



# Understanding and Embracing Intercultural Unity

A position paper of Ethnic America Network (EAN)

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to explain how intentional, intercultural unity among God’s people is both a natural and expected outcome of salvation. Each member of the Body of Christ is a new creation and thus given a new name and a new family. This kingdom family consists of believers from every culture of the world and brings with it the expectation of unity while honoring diversity.

All of God’s people and every gathering of His church must cross the boundaries of culture and make intentional efforts to move toward one another as we all move toward Christ. This is a lifestyle foreign to the unbeliever and unnatural even to the redeemed. We affirm, however, that it should be the goal of all believers to embrace and interact with one another in unity as an expression of kingdom life.

In order to avoid confusion in our terminology, it is important to explain that we use the phrase ‘intercultural’ to emphasize the reciprocal, two-way bridging (thus, inter-) between two or more cultural groups. We prefer this to “cross-cultural” (which could denote one-way relationship) as well as “multi-cultural” (which could imply mutual co-existence without relationship). Thus, as we use the phrase, intercultural unity is the supernatural, interdependent relationship between believers of different cultures made possible only through the reconciling work of Christ on the cross.

Having said this, the intention of this paper is not to suggest that there is a set template or pattern that all members of the Body of Christ must use to best express kingdom life. Part of the beauty of all believers intentionally interacting is the diversity that enhances fellowship and creates unique ways to unite. The remainder of this paper will paint a word picture of the character of kingdom life graciously conveyed through the common fellowship of all God’s

people. This picture is one of a Spirit-led journey toward heaven where those of every people, tribe, tongue, and nation will finally lay aside all that divides and with one heart and mind serve God together as true kingdom worshippers.

## **THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1. If we belong to Jesus, then we belong to those who belong to Jesus.**

Several biblical themes converge to support this rather simple but profound statement. The first is that we belong to each other because we were brought together by Christ when He redeemed us and made it possible to know peace with the Father. This act of reconciling makes each believer, and all believers, one in Christ with no distinction (Gal. 3:28).

Another essential theme that supports this statement is that the nature of God Himself communicates togetherness. In essence, God is a unity of three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the prime example of that which He desires for us, the unity and unhindered relationship of different members.

Too often we confuse unity with “all parts being the same.” Unity does not mean “all the same” (that would be “uniformity”) rather it involves belonging together in spite of distinctions. Without the creative beauty of diversity in all its forms, unity loses its power.

The overwhelming wonder is that, at Creation, humanity was brought into the inner circle of relationship with the triune God. He desires the companionship of humanity. In the tragedy of the Fall, sin corrupted the relationship that man had enjoyed with the Creator. At that time, humanity lost intimate, daily fellowship with God. We can now see that God’s complete intention through our redemption is to “bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph. 1:10 NIV). In other words, God will restore all things together as they were originally intended to be.

## **2. Our unity reflects the loving relationship of the Triune God.**

With the door of reconciliation between humanity and God open and freely offered, we find that the same calling of Christ (the ministry of reconciliation) is now our calling as well. We are to love and welcome into community all those who respond to Christ's call, even our enemies. In Christ, we are to imitate His example by personally and corporately reflecting in our human relationships the love which the Father, Son, and Spirit share. Therefore, division and separation between believers is a rejection of what Christ died to establish (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Refusal to embrace reconciled human relationships with all people regardless of culture is to reject the fullness of all that God intends to restore.

## **3. The church embodies the new humanity.**

Ethnic and cultural differences are traits to embrace and enjoy because they aid in understanding God and bring glory to Him. The problem arises when these cultural characteristics become so much a part of how we see ourselves that we start to believe they are what truly identify us as humans. But, our true identity rests in Christ. When we forget that Christ is our absolute identity and we make our ethnic distinctive a priority over the cause of Christ as the reason for our gathering, they become the source of all manner of hostility and conflict.

We must never forget that Satan promotes and delights in division, separation, segregation, alienation and enmity between people and cultures is a legacy of sin, the inheritance received from Adam; love, redemption, forgiveness, community, reconciliation and unity are the legacy of life, the inheritance we receive from Christ. Therefore, God has intentionally designed the Church, the Body of Christ, as the embodiment of *perfect human community*, "*members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the*

*chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit”* (Eph. 2:19-22 NIV). Unity in Christ *transcends* all other identities and affinities and their inevitable divisions. The wonder of the kingdom is not just that there are believers from every culture. The true wonder is that when those from every culture come together as the church, mutual love replaces the walls of division (2 Cor. 5:14 NIV).

#### **4. Unity is a testimony of God’s love to a divided society.**

In John 17, Jesus prayed three separate ways for one truth to characterize His disciples and us who would later believe. With the Cross before Him, Jesus turned His heart toward each follower then and now with the desire that all of us would be one, just as He and the Father are one (John 17:21-23). This visible oneness among believers is a testimony to who God is and to the salvation He offers.

The world is not necessarily impressed when people who are ethnically and culturally alike love each other. What is strange to the world is when the church chooses to live as a community that looks and acts differently by embracing all Christ’s followers as members of one united family. The church represents the restoration of human community as God intended. Is it not sobering to realize that the credibility of our witness of Christ rests on the beauty of Christian love and togetherness?

