*. (New York: Friendship Press, 1955)

⁸ McGavran, D.A. *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) p.223

⁹ Turner, G.W. (ed.) *The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary*. (Melbourne: OUP, 1984) p.202

¹⁰ Galea, R. et al '...no gathering on earth can be truly representative of the heavenly one, for intentionally or unintentionally every gathering in our churches is homogeneous to at least some degree. It must be limited by time and space, and language and geography.'

result of a social paradigm developed over time (regardless of genetic expression) depending on the classification for the purpose of making that distinction.

The contemporary definition of *racism* combines the aforementioned definitions for *discrimination* and *racism* to mean an assertion of 'the belief in the superiority of a particular race'¹¹ over another (moral, intellectual or physical) on account of *racial* differences.¹² This definition confers a *morality* judgment on making a racial distinction. This is the definition we shall apply to the statement we are evaluating. The practical outcome of this type of *racism* (whether at personal, social or institutional level) is often the misuse of power so that members of the race or group are treated as subordinate in some way. This racism is currently deemed *immoral* within our society. Whilst this definition of racism as 'immoral discrimination' has no theological grounding, this activity of racism is a reality in our society amongst both unbelievers and Christians. Given this context, we shall firstly explore biblically whether this definition of racism as an immoral activity can stand.

CAN WE ASSERT BIBLICALLY THAT RACISM IS IMMORAL?

The Bible defends the excellence of diverse peoples and races amongst whom there is no inference of subordination. The Biblical creation account affirms that all people are descended from Adam as the father of humanity (Gen 1:27-28). His descendants culminate in Noah (Gen 5) whose family alone survived the flood (Gen 8:16-22) and from whom all people are subsequently descended (Gen 10). In the account of Noah we learn that God's favour rests not on the basis of race but with those who are obedient to his commands. God created each member of humanity with superficial differences arising from their unique genetic make-ups based on a homogeneous template - 'from one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.'¹³

The primary distinction of races came about through the dispersion event at Babel (Gen 11:1-9) at which God 'confuse[d] their language so they [did] not understand each other... [and] scattered them from there over all the earth.'¹⁴ This was a divinely ordained event in response to the collective efforts of humanity to continue in disobedient rebellion against their creator God, the linguistic consequences of which we shall endure until the new creation. It is from this Biblical foundation we can explore God's teleological plan for

¹¹ Turner, G.W. (ed.) *The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* p.564

¹² Becker, C.B. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Ethics Vol 2:L-W*. (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1992) p.1056

¹³ Acts 17:26

¹⁴ Gen 11:7-8

humanity as a reconciled and united people group under his sovereign rule, as mediated through his purposes revealed in his acts of redemption.

God's chosen people, Israel, were given no theological basis to consider themselves as superior to other races. Indeed, Israel was to be a blessing to all the families on earth through Abraham (Gen 12:3), a light to the gentiles (Exo 7:5) and a servant (Isa 53) in their centripetal mission to honour God. Other races, *gentiles*, were frequently assimilated into their nation (Exo 18:12, Josh 6:25, Ruth). It is this mission which is the foundation for the gospel message of Jesus Christ - a message of redemption and reconciliation for all races across the globe without discrimination. It is Jesus himself who moves centrifugally amongst the foreign nations (Matt 15:22, John 4) to inaugurate his kingdom until the first person reported to confess him 'Son of God' is a gentile (Mark 15:39).

Jesus' disciples in Acts are empowered by his Spirit (Acts 2) to reach all gentiles (Acts 8, Acts 10) 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'¹⁵ In the account of Peter, like that of Noah, it is made clear that 'God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'¹⁶ The gospel of Jesus Christ is purposed for the teleological reunification of his people under God, visible now as his church, 'a body in which the gospel has achieved reconciliation across natural barriers, [a] testimony to the power of the gospel of reconciliation.'¹⁷

The term gentile encompasses *all* non-Jews and so those who are 'sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized (sic) into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.'¹⁸ It is clear that God sees *no* racial distinction for his gospel since we are now all one in Christ (Gal 3:28). The only distinction he sees is righteousness and obedience found in submission to Christ (Romans 3:20-24) or a rejection of his word of truth (Rom 2:8). His teleology for his people is found in the new creation, consisting of all believers as a *heterogeneous* unit, 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation'¹⁹, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.'²⁰ 'The implication of this radically new creation in Christ is that the church should never

¹⁵ Acts 1:8

¹⁶ Acts 10:34-36

¹⁷ Shead, S. 'Rethinking Homogeneous Unit Churches: The Tension between Church and Mission' in *Thinking About the Homogeneous Unit Principle and Churches - CCSI Staff Conference Pamphlet*. (Edited by Raj Gupta. Unpublished.) p.5

¹⁸ Galatians 3:26-29

¹⁹ [UBS] ἔθνος, οὐς n nation, people; non-Jews, Gentiles - equally synonymous with 'race'

²⁰ Rev 7:9

discriminate between race, cultures or status.²¹ The biblical testimony of God's election of his people is one against racism. We have established a biblical Christian ethic from which we can deduce that God finds racism unacceptable and immoral.

