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BETHEL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
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DISCERNING BEST PRACTICES
FOR MULTIETHNIC CHURCH OF CHRIST MERGERS

A THESIS PROJECT REPORT
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA
MAY 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researcher would like to acknowledge Dr. Katie Friesen Smith for her guidance and help in completing this process. The researcher also appreciates Jason Esposito for proofreading and preparing this for defense.

The researcher would like to thank the Woodbury Church of Christ for supporting the researcher in his pursuit of this degree.

Finally, the researcher would like to acknowledge and thank his family. His parents were a huge encouragement in this process. Lindsey and Micah sacrificed and created space and opportunity for this project to be completed.

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ABSTRACT

This project was aimed at discovering best practices for multiethnic Church of Christ mergers. Three churches were discovered that had formed by the merger of a White Church of Christ with a Black Church of Christ. A study of the multiethnic dynamics of the early church provided the biblical and theological foundation for this project. Special attention was given to Galatians, Romans, and Ephesians, as well as the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. The researcher discovered that the Church was multiethnic from its inception.

The researcher then researched the literature concerning multiethnic churches in America, Churches of Christ, and church mergers. These three streams of literature converged in this project and based on the literature the researcher created the research instruments for this project.

The researcher then traveled to the three congregations. Questionnaires were distributed at the end of Bible class times. The researcher also took field observations at these locations. Phone calls were set up to interview key leaders after these trips. The data was then coded and analyzed for trends.

The following key findings for best practices in multiethnic Church of Christ mergers were discovered. Churches should pursue unity with other churches. Mergers take time and leaders must be patient. Putting together the right steering team is vital. In most mergers, only one of the two ministers will last more than five years. The eldership should reflect the diversity of the church.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE NEED FOR DISCERNING BEST PRACTICES IN MULTIETHNIC CHURCH OF CHRIST MERGERS

Churches of Christ are in decline and many churches are looking at options to prolong their existence. One of those options is merging churches, sometimes even across ethnic lines. There is currently a lack of understanding of best practices related to multiethnic Church of Christ mergers.

Churches of Christ emerged as the first major division within the Stone-Campbell movement, officially becoming recognized as a distinct denomination in 1906 when David Lipscomb acknowledged that Churches of Christ were a separate religious communion from the Disciples of Christ for a National Religious Census.¹ Churches of Christ have valued the autonomy of the local congregation and do not consider themselves a denomination, with no denominational hierarchy outside of the local church. However, the universities associated with the tradition have historically hosted large gatherings of many church leaders, often called lectureships, and these gatherings functioned to maintain unity within the larger communion of these autonomous churches. Churches of Christ were initially a mostly unified communion, but by 1968, there emerged two distinct fellowships: the White mainstream Churches of Christ and the African-American Churches of Christ.² The Civil Rights era in American history directly

¹ Douglas Foster, *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches - Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 482.

² Gary Holloway, *Unfinished Reconciliation: Justice, Racism, and Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian Univ. Press, 2013), loc. 1640, Kindle.

coincides with the emergence of two distinct groups. Efforts have been made to unify these groups over the years, but these two distinct fellowships remain.

The researcher discovered three churches that were formed by the merger of a White Church of Christ and a Black Church of Christ. Two of the churches are located in Mississippi. One merged in April 2005 and the other merged in January 2018. Another church was discovered in Delaware that merged in December 2018. These congregations were discovered through articles in *The Christian Chronicle*, an online and in print publication for Churches of Christ, and an email conversation with the editor for that newspaper.

To discern best practices, the researcher undertook four tasks. First, the researcher considered the Pauline material in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians regarding ethnicity in the early churches. Second, the researcher reviewed the relevant literature on multiethnic churches, church mergers, and the particular ecclesial realities of Churches of Christ. Third, the researcher assessed three Churches of Christ that were formed by the merger of two congregations predominately of different ethnicities through visiting, interviewing and surveying key leaders and members. Finally, the researcher determined best practices for Churches of Christ that desire to merge across ethnic lines.

Delimitations and Assumptions

This project was limited to multiethnic Church of Christ mergers of a White Church of Christ with a Black Church of Christ. The researcher became aware of five such mergers, and three of those churches were suitable for this research project. The research was limited to the researcher's role as the outside observer in the churches that were the focus of this project. The researcher was invited to teach a Bible class in each church explaining his project and providing encouragement for each congregation, but

the researcher was in no way compensated for his research or engagement with these churches.

Additionally, the biblical research was limited to Paul's letters to the Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians as well as Luke's account in Acts 15. The focus of this was to explore the multiethnic dynamics as the gospel initially spread.

The researcher made several assumptions in this research project. The researcher assumed that the Bible and theology ought to be the guide for one's ecclesiology. Therefore, the biblical and theological review in this project was critical in establishing the principle that the church should be multiethnic. Also, the researcher assumed that Paul was the original writer of Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians.

The researcher also assumed that multiethnic churches could be healthy and function well, and that church mergers can be done in healthy ways. The researcher assumed that examining multiple churches for this research project would yield more reliable results than simply examining one church. Finally, the researcher assumed that racism is a sin, the denial of the image of God in another person and that God desires for people of different ethnicities to be together in peace.

Issues Explored

Several issues arose that needed to be explored. The first issue was to identify the ways that the apostle Paul talked about ethnicity in his letters. The researcher had to exegete the biblical texts and examine the insights of Bible scholars and theologians in commentaries, books, articles and other works. Data was evaluated and systematically organized to create a theological framework for multiethnic churches. The second issue was to examine three streams of literature: multiethnic churches today, the realities of church mergers and the history of race and ethnicity in Churches of Christ. These streams

of literature consisted of books, websites, articles, and dissertations. Once these streams of literature were explored and understood, the researcher was able to develop research instruments appropriate for this project. The next issue was to look at the three multiethnic Church of Christ mergers and examine them using those research instruments. The researcher gathered the names and locations of representative congregations, the stories of how the mergers took place, the names of key leaders in these mergers, and was granted access to the congregations. The researcher handed out questionnaires, conducted interviews with key leaders, and gathered field notes at each congregation. Finally, the last issue was to articulate best practices to help multiethnic Church of Christ mergers be effective in the future.

Importance of the Project

To the Researcher

This problem was important to the researcher. He recognized the decline in Churches of Christ as well as the reality that the United States has become increasingly divided. This particular focus on multiethnic mergers came to light through several discussions within the researcher's former church, which was a predominantly White church. Associated with that church were a Spanish speaking ministry and a Hmong ministry that both worshiped in the same building. Despite several attempts at unifying these groups into one body, the three groups remain separated. Furthermore, the researcher engaged in developing a close relationship with a predominantly Black Church of Christ in the Twin Cities, including creating joint ministry efforts and sharing the pulpit from time to time. Conversations with the minister of that church led the researcher to believe that the church has an opportunity to be a prophetic witness of the kingdom of God by engaging across ethnic lines, not only with civility but also with the love of God.

