



URBAN CURRENT

The new tilt

I stared at the page a long time. I stared in disbelief. I was holding a major Christian magazine (not the *Tribune* — I said major, not the best). I was looking at a double-page ad for a huge conference to be held in Florida. It spoke of winning souls. It trumpeted global effort. It had a big graphic with faces of every ethnicity possible. Below the graphic were the names and pictures of 42, yes, 42 speakers. From among the 42 speakers I could only find 6 who seemed to be of a different ethnicity than white American. I was stunned. I saved that ad. I scrutinized it once again as I prepared to write this column. I clipped to it an ad from a denominational paper for another conference. This one was sponsored by a leading church in the Bible belt. Its focus was all about being innovative and missional. Twenty-two speakers, yes 22, every one of them white. I have to tell you I don't ever see 22 white guys in one place in my day-to-day life. I couldn't help wondering what world this group represented, certainly not the real world.

Neither of these conference ads was a reflection of the vision found in The Book. When the Word was made flesh, the greatest cross-cultural mission ever, it modeled the mindset and the heart every New Testament church should have. Leaving glory. Leaving comfort zones. Going to the gritty and the gory. Jesus left no room for confusion. He said He wanted His house called a house of prayer for all nations. The Acts 1:8 command is to go to Samaria (close but different) as well as “the uttermost parts” (different and far). Acts 2 makes clear what kind of called-out assembly God has in mind. In Acts 10, the Holy Spirit pushes Peter out of his cultural paradigm into the paradigm of God's plan. The church in Antioch had a leadership team that appears to

have had its origins in three continents.

The evolving reality of America's urban centers in the 1900s predicted the multicultural flavoring of American society. Back in the 80s and 90s, we had already gone from Ford to Honda, Richardson to Jordan, Chancellor to Chung, GE to Sony, Cleavers to Cosbys, Good Humor to Haagen-Dazs, and Kodak to Fuji.

Charles Barkley said “You know the world is off tilt when the best rapper is a white guy, the best golfer is a black guy, the tallest basketball player is Chinese, and Germany doesn't want to go to war.”

No, Charles, this is the new tilt.

Ray Bakke points out, in *A Biblical Word for an Urban World*, that 80 million Chinese live outside China. One million Japanese live in Sao Paulo, Brazil. France used to rule 46 countries; all 46 are now represented in Paris. Marseille with a 2-million-person population is 31 percent African. Amsterdam is 20 percent Muslim. Britain ruled 52 nations in its colonial heyday. All 52 are now in London. The U.S. is the largest Irish nation in the world, the largest Scandinavian nation in the world, the largest Jewish nation in the world, and the second-largest African nation in the world.

It's important to remember this is not a matter of color and ethnicity only. Academics, mobile home park folks, skaters, artists, single-parent families, bikers, etc... may be your color but not your culture.

We read our sociology texts through theological lenses. We can't call ourselves biblical if we're out of touch with the biblical vision of the New Testament church. It's not very good stewardship on our part to be Jesus' mouth, hands, and feet in the earth, to deny the statistics that tell us what is going on in our nation and in our

world. We are not in touch with reality if we are pretending the current trends don't exist.

Having lived this thing for almost a generation now, I can tell you a culturally diverse church is a powerful, visible witness to the world. While I was writing this piece ABC7 News called wanting permission to shoot video during our Easter services. The caller commented she had heard a lot about our church and how multicultural it was. Some years back we were under attack by radicals. John Leo wrote of one of the demonstrations in *US News and World Report*. “The most common chant was ‘Racist, sexist, anti-gay / Born-again bigots go away.’ The ‘racist’ charge is particularly weird: The Armitage congregation is roughly 30 percent black, 30 percent Hispanic and 40 percent white. Somewhat confused, the woman with the bullhorn tried to lead the crowd in singing ‘Little Boxes’ a song about suburban conformity popularized by Pete Seeger in the 1960s. It was, without a doubt, the least appropriate song anyone could have sung about this diverse urban congregation.”

As well, a multicultural church is an educational opportunity for everyone involved. It's a reminder of our need to live beyond our little box. It can reach out to all nations in unique ways.

It's not a mystery — the gospel is supra-cultural. Our outreach is cross-cultural. The result — our church is multicultural.

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