

Pluralism and Nationhood

Bill Berends

As the world is increasingly moving towards a “global village” the question naturally arises whether there is still room for the ethnic and national divisions that have marked the world for most of its recorded history. The way this question is answered differs greatly in theory and practice. On the one hand we see the need for greater unity acknowledged in a push for wider alliances that encompass larger parts of humanity. But since such alliances are inevitably based on regional, political, economic, ideological, cultural, religious or other such identity markers, they also serve to sharpen the issues that divide them from alliances based on different criteria.

Within national boundaries we have witnessed a similar ambiguity. On the one hand many nations have adopted a policy of multiculturalism to make room for different ethnic identities. On the other hand we have recently witnessed the breakup of a number of larger states that incorporated different ethnic groups, leading to the formation of smaller nations based on ethnic identity. The former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia are just some examples. Even where countries have adopted a policy of multiculturalism we find this is increasingly being questioned under the threat of terrorism and fears about loss of cultural identity. The tightening of immigration policies and opposition to customs that emphasise differences, like the wearing of a *burka*, highlight an increasing antagonism to multicultural policies.

In the light of this ambivalent situation it is right that we should ask where God’s word is leading us on this question. Should Christians promote a greater world unity through the loosening of national, ethnic and cultural identities, or should national identities be encouraged as upholding a divine design? Can the unity humans find in Christ be translated into political, ethnic and cultural unities in this present world? Or are we to oppose such

unity on the understanding that any worldly unity would be one of worldly powers, while Christ's Kingdom is not of this world?

We will explore these questions from the familiar triad expressed in the biblical meta-narrative of creation, fall, redemption.

Creation

The first thing we learn from the creation account is that it makes no distinctions in status between people – all human beings are created in the image of God, both male and female (Gen. 1:27). There is good reason to believe that in this claim the Bible is unique, as other human origin accounts typically identify some people as being special. This was certainly true of the Egyptians, where Moses had been schooled before God revealed to him the creation account he recorded in the book of Genesis (Acts 7:22). In Egypt the humans singled out for special attention were Pharaoh and his house, who were pictured as uniquely descending from the gods. In the Shiva-Kali myth of Hinduism Shiva's forceful control of Kali is the basis for male superiority over females.

Other “origin stories”¹ single out particular ethnic groups, typically that of the story teller, as the true, or a divinely favoured, people group. A common ploy is to identify the group as the first-born or true descendents of the god(s). In such cases the word denoting the tribal identity frequently translates as “human” or “person” (e.g. the New Zealand word *Maori*). In more extreme cases other people groups are pictured as less than human, as in the Inuit myths which identify non-Eskimos as the product of bestiality. While it would be premature to conclude that every creation story outside of the Bible fails to recognise human equality, so far my own reading of African, South-Sea island and other origin myths has not yet shown an exception.²

¹ I will use the term “origin stories” rather than “creation myths” to avoid confusion with the widely held position that the Bible presents yet another creation myth.

² A helpful discussion of other origin stories circulating around the time Moses penned the Genesis account can be found in Rikki Watts, “Making Sense of Genesis 1”, *Stimulus* 4, 2004: 1-12.

Here we should note that the evolution theory is trying hard to avoid the logical conclusion that fitter races should replace weaker ones, or that the stronger sex should be allowed to dominate the weaker one. We may be thankful that the historical influence of Christianity continues to have some lingering influence on this score, although we must acknowledge that many Christians did not follow the biblical teaching on this point (e.g. in *apartheid* and sexism). Mother Earth pantheism, rather than correcting this situation, leans towards the exaltation of the female sex, mythically expressed as the replacement of Pisces with Aquarius.

Historically nations were formed along lines of physical descent, with tribes and clans finding unity in common ancestors (cf. Gen. 10). In many cultures carefully remembered genealogies ensured tribal distinctiveness. But as tribal groups grew in size, and genealogies were forgotten, it was the culture itself that gave identity to the group. Larger people groups, or nations, found their unity and distinctiveness in culture, in terms of language, customs, economy, politics, religion and the like.³ Though conquests and treaties sometimes led to nations and empires that transcended cultural identities, we must look at the role of culture if we want to understand what is involved in ethnic identity.