The researcher hopes that a future exists in which the divisions of the past can be worked through and the multiethnic Kingdom of God can be experienced anew. If best practices can be established by looking at these churches, the researcher hopes that more churches will decide to pursue this option in the future. The theological premise of this project, that God's desire for the church is to be multiethnic, is a principle that the researcher hopes to pursue in his ministry career.

To Ministry

The problem has great importance for ministry. When the researcher began exploring this topic, a number of ministry mentors and a college professor reached out to him about his work. Churches those men consulted have talked about the option of merging with a church of a different ethnicity, and there is hope that a multiethnic merger may be a path forward. Many parishioners work in multicultural settings, but when they come to church, they experience homogeneity and they desire for their churches to be more diverse. As churches shrink, they will have to consider options, and mergers should be one of those options. The researcher has recently resigned from his ministry position, in search of an opportunity to pursue ministry leadership in a multiethnic context. For the ministers in churches that decide to pursue this path, the researcher hopes to provide best practices for how to go about merging across ethnic lines.

To Academia

There had not been much academic work done on multiethnic churches within the Churches of Christ. There were a few dissertations written about the history of race and ethnicity in Churches of Christ, but aside from a single footnote, the researcher did not

find any scholarly work done on Churches of Christ that had merged across ethnic lines.³ These mergers that this project examined were lauded in the newspaper publications of Churches of Christ, but there was a lack of scholarly work in examining them as a model for future mergers. The researcher worked to provide an opportunity for the best practices that have been discerned to be tested further in the future. Furthermore, there was a wealth of resources on multiethnic churches and church mergers, but there was not much focus on multiethnic church mergers. Having more information ought to lead to better results than having less information. For churches so bold to try this path, hopefully, this project can be a resource.

³ Theodore Wesley Crawford, "From Segregation to Independence: African-Americans in Churches of Christ" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2008), 110.

CHAPTER TWO: MULTIETHNICITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Jesus' Jewish identity was central to the gospel story. The Gospel of Matthew began by presenting Jesus as the new Moses, with the flight to Egypt and the Sermon on the Mount that was reminiscent of the giving of the Law. In Matthew 10, Jesus, as the representative of Israel, calls the Twelve and commissions them to go proclaim the good news to the lost sheep of Israel, specifically telling them not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans. In Matthew 17, Jesus was transfigured and stands between Moses and Elijah, the symbols of the Law and the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible. In Matthew 27, Jesus was crucified as the "King of the Jews." The ministry of Jesus was focused on the Hebrew people. Matthew frequently portrayed Jesus as a Jewish rabbi, the Messiah of the Jews, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. It is fair to say that Jesus is the symbol of realized Judaism.

Judaism at its core claims that the Jewish people are the exclusive people of Yahweh. N.T. Wright says, "Belief in one god, who called Israel to be his people, is the very foundation of Judaism."⁴ This is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Israelites were told, "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; it is you the LORD has chosen out of all the people on the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut.14:2).⁵ God said to the people, "You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Ex.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 77.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

19:5). Much later, the LORD spoke to the people, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2).

When Jesus came, this did not change immediately. Jesus chose twelve Jewish men to be his disciples and appointed them as apostles. Jesus said that his mission was for “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). Peter, Paul, and the Gospel writers saw Jesus through the lens of the Hebrew Scriptures. Even at the death and resurrection of Jesus, it was abundantly clear that the disciples of Jesus were still engaged in the life of the Jewish community, whether in Jerusalem or the Diaspora. The gift of tongues that the Holy Spirit gave to the apostles in Acts 2 happened in Jerusalem where Jews and god-fearing Gentiles were gathered to celebrate Pentecost, a Jewish holiday.

When the apostle Paul was converted and began his ministry, his primary mission created tension for the mostly Jewish church. Paul’s mission was delivering the gospel beyond the Jewish world into the Gentile world. Ryan Schellenberg explained, “For Paul ‘Jew’ and ‘gentile’ were not only theological but first of all ethnic categories.”⁶ His travels took him all over the Mediterranean world, and the gospel was proclaimed and received by people that did not share his Jewish ethnic heritage.

Therefore the question became, what is the primarily Jewish church going to do with an influx of Gentile people? The thesis of this chapter is that as the makeup of the church shifted from being almost exclusively Jewish, the multiethnic reality of the gospel became increasingly clear for all to see.

⁶ Ryan S. Schellenberg, “Seed of Abraham (Friesen?): Universality and Ethnicity in Paul,” *Direction* 44, no. 1, (2015): 16.

Galatians

Galatians is an intense letter and likely one of Paul's earliest letters.⁷ Paul held no punches and came out swinging at whatever opponents have "bewitched" his former converts. Very little background was given, and what has been assumed about this letter is mostly drawn from Acts.⁸ Galatians requires the reader to step into the middle of an argument that has already begun, and only hear one side of it. This is complex. A. E. Harvey wrote, "We are continually having to reconstruct the other side of the debate. An argument is in progress; but we do not know what the opposition has been saying. An attack has been made; but we do not know exactly at what it was directed."⁹ This makes a reading of this letter a bit complicated. J. Louis Martyn remarked,

Reading Paul's letter to his Galatian churches is like coming in on a play as the curtain is rising on the third or fourth act. The opening lines of the letter tell us three things. First, to read this letter is to be involved in high drama, for one senses between Paul and the Galatians both deep affection and angry tension. Second, Paul and the Galatians have a rich history with one another. Important developments antedate the writing and the reception of the letter. Third, what has already occurred has involved a number of persons in addition to Paul and the Galatians. Genuine understanding of the letter involves discerning the roles played by these other actors, as well as the roles played by Paul and the Galatians. Somewhat as though we were witnessing a play in a theater, then, we pay attention. And as the drama of the letter unfolds, we start to put the pieces together, beginning with a brief sketch of the players.¹⁰

⁷ J Louis Martyn, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. v. 33A, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 20.

⁸ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary On St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 5.

⁹ A.E. Harvey, "The Opposition to Paul." in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, edited by Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 321.

¹⁰ J Louis Martyn, 13.

Determining “the players” of Galatians becomes the first task in understanding what was going on.

Characters in Galatians

Paul is the first important character in this letter. According to Galatians 4:12-20, at some time in the past, Paul proclaimed the gospel of Christ to the Galatians. He had a special relationship with these people; he considered them his “little children.” On top of that, Paul revealed quite a bit about his own story in this letter. Paul wrote of his past in Judaism, his initial zeal for persecuting the church, and his conversion and calling by God to proclaim Jesus among the Gentiles. The Galatian Christians were the result of Paul’s apostolic calling. Further, he wrote of his encounter with Cephas, James and John and how they gave him “the right hand of fellowship,” meaning that the gospel he proclaimed to the Galatians was sanctioned by the leaders of the movement. The first two chapters of this letter were replete with stories Paul told to set up his defense of the gospel he had proclaimed.

