




# Missional Journal

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### The Founder Effect

In the last issue of *Missional Journal* I discussed theological hospitality as a way of pursuing the unity that Scripture enjoins upon the followers of Jesus. In this article I will reflect on the *missional* importance of theological hospitality.

### Expanding the Gene Pool

The field of genetics supplies a helpful analogy supporting the pursuit of unity among believers. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century scientists described the "founder effect" which is the loss of genetic variation that occurs when a small number of individuals from a larger population establish a new group. The founder effect increases the likelihood that the group will develop distinctive, often undesirable, genetic traits.

The Amish community in North America is a well-known example of the founder effect. Two members of the original 18th century Amish migration to Pennsylvania possessed the recessive gene for Ellis-van Creveld syndrome (dwarfism). Because the Amish have been closed to outsiders for most of their history, the gene pool is highly inbred, and the community shows a much higher than normal incidence of EVC. Ongoing medical research among the Amish has surfaced other rare disorders linked to the same founder effect.

Let's think about this in terms of the church. Estimates vary widely on the total number of distinct ecclesiastic bodies in North America. The 2008 *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* falls on the conservative side and lists a mere 224 distinct church traditions in North America! [1] Of course the tally grows significantly if we count the small splinters from larger or older theological traditions, or the many independent churches that sometimes function in relative isolation from other churches. The large number of traditions, the frequency with which they have been shaped by a single dominant leader or by a particular hermeneutical perspective, and their tendency toward insularity, ensure that many American churches have been touched in some way by the theological equivalent of the founder effect. In this environment, minor eccentricities can become central beliefs and practices, with a resulting suspicion toward those who do not share the same distinctives.

Thus some believers are convinced that the only biblically

responsible way to read Genesis 1 is within the framework of a literal six-day creation. Some advocates of a pre-tribulation rapture suggest that other eschatological approaches are the slippery slope to theological liberalism. Low-church communions (sometimes) question the authenticity of high-church formality, and liturgically-minded believers easily return the favor by accusing non-liturgical groups of superficiality in worship. And so it goes: the more we divide, the more genetic aberrations appear and the health of the body declines!

Is there an alternative beyond simply giving up our distinctive commitments and submerging ourselves in a bland soup of sentimentality? I think there is. Certainly no total solution is possible before Jesus returns, but that doesn't mean we do nothing. To follow our metaphor a little further, what we can do is expand the gene pool of our churches and congregations. In the science of genetics the opposite of inbreeding depression (the founder effect) is out breeding enhancement. In the latter case the introduction of new genetic material maximizes inherited strengths and minimizes weaknesses.

When churches consciously move outside self-imposed boundaries of "us" to embrace "them," a climate is created that the Holy Spirit uses to strengthen God's people for mission. What may strike us at first as dangerous or threatening is actually the road to vitality and health.

### **Healthy Self-Awareness**

A significant component of growing to maturity is realistically assessing who we are: our personality type, our emotional intelligence, our intellectual abilities, our passions and predilections, and our strengths and weaknesses. Of course, left to ourselves we are unlikely to make a very accurate assessment. Much to our discomfort, we discover that others frequently have a different (and sometimes disturbing) perspective on our identity. Healthy self-awareness usually lies in some combination of our own insights and those of others, particularly from people who have earned our respect and trust.

It seems to me that a parallel self-awareness is needed among the various congregations, denominations, and theological traditions in the body of Christ. At present many groups lack mature self-awareness because they are too in-grown. Too much time is spent in narcissistic self-contemplation. If the only people I really converse with--as opposed to "argue with"--are folks who think like me, I soon lose touch with reality: I may assume strength where there is weakness, spirituality where there is carnality, or wisdom where there is foolishness.

This brings us back to the importance of what John Armstrong calls "missional-ecumenism."<sup>[2]</sup> We need to recognize the essential value and importance of those who are not "us" so that we learn to welcome "them." Of course, as a result we *will* be changed. This can be frightening, especially if we believe a rhetoric that tells us change is *only* dangerous.

Let me illustrate the point with a recent important work by Soong-Chan Rah of North Park Seminary in Chicago. In his book *The Next Evangelicalism* professor Rah launches a firm and sometimes

angry critique of what he calls "the White, western captivity" of the evangelical church in America. The nub of the problem he identifies is that while the largest demographic expansion of evangelicalism today is within non-white, ethnic communities, the power brokers and spokespersons for evangelicals in North America remain almost exclusively white. He writes: "I grow weary of seeing Western, white expressions of the Christian faith being lifted up while failing to see nonwhite expressions of faith represented in meaningful ways in American evangelicalism." [3]

I suspect that many of us in the white segment of the church will respond with something like, "What's the problem?" For most of us racial prejudice is not a part of our self-awareness, either as individuals or congregations. Certainly none of us *wants* to be racist, but being part of the majority culture easily deceives us into thinking that the way we appropriate and practice the gospel is the way of right-thinking, unbiased people.

Rah disagrees: "The best way to understand the full complexity of the gospel message is to learn from others who are seeing the story from a different angle. . . . It is the arrogance of Western, white captivity to assume that one's own cultural point of view is the be all and end all of the gospel story. Every seat has its advantages and disadvantages, and it is imperative for the entire global community of believers to learn from one another in order to more fully understand the depth of the character of God." [4]

Now the reason I cite professor Rah is not to argue that all of his perceptions are true--although I think many of them are. The point is rather that we need to broaden the theological-cultural-ethnic gene pool of our churches. Our self-perception needs to be balanced by the views of those who have heard the one gospel in a different context from ours and have identified and appropriated truths we have neglected.

### **Healthy Interdependence**

The church in the West faces enormous challenges engaging effectively with the mission of God. The call is for all hands on deck. In the words of the Apostle, "Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. . . . The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'" (1 Cor. 12: 14, 21).

Under the structures of Christendom many churches and denominations in the West functioned from positions of power, privilege, and wealth. There were gains but there were many losses. Now Christendom is collapsing and many of the assumptions about ministry that Christendom supported are also collapsing. As the church at large finds itself more on the margins, we have an opportunity to learn from other believers who have long been on the margins themselves--Christians who live in circumstances of oppression, poverty, or cultural dislocation. In fact, says Paul, "the parts of the body that *seem* to be weaker"--note the italics!--"are indispensable" (1 Cor. 12:22).

I believe the resources needed for the task are present in the gospel as God's people learn to value all parts of the body of Christ. However, this learning can only take place as we move into a deeper expression of the unity of the one body. Without that we will remain spiritually handicapped--disconnected or deformed members of the

body--incapable of fulfilling the high calling of the gospel.

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So missional-ecumenism promotes spiritual health, which in turn improves our effectiveness as kingdom representatives. In the next article we will consider the importance of aligning the message lived with the message proclaimed.



[1] Eileen W. Lindner, *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* (Abingdon, 2008), p. 58.

[2] <http://www.biblical.edu/images/stories/faculty/vol4no1.pdf>.

[3] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism* (InterVarsity, 2009), p. 16. Rah identifies three primary manifestations of the western captivity of the church: individualism, consumerism, and racism.

[4] Rah, p. 136.