Traditionally theologians have traced culture to a *cultural mandate* given at creation. There is no agreement as to whether this mandate is found in Adam's creation in the divine image (Gen. 1:28), or his appointment to develop and take care of the garden (Gen. 2:15), or both. However, there are problems when we try to explain the human disposition to culture in terms of these passages alone. While the accounts do make mention of cultural tasks, in themselves they do not cover all of what is commonly understood as comprising culture. The *cultural mandate* really only covers man's dealings with the rest of creation, areas like agriculture, horticulture, apiculture, aquaculture, arboriculture, and the like.⁴ Secondly, they speak of a situation

³ Political entities have also sought unity in geographical proximity alone. This typifies the situation in many former colonies, which often continue to be plagued by tribal and cultural divides.

⁴ The word *culture* is usually traced to Cicero's translation of the Greek *paideia*, meaning education or perfection, into *cultura anima*, the cultivation of the mind. Until E.B. Tylor wrote

before the fall, and this raises the question how this applies to postdiluvian humanity. While we will leave the latter question for later discussion, we will here note that God's mandate to Adam in Genesis 1 and 2 differs considerably from the mandate he gave to fallen humanity in chapter 9.

We do better to base the human cultural drive on their creation in the image of God, and not just the mandate that flows out of it. Culture is a dynamic reality that flows out of humanity's created nature: humans are cultural because they image God. Earlier theologians mostly defined mankind's image of God, or *imago Dei*, in terms of qualities that set them apart from the rest of animate creation – their spirituality, rationality, morality and the like. This approach is sometimes called the *substantialist*⁵ understanding, in that it understands the image to exist in some part of humanity's makeup or substance. While this helped clarify HOW mankind was uniquely able to participate in culture, it did not explain WHY they should do so.

Here the *functionalist* perception of the *imago Dei* gave more direction. It sharpened the view that man was created for culture by stressing his task to represent God in creation. One who defended this position was Von Rad. Pointing out that it was the custom of Ancient Near Eastern monarchs to erect images of themselves in territories they laid claim to, he concluded:

... the text speaks less of the nature of God's image than of its purpose. There is less said about the gift itself than about the task. This then is sketched most explicitly: domination in the world, especially over the animals. This commission to rule is not considered as belonging to the definition of God's image, but its consequence, i.e. that for which man is capable because of it.⁶

If this approach helped explain why humans participate in culture, it still tended to see man's cultural gift mainly in terms of man's task towards the rest of creation. There is no room here for such cultural pursuits as sport, the

his *Primitive Culture* (1871) the word culture denoted "the pursuit of total perfection", Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869.

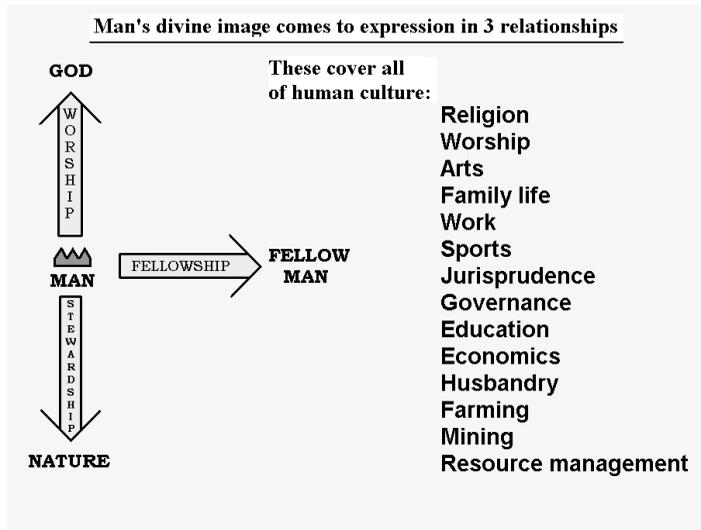
⁵ The terms *substantialist*, *functionalist* and *relationalist* have been used to describe three approaches to understanding the *imago Dei* or divine image. For a fuller treatment of these positions see Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? : Human uniqueness in science and theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, chap. 3.