The next major character group were the recipients of this letter. Galatians poses a particular problem because “Galatia” could signify one of at least two things. Galatia could either represent a geopolitical area that included some ethnic Galatians or it could represent the particular ethnic subset of the population from northern Europe who had settled in Asia Minor known elsewhere as the Gauls or the Celts.¹¹ Although there is considerable debate about which geopolitical area “Galatia” would be, the likelihood is that Paul is addressing a group of churches in a particular geopolitical area, not a specific ethnic subgroup. This point is contested by Martinus de Boer who speculates heavily that

¹¹ Martyn, 15-16.

the recipients must have been in the northern part of Galatia, not the south, and thus ethnic Galatians.¹²

De Boer based his conclusions on the idea that there is “no evidence for Jewish communities or synagogues in the Northern region in the first century C.E.”¹³ Martyn agrees with this assessment, going so far as to say that “there are no Jews in Paul’s Galatian churches.”¹⁴ On the other hand, the letter reveals that whoever this Galatian audience is, they have a particular interest in Judaism.¹⁵ Witherington wrote,

These Galatian Christians were attracted, indeed even bewitched, by the Judaizing suggestions or demands of the agitators and this makes it natural to suppose that the Galatian Christians had already had some exposure to Judaism before becoming Christians.¹⁶

Establishing that the ethnic Galatians had a proclivity toward Judaism is not an easy task for historians, and is what De Boer and Martyn are assuming does not need to happen.

However, Paul’s practice was to enter a town and go preach at a Diaspora synagogue until they asked him to leave (Acts 13:43, 14:1). Paula Fredriksen argues that it was in such places that Paul met resistance from Jews and received “enthusiastic

¹² Martinus C de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 5.

¹³ De Boer, 5.

¹⁴ Martyn, 16.

¹⁵ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Short Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 136. For the sake of consistency, the researcher will use “Gentile” as a designation of Non-Jewish people. This is done while recognizing that “Gentile” was a discriminatory epithet used by the Jewish people. In some quotations, “gentile” will not be capitalized to maintain the quoted author’s preference.

¹⁶ Witherington, 7.

response” from the God-fearing Gentiles.¹⁷ Paul referred to the churches of a geographical region in his first letter to Corinth, Achaia (1 Cor. 16:15) and Asia (1 Cor. 6:19). The researcher believes that this evidence points to an understanding that the recipients of the letter were Gentile-majority churches in the province of Galatia who had some background in Jewish synagogues.

The third major characters of this book are the agitators. The specific identity of these agitators is unclear. In Galatians 3:1, Paul asks, “Who has bewitched you?” and then later, he asks in 5:7, “Who prevented you from obeying the truth?” He responds in 5:10, “Whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.” Paul addressed the conflict but did not specify the culprit. There is a real question if Paul even knew who the culprit was. It is not clear that he knew their identity. Someone had come in and stirred the Gentile Christians up. The accusations Paul leveled against these people were that they had come in “confusing you” and that they “want to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:7).

Scholars have speculated about the identity of these agitators. As Harvey points out, “It has become customary to call [the agitators] Judaizers.”¹⁸ This term is a cognate of the translation of *ioudazein* from Galatians 2:14 and according to Harvey has the meaning to “adopt Jewish observances.”¹⁹ Todd Scaewater concurred, adding that the word “should be understood as referring generally to living like a Jew, with special

¹⁷ Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2.” in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, edited by Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 258.

¹⁸ Harvey, 323.

¹⁹ Harvey, 323.

reference here to Jewish food laws.”²⁰ This meaning was clear based on the content of the letter. Paul strongly argued against salvation by “works of the law” by pointing to the Galatians “observing special days” and ultimately the practice of circumcision. Whoever these agitators were, they seemed to have come in with a mission of calling these Gentile Christians to observe Jewish customs.

Battle for the Gospel

Having identified the key players of this book, it became obvious that the tension stems from multiethnicity. Were the Gentile Christians required to observe Jewish practices to be saved? This was a question at the heart of the gospel. The contents of the letter made clear that Paul’s gospel transcended and replaced Jewish customs for this Gentile community.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians was dominated by “divisive rhetoric.”²¹ Paul considered observing these practices the agitators were insisting upon tantamount to “turning to a different gospel.” This was unacceptable to Paul. The gospel was at stake. As De Boer wrote, “Paul seeks to make it clear to the Galatians that the issues posed by that different gospel is not trivial; in his view, their true Christian identity and thus their salvation are at stake.”²²

Paul’s defense of his gospel began when he said, “For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me was not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through

²⁰ Todd Scaewater, “Galatians 2:11-21 and the Interpretive Context of ‘works of the law’,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 314.

²¹ Pheme Perkins, *Abraham's Divided Children: Galatians and the Politics of Faith* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 12.

²² De Boer, 40.

a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12). As Martyn interpreted this, “the gospel happened to Paul when God stepped on the scene, invading his life in Christ.”²³ The divine gospel that he claimed he received was affirmed 14 years later when he took it to Jerusalem to share with the leaders of the church, “in order to make sure that [he] was not running, or had not run, in vain” (Gal. 2:1-2). The leaders of this church, James, Cephas, and John granted him “the right hand of fellowship,” thus approving of the gospel which he was presenting to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9).

The contents of the gospel Paul preached are established in the text as well. As he says, “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). This is a very complex formulation due to three particular Greek phrases. First, *dikaioutai* is translated as justified. Many theologians, including N.T. Wright and John Piper, hotly debate the meaning and translation of this word based on their theological perspectives.²⁴ Witherington argues that this word comes from the law courts and in this particular instance has the connotation of acquitted because it is established throughout the rest of the letter that both Jews and Gentiles are sinners.²⁵ The second part of the phrase, “works of the law” will be picked up when examining the gospel of the Judaizers. Finally, the third phrase is *pisteos Iesou Christou*. The debate around this phrase was whether it is an objective genitive or a subjective genitive.²⁶ The objective view translates this as “faith in Jesus Christ,” whereas the subjective view translates this

²³ Martyn, 144.

²⁴ N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007).

²⁵ Witherington, 174.

²⁶ Witherington, 179.

as the “faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” PHEME PERKINS points out that there is symmetry with the phrase that follows, where Paul says “we have come to believe in Christ Jesus” that makes the objective view more likely.²⁷ Paul’s gospel is a gospel of faith in Jesus, not faith in one’s own obedience.

This line of reasoning was prevalent throughout the text, with many comparisons between works of the law and faith in Jesus, including in 3:25-26, when Paul wrote, “But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian [the law], for in Christ Jesus, you are all of children of God through faith.” The word translated as disciplinarian is the word *paidogogos*, which was “a slave employed in Greek and Roman families to have general charge of a boy in the years from about six to sixteen, watching over his outward behavior and attending him whenever he went home.”²⁸ According to De Boer, Paul used this image “primarily to underscore the temporary nature of its [the Law’s] control over humanity.”²⁹ Paul’s argued that now with the advent of faith, there was no need for observing the Law. This led to the beautiful truth of the gospel, that in Christ Jesus the former exclusions no longer hold. Faith has created an avenue for the Gentile’s acquittal and thus inclusion in the people of God. Faith brings about a multiethnic reality of the gospel.