#### **5. Intercultural unity is a mandate to pursue.**

Given the nature and extent of intercultural unity and its tie to God as the supreme example, we must be intentional about our obligation to work out this model in everyday life. A picture of kingdom togetherness cannot serve as some cosmic concept that fits comfortably in a personal belief system but never becomes active on the front lines of life. Jesus prayed in John 17 that His

followers would be one in order to experience what God enjoys and also to display that oneness so the world would see God. Jesus effectively embodied and displayed this oneness on a daily basis, but when the Church does not display oneness, we demonstrate a false view of God.

Unfortunately, a common response to other cultural distinctions, whether in Christ or not, is indifference, which says, “I/we don’t care about you.” Those different from us then become the unconsidered masses, the generic “them.” Indifference is sin, because it is a direct refusal to actively love our brother and sister in Christ (or neighbor, or enemy). *“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother”* (1 John 4:20-21). The joy and opportunity of intercultural unity envisions the day when our community in Christ so fully reflects God’s love that there is no longer a “them,” only an “us.”

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Given this goal of intercultural unity within the kingdom of God, several statements are helpful in understanding this journey toward intentional belonging.

1. In diverse contexts the demographic makeup and history of a congregation tends to communicate an unspoken message to its people and the public about its attitude toward those of other cultures. Aside from the expressed purpose of worship and spiritual formation, churches tacitly communicate that either diversity is important or separation is important.
2. Christian fellowships that are organized according to economic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, generational, worship preference, or lifestyle distinctions are incomplete expressions of kingdom reality. While homogeneous gathering (in whatever expression)

has a place, timing and trajectory, it is a *waypoint* on the kingdom journey, not the destination. Furthermore, in the North American context, the term “ethnic” tends to refer to non-majority, or visible minority, populations. Such perceptions and labels cause us to forget that we are all “ethnic” in a biblical and anthropological sense. [We *do not* mean to imply that there is only one viable, biblical model of church expression. Rather, we are stating and affirming that the character of interdependent belonging in the Body of Christ obligates us to move toward each other in intercultural relationship.]

3. Cultural distinctions not only give texture and depth to the Body of Christ, but they give texture and depth to the whole Christian experience. Language and culture are assets that enrich, not barriers to avoid.
4. We are incomplete without each other. The church should not accept the name “Body of Christ” without its essential character of intercultural unity. A body has many distinct parts to which all cultures contribute. It is a great tragedy when congregations demonstrate through their networks that they think they are complete within their own affinity group. This reveals a belief that such churches don’t feel a need for those who are unlike themselves. In contrast, Christ challenges us to love one another and consider others more important than ourselves. Besides, is any member of the Body not needed for the edification of the rest of the Body?
5. Intercultural relationships and unity lead us into a new understanding of who God is, drawing us ever closer to Him. As our brothers and sisters of other cultures reflect who God is in a way which is unique to their context, the body of Christ grows stronger and is better able to proclaim Christ to the world.

6. We must seek to embrace and hear with empathy the stories of others including stories of their culture, history, perspective, and even their weaknesses.
7. As believers become aware of the need for intercultural unity and seek to actively pursue progress in becoming more unified, they are better equipped to defeat long-standing patterns of separation. These patterns may include the assumption that no other culture can contribute anything of value, which directly undermines the biblical expectation of interdependence.
8. Every assembly should anticipate the blessing of sustained friendship across cultures while cultivating intercultural skills and celebrating the destruction of hostility and enmity. The mere co-existence of ethnic congregations throughout the city does not approach the displayed unity of the Body of Christ envisioned in the gospel.
9. Although language and tradition are often sources of the lack of intercultural unity in many long-standing congregations, it must be affirmed that unity is the goal which becomes realistic through inter-generational vision and faith.

It is not enough to say that ‘hope for change lies with the next generation’ if the first generation doesn’t proactively cultivate such hope among the next. Even if the first generation is unable to make significant progress in intercultural fellowship, they must communicate to their children about the values and contributions of fellow believers from other cultures. Failure to do so creates a legacy of fear rather than a faith-filled desire for reconciliation and unity. It is the responsibility of first generation congregations to encourage the next generation forward and outward. By faith, through their words and the testimony of God’s kingdom design for reconciliation in all relationships, the journey will continue toward oneness.

## CONCLUSION

Separation, segregation, and division are the grievous stories of humanity attempting to compensate for the loss of meaning found only in God. These sad stories tell of humanity under the headship of Adam not that of Christ. Intercultural unity, the journey of intentional belonging, however, is a picture of God's original and continuing intention for creation. It is the how-could-this-ever-be "mystery" which was "made known" through the revelation of Christ. Through the gospel of the Cross all who believe become "members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Jesus Christ" (Eph. 3:2-6 NIV). It is a return to who we were created to be.

In summary, this paper seeks to highlight the prophetic call of Christ that *we would be one*, and to invite everyone in Christ to journey together in order to understand the full implications of what this means.

***This is a position paper of Ethnic America Network (EAN) [www.EthnicAmerica.com](http://www.EthnicAmerica.com)  
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