⁶ Gerard Von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*, trans. John H. Mark, London: SCM Press, 1972, 59.

arts, jurisprudence, music, worship or religion. Here the *relationalist* position is more helpful, because it shows the cultural task to be wider than developing and looking after creation. It is also useful in explaining effects of the Fall on human cultural pursuits.

The relationalist position explains the *imago Dei* in terms of mankind's relationships to 1) the divine, 2) their fellow humans and 3) the rest of creation. These three relationships can be identified as *worship*, *fellowship* and *stewardship*, and they indeed embrace all of what can be subsumed under the term culture.

Each aspect of culture touches on these relationships, sometimes more in one area than the other, but often touching on two or more, like economics or corporate worship.



However, I believe it is incorrect to follow Barth in identifying the *imago Dei* itself as a relationship. The context in Gen. 1 shows that these three relationships should be regarded as a consequence of this image. In itself Barth's approach would only answer why humans are cultural beings, and not explain how they are cultural beings. Humans are made for relationships expressed in cultural forms, and are able to do so because they are substantially and functionally made in the image of God. In other words, God created humans in his image, giving them unique gifts that distinguish them from other creatures, in order that they might function in a threefold

relationship to himself, to each other and to the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:15-24).⁷

Thus mankind's creation in the image of God can be seen as the origin of and reason for mankind's cultural proclivity in all its diversity. Since cultural diversity is a crucial criterion defining nations and ethnic identity we now need to ask how such variety arose and why it led to divisions in the human family. For this we need to turn to the second stage of human history, occasioned by Adam's fall into sin.

The Fall

The tragic consequences of Adam's choice to give in to temptation are something we experience every day. As mentioned, the relational interpretation of the divine image is particularly helpful in understanding what happened to humankind on that fateful occasion. It shows us that Adam's relationship to God was severed. We first see this in his own attempt to hide from God, then in his banishment from the garden. He, his wife and his posterity are barred from direct communion with God and access to the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:23-24). Communion with God was still possible, but only through the mediating blood of sacrifices, which served to point to the mediatorial role of Christ (Gen. 4:3f.; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 10:19).

Without communion with God, Adam's other two relationships immediately begin to falter. Adam's rejoicing in Eve turns to shame and blame as he feels his nakedness and holds Eve culpable for all that took place. The same distortion in fellowship is found in Adam's children, culminating in anger, boasting, murder and sexual perversion (Gen. 4:8, 19, 23-24). Mankind's relationship to the rest of creation is similarly distorted. This is first witnessed in the cursing of the ground, where thorns and thistles make work difficult and burdensome (Gen. 3:17-19), then in the alteration in mankind's relationship to the animal world, as indicated in their utilisation of skins for clothing and meat for sustenance (Gen. 3:21; 4:4).

⁷ For a fuller argument identifying the threefold relationship as the intended consequence of God's creation of mankind in his image see W. Berends, "The Evaluation of Culture in Missiology", unpublished doctoral dissertation, Australian College of Theology, 1990, 161-69.

The full implications of mankind's changed status are brought out in God's covenant with Noah, which is sometimes identified as the Covenant of Common Grace.⁸ A comparison of this covenant with God's mandate to Adam shows the changed situation that came with sin: the command to multiply and fill the earth is repeated, but there is no mention of mankind's dominion over other creatures. Instead we find that a fear and dread of humans has come upon the animal world (Gen. 9:2).