Furthermore, the result of faith was life in the Spirit. Paul asked the rhetorical question, “Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?” (Gal. 3:2). He then rephrased it, asking again in 3:5, “Does God supply you

²⁷ Perkins, 60.

²⁸ De Boer, 240.

²⁹ De Boer, 241.

with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?” The Spirit was a central aspect of Paul’s gospel. Paul told these Galatians, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” (Gal. 4:6). Concerning the metaphor of Galatians 3, Perkins said, “After the Spirit is given to believers, they no longer need such a governor [the law], since the Spirit becomes the principle of Christian life.”³⁰ As Paul definitively stated, having the Spirit of God in them means that they “are not subject to the law” (Gal. 5:8). Andrew Das summarized, “The Galatians will have all the power they need to live as Christ-believers by the power of the Spirit. To seek to be ‘under’ the Law is to regress into an era that has passed away.”³¹ This was not to suggest that there is no Christian ethic apart from the law, for the Spirit of God produced within the Galatians the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22).

Ultimately, Paul’s gospel was a testament to freedom. Paul told them, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:2) and that they were “called to freedom” (Gal. 5:13). This did not mean that nothing was expected of them, but rather that observing the law was not required for their acquittal. There was a Christian ethic that Paul points them to in 5:14, to “love your neighbor as yourself,” taken directly the words from Jesus. This Christian ethic, however, was not based on observance of the law, but rather by being led by the Spirit. Paul contrasted the Spirit and the flesh in this way.

Paul created a dichotomy in this letter, contrasting faith and the Spirit with the law and the flesh. This was not by accident, for Paul knew all too well the correlation between the law and the flesh, particularly as it was symbolized in circumcision. Paul

³⁰ Perkins, 74.

³¹ A. Andrew Das, *Paul and the Stories of Israel: Grand Thematic Narratives in Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 178.

was calling for his converts to be like he was, leaving behind his adherence to Judaism and instead living by faith.

Paul's gospel was challenged by the gospel of the Judaizers, which Paul claims was no gospel at all, but rather a perversion of the gospel. For Paul, the claims of the Judaizers were incompatible with the gospel he had presented to the Galatians.

The same phrase "works of the law" was used throughout the letter. Witherington comments, "There is little dispute among scholars that when Paul speaks of 'the Law' here he means the Mosaic Law. The debate primarily centers on what sort of 'works' he has in mind."³² The meaning of this phrase became clearer when two particular practices came to light. First, in Galatians 4:10, Paul alleged that the Galatians "are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years." Scholars have been divided on what exactly this means. Martyn, on the one hand, argued that the Galatians were being tempted to "return to the worship of cosmic elements" based on the language used in the preceding verses concerning the stars.³³ Harvey argued that the language is almost certainly about "Jewish observances," saying, "the Galatian Christians had already renewed their contact with the synagogue to the extent of observing the Jewish festivals and holy days."³⁴ De Boer took a more inclusive approach and suggested that "Paul has here chosen words that could cover both Jewish and pagan calendrical observances."³⁵ Witherington adds,

³² Witherington, 175.

³³ Martyn, 414-416.

³⁴ Harvey, 325.

³⁵ De Boer, 276.

The point of this verse is to draw a close parallel between what the Galatians used to do in regard to religious observances and what they are now doing or at least contemplating doing by following the Mosaic Law... What they are about to do is a case of *déjà vu*; they have already been there and done that before when they were pagans.³⁶

The careful observance of these special days was a part of the “works of the law,” and Paul was saying that for the Galatians to observe these days was the same as moving back to paganism and rejecting the gospel.

The second and more significant part of “works of the law” was circumcision. This was the ultimate source of multiethnic tension; once it was done, it could not be undone. Must uncircumcised Gentiles be circumcised? It was clear from the text that the Judaizers were promoting circumcision. This issue was what Paul is referring to when he rhetorically asks, “Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3). Paul was plainly against that particular observance on the part of the Galatian Gentile Christians. He wrote, “I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. One again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law” (Gal. 5:2-3). The assumption was that the Judaizers were preaching to the Galatians that the next step in their faith was to be circumcised and thus observe the Law. Perkins wrote, “Circumcision becomes like the branding of a slave, the sign of subjection to the Law in its old power.”³⁷ But Paul was having none of it. He wrote in 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” As Perkins put it, “There cannot be dual sources of

³⁶ Witherington, 301-302.

³⁷ Perkins, 31.

righteousness.”³⁸ Therefore, Paul’s argued that God would not acquit the Galatians of their sins based on “works of the law.” Rather, their acquittal comes based on faith.

Multiethnicity in Galatians

The gospel that Paul proclaimed shows that there is no longer “Jew or Greek” (Gal. 3:28) because God acquits all who come by faith. Jesus has leveled the field and all people are welcome to be God’s children now. Former exclusions no longer hold in light of the work of Jesus. Faith was now the standard, not righteousness by observing the law. The reality of Gentile inclusion into the people of God created tension within the Jewish Christian world.

Paul’s opponents emerged preaching that these Gentiles needed to become Jewish in practice and belief to become God’s covenant people. Paul strongly disagreed and attacked his opponents. Paul used the phrase “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6 to signify the church, not the people of Israel. All of Galatians 3 was directed at the Judaizers’ view of the law, especially the section concerning a mediator. And finally, the language of wishing they “would castrate themselves” (Gal. 5:12) would have effectively removed the Judaizers from the covenant people of God, based on Deuteronomy 23:1.³⁹

Paul was speaking aggressively because the gospel was on the line. The gospel crossed boundaries; it expanded God’s people and included the Gentiles based on faith.

Jerusalem Council of Acts 15

The conflict of Galatians was quite similar to the conflict with which Acts 15 began. Acts has historically been read differently than other books in the New Testament.

³⁸ Perkins, 96.

³⁹ Craig Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 469.

Timothy Gervais wrote, “Without similar material with which to compare, readers often unfairly treat the work as a simple historical narrative.”⁴⁰ However, Luke’s account is full of theological convictions, one of which is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God. As far as the multiethnic gospel is concerned, the importance of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 cannot be overstated. Babu Immanuel calls it “the single most important event in the book of Acts.”⁴¹ The council must answer the big question the church was facing. Ben Witherington explained,

Here the matter must be resolved as to what constitutes the people of God, and how the major ethnic division in the church shall be dealt with so that both groups may be included in God’s people on equal footing, fellowship may continue, and the church remain one.⁴²

Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch where they had done considerable ministry already. While they were there, some men came from Judea and taught that Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved. This created tension and debate and the church sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to discuss this with the apostles and elders there (Acts 15:1-2).

Although this whole encounter is centered on Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, Paul is never quoted directly. In between Peter’s summary of his encounter with Cornelius and James’ decree, Barnabas and Paul “told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.” At this point Paul seemingly disappears in this story that is really about the council.

⁴⁰ Timothy Gervais, “Acts 15 and Luke’s Rejection of Pro-Circumcision Christianity,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 41, no. 2 (January 2017): 7.