Since the statement contends that the adoption of HUP by evangelists is discrimination based on race, it warrants evaluation. We shall explore whether HUP is a racist concept and establish the grounds for adopting HUP for evangelism. We shall then determine whether evangelists should adopt HUP.

WHY MIGHT HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE BE CONSIDERED RACIST?

Evangelists are empowered by God to disseminate his word of truth to all races (Matt 28:18-20). Evangelists are the people of God holding the word of God with his authority to both exercise and disseminate his word (John 20:21-23). There is scope for the evangelist to employ selectivity and misuse of power through discrimination on the basis of race. It is necessary and responsible to investigate concerns about the misuse of this power.

Evangelism can be undertaken external to a church environment, perhaps within a *para-church*²² or within the church gathering to unbelievers who attend. The application of HUP to any of these environments entails the specific targeting of a particular HU, exclusively catering for and accommodating that HU (e.g. a regular meeting to read the Bible with people from a Greek background). In the context of a evangelistic para-church we can extrapolate this ethic to assert that employment of HUP strategy is racist if it leads to subordination of any race or if it restricts fair and equal access to the gospel message for all.²³ Likewise in the context of HUP church gathering, particularly since it does not visibly represent the eschatological reality of God's people in Christ, which is heterogeneous in nature. We must consider whether the true nature of the church is being undermined by its expression on earth in the existence of HUP churches since God had purposed from creation (Eph 3:9,11) that the gentiles join Israel in the sharing in his promises (Eph 3:6) of salvation.

Christ's redemptive act was purposed for reconciliation both vertically between God and laterally between man and man in order to joined as one man in Christ and to be indwelled by his Spirit (Eph 2:11-22), a shared experience as a multiracial church community

²¹ Lim, D 'A Theological Reflection on the 'homogeneous unit principle'. B.D. Issues in Theology Paper. MTC, 2003. p.6

²² a tricky and contested term which I have undertaken to mean here an environment tailored to invite and reach the unbeliever with the gospel message

²³ Another danger is that its implementation may simply inculcate a forgetfulness that out-group people exist and so it becomes an unspoken system of never having anything to do with them (courtesy of AJC)

experiencing diversity in unity. Critics of HUP argue that church across cultural barriers is an essential expression of this eschatological reality²⁴ and that HUP rebuilds the barriers that Jesus has destroyed.²⁵ The HUP church gathering can also communicate a message of disunity to the unbeliever in its midst. This is potentially confusing if Christians intentionally group themselves into units that reflect the culture and life-style of just one HU without acknowledging the reality of their grouping.

SHOULD EVANGELISTS ADOPT THE HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE?

There is considerable debate amongst Christians on whether evangelists should adopt HUP from both a theological and cultural perspective. We have determined theologically that racism is immoral and that HUP must be regulated carefully to avoid its decline into racist abuse. We have determined that God's eschatological design for his people is a shared experience of reconciliation as a multiracial church community experiencing diversity in unity. We also submit that 'the ethical starting point for this thesis is the Christian law of love,²⁶ since integrity and love are the foundations on which all methods of evangelism should be built.²⁷ On the basis of God's selection criteria for his people and on the basis of a love ethic, we must ensure that any employment of HUP excludes racism.

Contrary to Padilla's conclusion that the 'use of HUP for church growth has no biblical warrant'²⁸, Steele provides an overview of the *theological* warrant for adopting HUP. He argues that the unity Christians share is based on relationship with Christ (Gal 3:28) rather than the makeup of any particular gathering, that Jesus' command to love (Matt 22:21) means that all ministries should maximise the *most* loving actions of evangelism and edification (Col 1:28) including HUP and that HUP is consistent with Paul's argument to 'become all things to all men' (1 Cor 9:19-23²⁹) in order to 'try to please everybody in every way' (1 Cor 10:32-33).³⁰

²⁴ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. 'The Pasadena Consultation: a colloquium on the Homogeneous Unit Principle'. (*Lausanne Occasional Papers* 1: 1978) p.194

²⁵ Foster, T.