To understand this change we need consider the words used to describe Adam's rule and dominion:

*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue (*kābāsh*) it. Rule (*rādāh*) over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Gen. 1:28).*

The words *kābāsh* and *rādāh* are very forceful words, rarely used in the rest of the OT, and then never in terms of mankind's relationship to nature. Rather they are used for inhuman relationships to fellow humans, as in conquest, oppression, slavery and rape (e.g. Lev. 26:17; 2 Chron. 28:10; Esther 7:8; Is. 14:6; Jer. 34:11; Ezek. 34:4). But they are also used in prophecies that speak of the Messianic rule (Num. 24:19; Ps. 110:2; cf. Zech 9:15), and are sometimes used of David and Solomon as messianic types (e.g. 2 Sam. 8:11; 1 Ki. 5:4). In view of that we have to ask whether Adam retained the mandate to subdue the earth and rule over creation, especially as there is no mention of this mandate in Genesis 9. Could it be that we must see this as a function usurped by Satan, "the prince of this world"? (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

The loss of humanity's rule and dominion after Adam's sin is not so much stated in itself as that it is implied by the many passages that speak of the restoration of this dominion. And this occurs on at least three levels.⁹ On the first level it is the dominion given to God's covenant people Israel, his first born Son (Ex. 4:22), when they conquer the promised land (note the *kābāsh* in Num. 32:22, 29; Josh. 18:1). On a second level this dominion is given to

⁸ Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, Overland Park: Two Age Press, 2000, 153.

⁹ See Dan G. McCartney "Ecce Homo, The Coming of the Kingdom as the Restoration of Human Vice Regency" in *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, 1994: 1-21.

Israel's king David, who conquered the surrounding nations (*kābāsh*, 2 Sam. 8:11, 1 Chron. 9:18), in fulfilment of Balaam's prophecy (*rādāh*, Num. 24:19). In some royal Psalms king David is identified as the new Man, the son of Adam who was the firstborn son of God (Ps. 2: 7; 80:17; 89:26f.; cf. 2 Sam. 7:14). He reigned from "God's throne" as his son and vice regent (Ps. 45:6; cf. Ps. 8:8f.; 110).

On the third level this dominion is given to Jesus Christ when he initiates the Kingdom of God. The Messiah came to defeat Satan and take up the throne that Adam lost. Thus the NT authors have no hesitation in applying the psalms that speak of David to David's Greater Son (Heb. 2:5-9; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:20-22). When Psalm 8 speaks of "man" (*'enôsh*), "the son of man" (*ben-'ādām*) who was created a little lower than the heavenly beings, we can apply it in its original covenant setting to God's people and David their king, but specifically we see it pointing to the reign of Christ Jesus.¹⁰ It is in him that we find the full image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) and it is through him that Christians are renewed in that image (Eph. 4:24; Col 3:10). Like Israel of old they are called to be a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). They will reign with Christ, and it is in that reign that we must look for the fulfilment of the creation mandate (2 Tim. 2:12; cf. Rev. 20:6).

All this does not mean that cultural development ended with the fall. On the contrary, the Bible depicts much of human cultural development as taking place among those who have forsaken the worship of God. It is in the sinful line of Cain that we find the inventors of tents, cattle herding, music and tools of bronze and iron (Gen. 4:20-22). Also after the flood it is the rebellious citizens of Babel who develop building techniques that allow them to build a tower reaching to heaven. God himself recognised their cleverness when he said: "*If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other*" (Gen. 11:6-7).

¹⁰ For a fuller outworking of this theme see Douglas J. Green, "Psalm 8: What is Israel's King that You Remember Him?" at <http://files.wts.edu/uploads/pdf/articles/mccartney-vicegerency.pdf>.

In this account of the scattering of the peoples at Babel we see the origin of the nations as these are listed in Gen. 10. The story also points to what is widely recognized as one of the most basic criteria for differentiating ethnic and national identities: language. We note that in his (common) grace God gave the different languages to different family groupings, thus bringing language divisions in line with a second important factor marking cultural and national distinctions: descent from common ancestors.