⁴¹ Babu Immanuel, *Acts of the Apostles: An Exegetical and Contextual Commentary India Commentary on the New Testament*; 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 160.

⁴² Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 439.

Luke wrote that along with the debating parties, the apostles and elders met together, but only one apostle is named. Peter was the main apostle of the first several chapters of Acts, delivering the Holy-Spirit filled message on Pentecost (Acts 2), receiving visions from God (Acts 10) and being let out of jail by an angel (Acts 12). Peter's return in Acts 15 was very important for what it symbolized. Luke Timothy Johnson believed that Acts 15 is a "watershed in the narrative of Acts."⁴³ Therefore, this was the moment that connects the ministry of the apostles represented by Peter to the ministry of Paul, which dominated the rest of the narrative.

Peter restated in Acts 15 the story of his encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10. Peter did not simply retell this story but sought to make a point with it. Peter was telling the story to provide evidence of why God was at work among the Gentiles. Even though there had been considerable debate, James D. G. Dunn contended, "The precedent of Peter's acceptance provides the decisive argument."⁴⁴ Peter recognized and stated, "that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:11). This statement was critical. Again Dunn wrote,

The grace of the Lord Jesus is both the necessary and the sufficient means of salvation for Jew and Gentile. The denial of any significance for ethnic or ritual factors enables the unconditional recognition of everyone's dependence equally on divine grace.⁴⁵

⁴³ Luke Timothy Johnson and Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina Series*, vol. 5, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 268.

⁴⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 196.

⁴⁵ Dunn, 201-2.

Based on Peter's testimony, Barnabas and Paul gave their testimony of "signs and wonders," (Acts 15:12) which was the evidence of the Holy Spirit found throughout Acts. And then James spoke.

James was an interesting figure to find here. He was perceived to be the leader of the Jerusalem church or at least one of the elders, but he was not a central character in Acts. Luke does not mention James much in the Book of Acts, but when he did, it was usually for a purpose. As Osvaldo Padilla wrote about James, "When there *is* some character development, it is done in the context of Gentile inclusion."⁴⁶ That was the issue at hand here.

James' response differed from that of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul. James went directly to the Scriptures. Again, Padilla points out,

Whereas Paul and Peter used mainly *testimony* to support their view, James uses *biblical exegesis* from Amos to bolster the argument. And in this way he brings to conclusion the Jerusalem Council: yes, the Gentiles can be full members of the people of God without circumcision.⁴⁷

James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to make a salient point. Carl Holladay wrote, "The force of this prophetic text is clear: God's desire to embrace gentiles is supported by God's own words – the direct speech of this text from Amos."⁴⁸ The purpose of alluding to this text was clear as well. Darrell Bock added, "James is stressing fulfillment, for the

⁴⁶ Osvaldo Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles: Interpretation, History, and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 91-2.

⁴⁷ Padilla, 91-2.

⁴⁸ Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 303.

prophets agree with what Peter has described. This ... is a declaration that this is now taking place. God had promised Gentile inclusion; now he is performing it.”⁴⁹

James’ quote led to a decree from the apostles and elders that they “should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). Instead, James decreed that they insist on four prohibitions: that the Gentiles abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from meat improperly slaughtered, and from blood. These four requirements are not new. As Holladay wrote,

What is significant about these four prohibitions is that in biblical legislation they apply not only to Israelites but also to non-Israelites, usually identified as “aliens who reside among the Israelites.”...The only specific obligations that should be put on gentile Christians are those explicitly required of gentiles in the OT.⁵⁰

Following the decree, the church selected delegates to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with a letter. The letter included a particular detail that was different from Luke’s earlier account: the presence of the Holy Spirit in the decision. Luke wrote that the letter said, “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Bruce Malina and John Pilch noted, “Mention of the Holy Spirit indicated divine direction and approval.”⁵¹ According to Acts, that is what happened at this council. Furthermore, Craig Keener wrote,

This statement provides a pneumatological climax in Acts: the Spirit was promised to empower witnesses for the Gentile mission (Acts 1:8), guided them to the nations, in a proleptic sense, even at Pentecost (Acts 2:5-11), expressed empowerment by providing a genuine foreign languages unknown to the speakers (2:4; 10:46; 19:6), initiated the Gentile mission in 8:29 and 10:19, and confirmed

⁴⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 503.

⁵⁰ Holladay, 302-3.

⁵¹ Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary On the Book of Acts*, Social-Science Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 111.

it in 10:44-47. Now the same Spirit has led the Jerusalem church to a theology that welcomes Gentiles.⁵²

From this point forward, the church was multiethnic. The Gentile Christians are now included among the people of God by the leaders of the church. Immanuel wrote, “Each person, whether Jew or Gentile, was allowed the space and freedom to practice his faith in the way that made best sense to him. The point was that one could practice right living without demonizing the other or making the other a sinner because these peripheral issues did not affect one’s salvation by grace through faith.”⁵³

Further, this decree kept the lines between Judaism and Christianity open. As Dunn wrote, “The agreement was of epochal significance for the future of Christianity and in crystallizing its character as a Jewish movement opening out to accept Gentiles as such as full members.”⁵⁴ The purpose of this episode in Acts was to set the stage for the expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem to Europe and beyond. As Witherington says, “[Luke’s] social premise is . . . one God and one redeemed people gathered out of the many.”⁵⁵

Romans

The leaders of the church acknowledged Paul’s apostolic ministry to the Gentiles, and following the Jerusalem Council Paul’s ministry expands. At some point, Paul wrote a letter to the Romans, a church that he had not pastored. Paul had never even been to Rome. It is curious that Paul would speak into the life of this group. There was tension

⁵² Keener, 2291.

⁵³ Immanuel, 171.

⁵⁴ Dunn, 198.

⁵⁵ Witherington, 439.

within this community that led Paul to write a letter to Rome. The researcher discovered that a significant part of the tension of Romans was multiethnicity.

To begin with, the audience of Romans is difficult to establish. In Romans 1:5, 13-14 as well as 11:13, Paul explicitly stated that he was writing to Gentiles. However, in Romans 16 Paul's list includes a few Jewish names. One of the key questions of this letter is the composition of the audience to whom Paul was writing.

The researcher came across no scholars who believe that Paul wrote to an all-Jewish audience, so two possibilities emerged: either Paul was writing to an all-Gentile audience or Paul was writing to a mixed audience with a Gentile majority.

Several scholars held that Romans was written to an entirely Gentile audience. Among those scholars was Andrew Das, who wrote a lengthy book to discern the audience of Romans. He concluded by writing, "The apostle is writing to a gentile audience... Future readings of Romans must take seriously the rhetorical impact of Paul's writing to an encoded gentile audience."⁵⁶ That is what Stanley Stowers had done in his work. He wrote,

The assumption of a Jewish Christian element in the audience forms another pillar in the traditional reading of Romans and of Paul's letters in general. ... Although the text explicitly addresses itself only to gentiles and nowhere explicitly encodes a Jewish audience, interpreters persistently speak of the predominantly gentile audience and the gentile majority. ... Dogmatic rather than historical assumptions still dominate the reading of the letter.⁵⁷

Mark Nanos articulated his assumption of an entirely Gentile audience being in Paul's mind as well:

⁵⁶ A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 264.