²⁶ Wagner, C.P. 'How ethical is the homogeneous unit principle?' *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2 (Jan 1978): p.12

²⁷ Weber, T.P. p.383

²⁸ Padilla, C.R. 'The Unity of the church and the homogeneous unit principle' in *Exploring Church Growth*. (Edited by W.R. Shenk. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.) p.301

²⁹ 1 Cor 9:19-23 'Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.' (NIV)

³⁰ Steele, D. 'Consider whether and how ethnic and interest ministries can be conducted without denying the gospel' in *Thinking About the Homogeneous Unit Principle and Churches - CCSI Staff Conference Pamphlet*. (Edited by Raj Gupta. Unpublished.)

Whilst the practices of Jesus and the apostles cannot be prescriptive as support for HU³¹ there are clear biblically cited events that are consistent with it. The evangelistic strategies of the apostles in acts are adapted to suit their respective audiences - Stephen speaks to the Jews (Acts 7), Peter to the god-fearers (Acts 10) and Paul to the Greeks at Areopagus (Acts 17), each apostle adapting to meet their distinct HU. The pastoral issue arising in the Jerusalem church as Greek widows were overlooked in Acts 6:1-6 led to the apostles appointing deacons from same HU. From 'AD 34 we see two distinct branches of Christianity – Hebraic Christianity and Hellenist Christianity.'³²

There are numerous *cultural* warrants for adopting HUP. These include McGavran's paradigm highlights citing the propensity of men to become Christians without crossing cultural barriers. McGavran also uses his *marvellous mosaic* model to contrast the western pursuit of individual experience with *people movements*, which can bring whole races or castes to the gospel. He cites massive growth under Christ once his word has touched a people group and as they respond in cultural transformation.³³ Cultural critics of HUP claim that historically 'it was precisely the heterogeneous, multiethnic nature of the church which made an impact on the divided Roman world and led to the growth of the Christian movement'³⁴ whilst advocates of HUP argue that the initiatives are simply the 'best way' since they tend to be more effective and grow faster.³⁵ The latter also assert that since every church is to some extent homogeneous, HUP churches are inevitable³⁶ and thus acceptable³⁷. Nevertheless, in the light of our desire to maintain a Christian ethic, any culturally consequentialist approach for the adoption of HUP must be tempered with the application of biblical theology.

SHOULD THE HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE BE EXTENDED INTO CHURCHES?

Paul was consistent in his application of the 1 Corinthians 9 argument in adopting cultural practices necessary for unbelievers to receive the gospel but insisted that there should be no barrier between unbelievers and the gospel other than confession, repentance and faith (Rom 10:9, 2:4-5, 3:22). He admonishes Peter for subjecting gentiles to Jewish practices (Gal 2:11-21), demonstrating that he does not have expectations for their immediate

³¹ Steele, D. p.8

³² Veron, Z. citing Paul Barnett in 'Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity'

³³ McGavran, D.A. '*Understanding*', pp.43-53

³⁴ Smith, D. 'The church growth principles of Donald McGavran'. *Transformation* 2 No 2 (1985) p.25

³⁵ McGavran, D.A. 'Priority of Ethnicity'. Pages 268-73 in *The Evangelical Review of Theology* 7 no 2, 1983. p.271; Veron, Z.

³⁶ Though ironically Vaughn cites a 1981 census which confirms that the Anglican church already attracts a 98% homogeneous group of white Anglo-Saxon protestants born in English speaking countries

³⁷ Veron, Z.

assimilation into a church culture. Does this mean that the HUP application should be maintained in the life of the newly formed church?

Shead argues against this idea on the basis of the doctrine of the church. He asserts that the goal of God's mission is the heavenly gathering of the multitude of nations (described in Rev 7:9), the church as the gathering of Gods people with each other around Christ. The gospel reconciles people and removes all barriers to fellowship and the resultant church is 'diversity united'. He contends that the church thus needs to confer *visible* unity³⁸ to world (John 17, Eph 3:2-10) because this is the *distinctive* witness of a body that has come through power of Christ, acting by its very nature as a proclamation of the gospel.³⁹ Whilst he recognises the validity of employing the 1 Corinthians 9 argument, he contends that this should not be in any way at odds with the church.⁴⁰