The fact that nations have their origin in God's direct intervention is acknowledged throughout Scripture. He gave to each nation its own territory (Deut. 32:8) and determined the time of its existence (Acts 17:26). This is not an incidental matter, but a major theme in the prophetic promises and threats directed to the nations. Nations that curbed the evil in their midst continued to receive blessings of territory and nationhood, but those that threw off all moral restraints, like the people before the Flood, or Sodom and Gomorrah, lost their right to existence (Gen. 6:6,7; 18:20ff.; cf. Jonah). The anthropomorphic threat that the land will "vomit out" any inhabitants that pollute or defile it points to the inevitability of such a fate (Lev. 18:26-28).¹¹

Isaiah's *Little Apocalypse* pictures the end of the earth in a very similar manner:

The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left (Is. 24:5-6).

We see the principle that national identity and territorial rights require obedience to God's laws worked out in some detail with regards to Israel's conquest of the promised land. Abraham is specifically told that he cannot in his time inherit the land because the inhabitants have not yet forfeited the right to live there (Gen. 15:16; cf. Deut. 9:4-6). Then, when Israel is given the land, they are warned that the same rule counts for them: disobedience will lead to expulsion from the land (Lev. 20:22). Indeed the Exile in Babylon

¹¹ Some tribal languages in Africa (e.g. *Zwa Tiv*) use the same expressions, suggesting that this may be an ancient concept.

was Israel's punishment for following the pagan practices of surrounding nations (Jer. 11; etc.).

For our purpose we note that nationhood and national identity are not, therefore, a right that is to be taken for granted, rather it is a privilege that God, in his common grace, bestows on those nations that uphold a moral order. Where nations forsake this order they lose their territory and with it their identity. Many prophetic discourses picture catastrophes, like wars, droughts and other natural disasters, as signs of warning, but where these are unheeded national destruction is bound to follow (Is. 13-24; Jer. 46-51; Ezek. 25-32; Joel 3-4; Amos 1-2).

Redemption

Unlike many surrounding peoples, Israel is restored to nationhood after her exile in Babylon. If Israel's liberation from Egypt served to illustrate the underserved grace of God's covenant love, the redemption of the exiles points to the constancy of God's love (Deut. 7:7-9; Zech. 8:7-8). On their return to Jerusalem the Jewish leaders blame an unhealthy association with other nations as a major contributing factor to the exile. Hence they are shocked to see how readily those who returned were prepared to repeat the pattern by intermarrying with surrounding peoples. Whereas Moses had left room for intermarriage (Deut. 21:11) and we have a number of examples of this happening before the exile (Matt.1:5), both Ezra and Nehemiah endeavour to put an end to such practices (Ezra 10, Neh. 13:26-27; cf. Jdg. 3:6; 1 Ki. 11:2; 16:31).

Judah's separation from other nations was, if anything, stronger than that of Israel before, even though many of the prophets had spoken of Israel's restoration in connection with the coming of people from all nations to worship God in Zion (Is. 11:10; 60:3; Mic. 4:2; Zech. 2:11). Provision was made for foreigners to worship at the temple, but only in the outer court, with a wall of separation to keep them away from the Jews (cf. Eph. 2:14). But the incidence of Christ's cleansing of the Temple shows how unprepared the Jews were for such foreign visitors, as it was the court of the Gentiles that was clogged with the market stalls of traders (Jn. 2:14-17; Mt. 21:12-13).

At first Jesus appears to uphold the Jewish exclusivity. While he does minister to non-Jews like the Roman centurion and Samaritan woman (Mt. 8:5ff.; Jn. 4:7ff.), he explicitly tells the Syrophenician woman that he came to serve the Jews (Mk. 7:27; Mt. 15:26). The event related in John 12 makes it clear that in this Jesus was waiting for God's timing to enlarge the scope of his ministry. Here we see Andrew and Philip telling Jesus that two Greeks have come to see him, and he answers:

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.... Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (Jn. 12:23, 31-33).