⁵⁷ Stanley Kent Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 29-30.

The mystery of Romans is revealed when we realize that the Paul we meet in this letter is engaged in confronting the initial development of just such a misunderstanding of God's intentions in Rome manifest in Christian-*gentile* exclusivism. In Rome, gentiles are being tempted to consider Jews excluded from God's purpose.⁵⁸

Nanos concludes that Paul was writing to a Gentile audience in defense of the Jews in Rome.

While there is good scholarship that has been done in support of this perspective and the issue seems far from settled, the classic understanding of the letter is that the audience was a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians. This perspective still maintains prominence in scholarship. Witherington wrote based on Acts 2:10-11, "It seems likely that the first Christians in Rome were ordinary Jews and God-fearers who heard the gospel in Jerusalem and brought the message home with them."⁵⁹ Douglas Moo quotes the fourth-century church father Ambrosiaster in his argument for a Jewish beginning to Roman Christianity.⁶⁰ Arland Hultgren agrees that the "oldest nucleus [of the church in Rome] would have consisted of Hellenistic Jewish Christians who had been shaped largely by the Jerusalem community."⁶¹ The Jewish community in Rome was distinct.

Historical data shows that the Jewish people of Rome had a particularly difficult time under the reign of Claudius. In 41 A.D., Claudius gave an edict declaring that Jews

⁵⁸ Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 10.

⁵⁹ Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 9.

⁶⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey*, second ed., *Encountering Biblical Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 17.

⁶¹ Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2011), 10.

were no longer allowed to “hold meetings.” Then in 49 A.D., Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of arguments around “Chrestus.” Disputes around Jesus were common in the Mediterranean world, as Paul’s history was persecuting those who belong to “The Way”.⁶² The extent of the edict was unclear. Claudius died in 54 and many scholars believe Romans was likely written shortly after his death and the return of Jews to Rome.

Based on this historical data, Thomas Tobin argued convincingly for a majority Gentile church with a minority of Jewish members. He wrote that “even when Jewish Christians such as Prisca and Aquila returned to Rome after the death of Claudius in 54, Paul’s letter to the Romans indicates that the community still remained largely Gentile.”⁶³ Likewise, Witherington talked about “an overwhelmingly Gentile group of Christians in Rome” while also pointing to the Jewish Christians who are named in Romans 16.⁶⁴ Richard Longenecker claimed that the Christians at Rome were largely dependent on the church in Jerusalem because of their Jewish connection, and denies the idea of an entirely Gentile audience when he says, “We need not insist that a Jewish component was no longer part of the Christian presence at Rome.”⁶⁵ Philip Esler concluded in his work that “Paul must have had both Judean and non-Judean Christ-followers in mind as his target

⁶² Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul’s Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 60-80.

⁶³ Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in Its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 38.

⁶⁴ Witherington and Hyatt, 6.

⁶⁵ Longenecker, 80.

audience.”⁶⁶ The researcher agreed with this perspective, assuming that the makeup of the church in Rome was largely but not exclusively Gentile. And as Hultgren says, “with variety comes a degree of tension.”⁶⁷

Contents of Romans

To read Romans without recognizing the multiethnic tension in the letter is to completely misread the whole book. Paul wrote this letter from a Jewish perspective to a Gentile audience. As the researcher discovered, the multiethnic tension of the letter was palpable and Paul was offering a theological, historical and practical rationale for why the people of Rome should accept one another across ethnic lines that undoubtedly was influenced by the Jerusalem Council.

One of the first places that the multiethnic tension comes to light is when Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power for God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”⁶⁸ Hultgren suggests that this verse is part of the *propositio* of Romans, a summary statement to set the theme for the letter.⁶⁹ Of particular importance for this project was the final phrase, “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Later in Romans 2:9-11, Paul used the phrase twice more when he said, “There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does

⁶⁶ Philip Francis Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 119.

⁶⁷ Hultgren, 11.

⁶⁸ The researcher contends that Paul uses “Greeks” and “Gentiles” to signify all people who are not Jews.

⁶⁹ Hultgren, 70.

good, the Jew first and also the Greek.” These passages distinguished the Jews from the Greeks, and a very important question arose: In what ways were the Jews privileged?

There were primarily two ways that scholars discussed the phrase, “the Jew first and also the Greek.” The first way is to suggest that Paul was using “first” to signify “that a priority is accorded to the Jews.”⁷⁰ Moo wrote,

The gospel has not disenfranchised the Jew, or even pushed the Jews out of first place in God’s purposes and plans...it does not, indeed cannot, take away the legitimate rights of the Jewish people granted to them by God himself in the Old Testament.⁷¹

Hultgren says, “While it may well have a temporal meaning ... that is not likely the whole of the matter. There must be a theological matter at stake.”⁷² This seemed clear to the researcher as well.

James Walters explained, “A special relationship exists between the gospel and Israel.”⁷³ He pointed to Romans 1:1-3, where Paul claimed that the gospel was promised through the prophets in the holy scriptures and that Jesus descended from the line of David. Further research into the letter bore Walters’ claim out as well. In Romans 3:1-2, Paul asked the question through the interlocutor, “Then what advantage has the Jew? What is the value of circumcision?” He answered the question, “Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.” In Romans 9:4-5, Paul wrote, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from

⁷⁰ Tobin, 104.

⁷¹ Moo, 27.

⁷² Hultgren, 74.

⁷³ James C. Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans: Changing Self-Definitions in Earliest Roman Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA.: Trinity Press International, 1993), 77.

them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.” In Romans 11, Paul used a metaphor to explain the Israelites were an olive tree and the Gentiles were a wild olive shoot that had been grafted into the tree. The roots of the olive tree supported the Gentiles. Paul was making clear that the Gentiles owed a debt of gratitude to the Jews since the gospel came through the Jews. Therefore, when Paul said “to the Jews first, and also to the Greeks,” he was saying the Jewish people maintain their privilege.

However, it is important to remember the audience of this letter was mainly the Gentile Christians. The gospel could have led the Gentiles to believe that God had somehow devalued the Jews in favor of the Gentiles. Rather, Paul’s point was that God has elevated the Gentiles to the status of the Jews, God’s people.

Paul expressed great anguish for his kinsmen, the Jews, as the reader learned in Romans 9-11. This section of the letter came across as deeply personal. Paul showed this side of him by retelling the narrative of Scripture.⁷⁴ A series of questions were raised and answered using the Scriptures. Paul said, “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (Rom. 10:1). N.T. Wright argued that Paul suspected that some Gentiles in the Roman church held a belief that “God has effected a simple transfer of promises and privileges from Jews to Gentiles, so that Jews are just as shut out now as Gentiles were before.”⁷⁵ Paul was grieving about the state of his Jewish kinsmen and asked the deep question, “Has God rejected his people, Israel?” Paul unequivocally answered, no! He went on to explain that “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” so

⁷⁴ N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 125.