If we accept Shead's proposition for the nature of the church then it is theologically inappropriate to extend HUP from evangelistic initiatives into church gatherings. If we remain unconvinced then the following theological criteria that need to be considered in the application of HUP to a church gathering:

The decision to apply HUP to a church will be driven by our subjective hermeneutic and we must take this into account. A HUP church initiative must be tempered with protection against favouritism and discrimination in relation to the unbeliever who visits (James 2:4) – the outsider must feel welcome. Gatherings must overcome their propensity to discriminate linguistically and remain intelligible (1 Cor 14:22-25), delivering a meaningful communication of gospel so that the unbeliever is given opportunity to repent.⁴¹ Opportunities must be created within a HUP church to encourage learning amongst a broader range of people (whilst acknowledging the reality of language barriers), creating an environment in which the younger can learn from the mature (Titus 2:4). A gathering must proactively protect itself against the adoption of ungodly aspects of their HU.⁴² It is also necessary to examine existing HUP churches and determine whether a retrieval ethic is required for those gatherings that have already compromised the heterogeneity of the church and allowed racism to set in.

CONCLUSION

³⁸ Likewise Padilla, C.R. 'The Nature and Mission of the Church: The Case for Unity'. *The Evangelical Review of Theology*. 7 no 2, 1983. p.248

³⁹ Shead., S. p.5

⁴⁰ Shead, S. pp.3-6

⁴¹ Shead, S. p.6

⁴² Steele, D. p.10

According to our definitions, HUP is a discriminatory strategy employed on occasion by the evangelist on the basis of racial discrimination. HUP in itself is not a racist strategy in the sense of our contemporary definition for racism since there is no subordination or oppression of any racial group. Indeed the Christian ethic compels us to reject and abhor racism. The statement that evangelists who employ the HUP are racist is not valid.

Nonetheless, it is likely that the debate will continue indefinitely. One significant reason for this is that advocates and critics of HUP often disagree on account of their respective cultural and theological grounds for their positions since to some extent 'the homogeneous unit principle is the pragmatic strategy stemming from observed realities of missionary work, whilst its criticism is theological in basis and the two different methodologies do not engage.'⁴³ Yet as we have seen there are advocates and critics on both theological and cultural grounds.

In conclusion, HUP is a helpful tool for evangelism that allows us to reach racial groups that may indeed otherwise be reluctant to embrace the gospel. Whilst it remains an effective strategy for evangelism, there is a point at which those attracted to the HU become believers and need to move from the milk to meat (1 Cor 3:2). HUP is a clear and proven method for evangelism⁴⁴ but we need to question whether the resulting HUP church should remain homogeneous. HUP 'should not be interpreted as expounding the ideal way that Christians should relate to one another, but the way in which believers become followers of Jesus Christ and responsible members of his church.'⁴⁵ The evangelist should seek heterogeneity as soon as possible so that the 'community' based church becomes a 'very powerful demonstration of the unitive power of the gospel.'⁴⁶ The alternative is to recognise that the HUP is employed solely for the evangelistic para-church, so that the members who come to Christ are subsequently encouraged to join heterogeneous churches.

Other challenges to the employment of HUP include its not becoming a preventative to our willingness to reach and integrate different groups within the population for the gospel. We need to regulate the employment of HUP strategy so that it does not become a tool to hide a desire to reject the reconciliation of believers found in Christ and we must be careful to avoid the promulgation of racist ideologies. There is great potential for HUP to be manipulated as a tool to excuse racism and segregation in the church contrary to Christ's

⁴³ Wasdell, D. 'The Homogeneous Unit Debate: Its Value Orientation and Changes' *Evangelical Quarterly* 87:3 (1987), p.226

⁴⁴ Galea, Poulos, Steele, Vaughn and Veron all cite convincing examples of successful HUP based evangelistic initiatives and churches

⁴⁵ Wagner, C.P. *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) p.168

⁴⁶ Shead, S. p.10

mission for reconciliation. 'We must never let the *reason* for our meeting be our homogeneity. We [must] meet together because God draws us together from every language, tribe and race to encourage each other as the day draws nearer.'⁴⁷ A HUP church must also proactively seek to embrace and involve Christians from outside the HU so as not to be defined by their *exclusion* of other HUs.

The HUP needs to be recognised as accommodation to weaknesses and prejudices of the unregenerate mind. It is an effective tool in response to a sinful desire for homogeneity. The homogeneous unit is helpful for evangelism, the heterogeneous unit best reflects the eschatological reality of Christ's church and is best for the edification of all believers.

⁴⁷ Poulos, A.

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