Jesus here speaks of the change that was to come with his death and resurrection, which ushered in the new covenant in his blood (cf. Mt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 12:24). And the historical occasion for the initiation of this covenant was Pentecost, the feast on which the Jews remembered the making of the covenant at Mt. Sinai.¹² On the Pentecost following Christ's ascension Jews and proselytes from many nations receive the Holy Spirit when they respond to the Gospel preached in their own language. This marked the fulfilment of the promised new covenant (Jer. 31:31-33; Ez. 36:24ff.).

To understand the impact this must have made we must remember that in popular first century Jewish thought God had spoken the ten commandments at Mt Sinai in the seventy languages of the world, representing the seventy nations listed as coming out of the division at Babel (Gen. 10, 11). Moreover, they believed that at Sinai each language had had been represented in a tongue of fire. At Sinai only the Israelites were there to hear God's voice, but in Jerusalem there were people of many tongues and nations. Thus the gifts of tongues pointed back to the divisions at Babel, but instead of bringing a confusion that drove people apart, the gift of tongues united them in the one Spirit.

Though Peter preached that the new covenant with its promise of the Holy Spirit was not only for his listeners and their children, but for "*all who are far*

¹² For a fuller explanation of what follows see Bill Berends, "What do we Celebrate at Pentecost?" *Vox Reformata* 63, 1998: 42-66.

off” (Acts 2:39), it is clear that at that time not even he knew fully what this entailed. It took two similar manifestations of the Spirit to lead the Church to the inclusion of Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17), and then of Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48). There were those, the Judaisers, who argued that, as in the former dispensation, Gentile believers could only enter into the new covenant by becoming Jews, through circumcision and adherence to the Mosaic laws and regulations. But the “synod” in Jerusalem confirmed that this was not the case (Acts 15 1-29). Again it was Peter who expressed this new insight:

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith (Acts 15:8-9).

The fact that God makes no distinction based on race or nationality lies near the centre of the Gospel message of reconciliation. Christ died for all, not in terms of every individual, but for all kinds of people who are newly created in him (2 Cor. 5:14-17). The wall of hostility that separated Jew and Gentile has been broken down (Eph. 2:13-19) and all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

But how do we apply this spiritual reality into practical terms? Does this mean Christians cannot divide into linguistic groupings, or other cultural divisions, for the purpose of worship? And how does this translate into the world of nations and politics? The first of these questions really lies outside of our stated aim for this paper, but briefly we observe the following. It is clear that in the NT the apostolic church sought to preserve the unity of the church in worship, making provision for the needs of Greek widows in Jerusalem and catering to the cultural sensibilities of Jews scattered over the cities of the Roman empire (Acts 6:1-6; 15:20-21, 28-29; cf. Rom. 14:5-23; 1 Cor. 8). This unity flowed from the Christians’ love for one another, so Paul could write:

... (bear) with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:2-6).

In their love and unity Christians gave testimony before the world of the reconciling work of Christ. However, because Greek was the common tongue in the NT world, we have no NT example of how Christians speaking different languages gathered together for worship. Rather than to speak of differences between Christians the NT emphasises the difference between Christians and the world.

When it comes to applying the new identity in Christ to the context of the wider society we first of all note that this identity is that of an alien, exile, stranger or pilgrim (Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:1,17; 2:17). Christians are not citizens of this world, but of the Kingdom of God (Phil. 3:20). But being strangers does not mean that we have no task in this world. What it does mean we can learn from Jeremiah's advice to OT strangers, the Jewish exiles in Babylon. He writes:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jer. 29:4-7)

We only need to turn to the book of Daniel to find examples of what this entailed in the lives of exiles like Daniel and his friends, who contributed much to the prosperity of the realm. The book of Esther, too, tells us of Esther's intercession for the Jews and Mordechai's intercession for the King. And Ezra and Nehemiah do their tasks for Israel as representatives of the Kings of Persia (Ezra 7:11ff.; Neh. 2:6). All these Jews obeyed orders and fulfilled their duties as citizens of the Babylonian and Persian empires, except where this went contrary to the revealed will of God.