⁷⁵ Wright, 127.

that Gentiles could come in (Rom. 11:25). But immediately following that, he declared, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). This all culminated when Paul summarized, “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (Rom. 11:32). Just as God had been merciful to the Gentiles, so too will God be merciful to the Jews.

Paul’s practical concern in 9-11 is that the Greeks not boast over the Jews or assume there is no need for the Jews. The multiethnic tension of these passages is palpable. As N.T. Wright wrote, “Paul here, we remember, is writing to head off any suggestion in the Roman church that it’s now time for the followers of Jesus to cut loose from their Jewish context and see themselves as simply a Gentile community.”⁷⁶ Paul wanted the Gentiles to recognize the value of the Jews and not discriminate against them.

On the other hand, Paul did not want the Gentile Christians to come to the false conclusion that God is partial to the Jews, somehow requiring something different of them than of the Gentiles. The impartiality of God was a major theme of this book. As Paul said, “For God shows no partiality” (Rom. 2:11). This was a particularly important thesis for Paul to expound upon. Walters argued that this is the pivot of Romans 1-4 and he says, “Paul’s application of the maxim is designed to highlight the implication of this truth for Jew-gentile relations in Rome.”⁷⁷ Paul sought to alleviate this tension by making some striking claims about the nature of God and the nature of Christ.

In Romans 3:29-30, Paul wrote, “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.” This

⁷⁶ N T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), loc. 4954, Kindle.

⁷⁷ Walters, 77.

passage was incredibly significant in establishing the impartiality of God. Paul invoked the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4. As Esler explained, “Paul proposes that God’s equal treatment of both groups depends on his nature as one. It is a daring claim.”⁷⁸ The *Shema* is the sacred belief in God’s oneness, and it often implied that if God is one, God has one chosen people, the Jews who were given the Law. Moo rightly pointed out, “Paul turns that belief against the tendency of Jews to confine justification to the law and therefore to Israel alone.”⁷⁹ But Paul established by using the *Shema* that God is God not only of the Jews but also of the whole world, and he did this through an interlocutor. Rodriguez wrote, “The interlocutor, having already been persuaded that Israel’s God is God of the whole world, can only answer, ‘Yes’ ... Paul then pushes the conclusion aggressively.”⁸⁰ Jews and non-Jews alike were justified before God based on faith.⁸¹ In Robert Jewett’s interpretation of this passage, he saw the multiethnic tension clearly. He wrote,

Neither the Jews, nor the Greeks, nor the Romans were acting as if they believed this, even in the church, which was split into mutually hostile ethnic groups. Each congregation had its rationale of superiority, believing that God was in its possession, but the atonement reveals revolutionary equality of all nations before God.⁸²

⁷⁸ Esler, 169.

⁷⁹ Moo, 71.

⁸⁰ Rafael Rodriguez, *If You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 88.

⁸¹ There are two debates around this passage that need to be acknowledged. First, the language of *πιστις χριστου* in 3:22 is notoriously difficult to translate and would raise the question, by whose faith is someone justified (3:29-30), their own or the faithfulness of Jesus. Second, there is a difference in prepositions in this passage that has been the source of much scholarly debate. *Ek* is used for Jews, *dia* for Gentiles. While the researcher acknowledges these debates, the debates do not advance the argument of this research project and will not be discussed further.

⁸² Jewett, 58.

Paul used the most sacred command of the Hebrew Scriptures to show the equality of people before God despite their ethnic differences.

After showing that God is impartial, Paul continued this line of reason in Romans 10:12-13, when he said, “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’” Paul used two passages from Joel to make a startling claim. The “Lord” Paul was pointing to has its antecedent in 10:9, when he called for the people to confess with their lips that “Jesus is Lord.” Joseph Fitzmyer saw this and wrote, “The risen Christ as *Kyrios* is ‘Lord of all’. Paul would mean by ‘all’ not just the Jew and Greek of v 12a or Israel and the Gentiles of 9:30-31, but all human beings.”⁸³ Likewise, Dunn stated, “It is now through this Christ that all will be saved, share in the final wholeness of God’s fulfilled purpose for the world – and that all includes Jews as well as Greeks.”⁸⁴ The Christological statement that Paul was making must not be minimized. Dunn pointed out the similarity between this passage and the passage in 3:29-30. If God is one, he is God of all. If Christ is Lord, he is Lord of all. He wrote about the quotations from Joel, “This hope and promise held out in Joel with reference to the God of Israel, Paul refers without any apparent qualm to the exalted Christ.”⁸⁵

This claim was massive. As Rodriguez rightly pointed out,

⁸³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 33, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 592.

⁸⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *Word Bible Commentary*, vol. 38B *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1988), 618.

⁸⁵ Dunn, 617.

Jews, no less than the gentile believers in Rome, have a place within the plan and blessing of God, and the gentiles' adoption into God's family has not displaced the Jews from God's covenant ... *Israel* finds its restoration in the proclamation that her Messiah is Jesus.⁸⁶

Paul was not seeking to minimize the place or role of the Jews. Schellenburg asserted that it is "difficult to sustain the notion that Paul's emphasis on unity in Christ results in a radical devaluation of ethnicity."⁸⁷ Rather, "Paul's stress is on the wideness of God's mercy."⁸⁸ Jewett speculated that,

The argument comes to a conclusion that is fully supportive of the missionary project that Paul wishes to promote: to preach the gospel of Christ crucified to the end of the known world and thus to overcome the destructive distinctions and imperial exploitations that had ruined the world.⁸⁹

Paul knew that the multiethnic tensions based on ethnic distinctions within the church at Rome had a solution: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This was what Paul was pointing to when he said, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (Rom. 11:32). This was his concluding statement for Romans 9-11. As Dunn put it, "Israel's particular covenant privileges, summed up as God's mercy to Israel, have been extended to all."⁹⁰ While that was true, it seems like this passage could be a summarizing statement for the whole book. After all, Paul did not use the term "all" lightly. In 3:23, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Here Paul was saying that it was God's plan for all to sin, so that God may be merciful to all. Beverly Gaventa found interesting the connection to "all creation" in Romans 8. She stated, "The

⁸⁶ Rodriguez, 206-7.

⁸⁷ Schellenberg, 16.

⁸⁸ Witherington and Hyatt, 263.

⁸⁹ Jewett, 137.

⁹⁰ Dunn, 696.

gospel claims the totality of creation.”⁹¹ This was what Fitzmayer pointed to when he wrote, “For Paul, God himself will bring everything to a good and proper conclusion through Christ Jesus.”⁹² That was why following this verse Paul transitioned to doxological praise of God (Rom. 11:33-36).