In a similar way our Kingdom citizenship does not excuse us from earthly tasks. We participate in society and obey its laws except where these contradict the revealed will of Christ (cf. Acts 4:19). But for Christians there is more involved than waiting for an end to our exile on earth. Christ's Spirit

has begun his work of renewal in us in this life, so that we may be renewed in the image of God in righteousness, holiness and knowledge of God (Eph. 4:24; Col 3:10). Hence, in Christ we are reconciled to God, and with the restoration of this relationship our fellowship and stewardship can again be exercised in a God-glorifying manner: “*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*” (Eph. 2:10).

What fallen Adam and his sinful posterity could no longer do, reigning over God's creation, will be accomplished in Christ who said: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*” (Mt. 28:18ff.). And his people, who will and have begun to reign with him (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 5:10; 20:6), must follow him in this task as they go out to make disciples of all nations and teach them to follow Christ in all that he has commanded. In this way the nations will be unified, under Christ the King.

But must we seek to initiate such unity in the present world? Should we try to find ways to remove the distinctions that mark cultures, peoples and nations since the confusion of tongues at Babel? Here we note that the eschatological vision of the people of God pictures them as a colourful mix of traditions, cultures and languages, representing the honour and glory of the nations (Rev. 21:24-26; cf. 5:9; 7:9). This is in great contrast to the kind of drab, uniform, homogeneous citizenship that typified totalitarian states (as in Stalinist Russia, the cultural revolution under China's Mao Zedong and North Korea today). In biblical times Kings, who are pictured as bearing treasures into the New Jerusalem, were patrons of culture (as in the story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon, 1 Ki. 10).

While Christians must strive for unity and peace this must never be seen as something to be accomplished through the removal of all the differences that divide mankind. Variety was built into world when God created a multitude of species and created mankind as male and female. Here the Christian worldview opposes both the monism of the pantheist who sees all differences as ultimately illusory. It also contests the reductionism of the naturalist for whom variety is only more of the same. The Christian worldview on this point was succinctly expressed by Abraham Kuyper, who suggested that

mankind's cultural variety reflected God's glory in the manner that the colours of a rainbow reflect the brilliance of white light.

A Christian worldview must therefore have room for pluralism.¹³ That is not to say that all cultural expressions are equally valid, but to recognise that God has not prescribed a single way to express worship, fellowship and stewardship. Some expressions of worship are clearly false, for example, the worship of other gods and idolatry. Human interactions that debase females or are based on racial prejudice or exploitation must similarly be rejected, as must those dealings with creation that abuse the environment or destroy species God has created. But there is more than one way of doing things right, and society must embrace a pluralism that has room for them all.

As Christians we anticipate a time when things will be different, when many of the limitations of the present dispensation will be removed. But in the tensions of the already and not-yet of the Kingdom of God we are not to anticipate what is coming by abolishing what God has instituted for this present earth. Institutions like gender distinctions, marriage, human government, nationhood and similar observances are to be upheld until Christ returns. While Christian renewal and the leaven of Christian modelling may bring improvement to the operation of such institutions, to remove them would be as foolish as the removal of clothing by the citizens of Münster who anticipated the return of paradise.¹⁴

Nationhood and pluralism are realities that have firm biblical support. Like all good things both are open to abuse, but in themselves they are not to be feared or despised. Rather as Christians we must ask how these realities can best be utilised to promote the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom that will embrace all the richness and variety of human culture without the shortcomings and sinfulness that marks this present world. We must use the richness and variety in creation to bring glory to the God who created it all.

¹³ For Kuyper's pluralistic outlook see Luis E. Lugo, ed., *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

¹⁴ It is reported that during the Anabaptist rebellion of 1534 citizens of Münster ran naked through the streets claiming that paradise had been restored.