Theodore Snider picked up a theme related to the multiethnic tension within the Roman church. He wrote,

Paul became convinced that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was God’s revelation that the good news of freedom from the impulses of evil was available to *all* persons, so that from that time on, there would be no distinctions made between persons in terms of superiority or chosenness.⁹³

God, through Jesus, leveled the field and has declared that all people are welcome to be God’s people. As Wright wrote, “Paul does not want his addressees to see themselves as basically ‘Jews’ and ‘gentiles’ at all, but as Messiah-people.”⁹⁴

So it was at this point where Romans 14 and 15 came into focus and Paul offered practical implications of this theology of God’s impartiality. Paul wrote about two particular issues in the church in Rome: diet and special days. Tobin wrote, “The issues that divide the community concern two different areas of Jewish observance: dietary laws and Sabbath observance.”⁹⁵ According to Romans, the strong did not have dietary laws or practice special days, while the weak did. The most common belief was that the Gentile

⁹¹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel According to Paul*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 122.

⁹² Fitzmayer, 629.

⁹³ Theodore M. Snider, *The Continuity of Salvation: A Study of Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 1984), 49.

⁹⁴ N T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 4, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2013), 397, Kindle.

⁹⁵ Tobin, 404.

Christians were the “strong,” and Paul considered himself part of this group, while the Jewish Christians were the “weak.”

Witherington agreed with Tobin’s perspective. He wrote, “Paul seems to be genuinely aware of some issues that need to be dealt with, issues between the Jewish Christian minority and the Gentile Christian majority.”⁹⁶ He added,

The divisions especially involved the marginalizing of the Jewish Christians. So Paul must offer a strong exhortation to the dominant Gentile Christians to welcome, receive, be hospitable to, and not offend the weaker Jewish Christians, who have more scruples about food and observance of days.⁹⁷

This seemed like a plausible reading of the text, but other scholars have come to different conclusions about the identity of the “weak” and the “strong.”

One perspective claimed that it is not clear that this was an issue between Jews and Gentiles. Tobin suggested that the start of the Christian community was made up of Jewish followers and Gentile god-fearers who also observed Jewish customs.⁹⁸ Therefore, Paul’s designation of weak and strong was not necessarily about Jews and Gentiles, but possibly about those who observe Jewish customs and those who do not. Dunn argued along these lines when he wrote,

More likely the section evidences Paul’s knowledge of circumstances in Rome itself, at least in broad terms, with tensions between those who saw themselves as part of an essentially Jewish movement and therefore obligated to observe the characteristic and distinctive Jewish customs, and those who shared Paul’s understanding of a gospel which transcended Jewish particularity.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Witherington and Hyatt, 326.

⁹⁷ Witherington and Hyatt, 327.

⁹⁸ Tobin, 408.

⁹⁹ Dunn, 795.

Judaism was at the heart of the conflict within this church, but scholars are divided on whether it was Judaism practiced by Jews or potentially Judaism as practiced by Gentile god-fearers. Wright observed, “What is really interesting about Romans 14 is the fact that nowhere in the chapter does Paul mention ‘Jews’ or ‘gentiles’ at all.”¹⁰⁰ Any conclusion about the specific makeup of the parties in conflict was speculative.

A few things can be said definitively about this passage. Das wrote, “On the other hand, that the weak were observing the Jewish distinctions between clean and unclean foods is clear, because the terminology Paul employs is unique to Judaism.”¹⁰¹ Jewish practices were at the heart of the conflict. But Paul did not address those who are practicing dietary restrictions or special days. Instead, as Nanos pointed out, Paul’s admonition was that “The strong should change their own behavior and act like the weak.”¹⁰² Walters added, “Paul’s admonitions in 14-15 reflect his desire for greater harmony between Christians who ‘live like Jews’ and those who do not.”¹⁰³ Paul’s desire was for those who were strong in their faith to sympathize with those who were weak in the faith for the sake of the church.

This was a striking difference between what Paul wrote to the Galatians and what Paul was saying here. Instead of leaving Judaism (or paganism) behind, as Paul was clearly calling for the Galatians to do, Paul’s message to the Romans was to be much more inclusive. This would make sense if the Jerusalem council occurred between the

¹⁰⁰ Wright, 397.

¹⁰¹ Das, 108.

¹⁰² Nanos, 117.

¹⁰³ Walters, 92.

writing of Galatians and the writing of Romans. Paul's stance softened as the perspective of the church has come closer to him.

Wright showed that “at the heart of [Paul's] work is the yearning and striving for messianic unity across traditional boundaries.”¹⁰⁴ Paul was striving to bring these parties together. In fact, “Paul is using deliberative rhetoric about peace and upbuilding and being of one mind in order to unify the Christians in Rome.”¹⁰⁵ Paul was laying the theological and ethical foundation for a Christianity that included and transcended ethnicity.

The multiethnic goal of this letter was that they be unified. Paul prayed for these Christians, “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5-6). Paul's vision of the church was multiethnic and included and transcended Judaism.

Ephesians

Ephesians was the latest of the three letters. Following Paul's defense of the gospel in Galatians, the Council's verdict that the Gentiles were welcome in Acts 15, and Paul's softening stance in Romans, Ephesians was a letter that laid out the multiethnic claims of the gospel. A major theme of this letter was the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul not only thought it was possible; he largely laid out the theological foundation for why this was necessary.

¹⁰⁴ Wright, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Witherington and Hyatt, 327.

Ephesians began with a greeting, a blessing and a prayer of thanksgiving.

Ephesians 1 established the overall themes of the letter, including the mystery of God's will, the salvation of the Ephesians, and what God desires of his people. However, the multiethnic appeal began in Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:1-10 has often been read as one of the most foundational texts in evangelical Christianity. The text began with an exploration of the pre-conversion state of the Ephesians. Paul said that they "were dead through trespasses and sins." Paul speaks of the universal condition of disobedience and everyone being "children of wrath." Frank Thielman wrote, "Before they believed the gospel, Paul's readers experienced a living death in the vicious way of life they pursued."¹⁰⁶ Mark Roberts read this text as if we are the audience, and he added, "In our former life, we were spiritually dead, following the corrupted spirit of this age as well as the demonic spirit at work among human beings. All of us were once in this state, driven to gratify our fleshly cravings and deserving God's judgment."¹⁰⁷ Paul painted a picture of an all-encompassing plight in which humanity was mired.

Paul did this to set up a contrast based on God's character. Paul wrote, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even while we were dead through our trespasses" (Eph. 2:4). The plight of humanity was in direct contrast to the nature of God. Thielman wrote about this passage, "God has demonstrated the

¹⁰⁶ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 122.

¹⁰⁷ Mark D. Roberts, Tremper Longman, and Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary. New Testament Series*, vol. 10, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 62.

overwhelmingly merciful, loving and gracious nature of his character.”¹⁰⁸ As sinful and rebellious as humanity was, God was exceedingly loving and gracious and through Christ has saved us. Thielman added,

God has rescued those who are in Christ from the desperate plight of sinful rebellion against God and subservience to the devil by uniting them with Christ in his new life and position of victory over the enemy forces of the transcendent realm. He has re-created them so that they now walk not in transgressions, sins, the course of the world, the devil desires of their minds, and in fealty to the devil, but as God created human beings to live from the beginning.¹⁰⁹

By God’s grace, God has saved us. Paul makes it exceedingly clear that “this is not your own doing,” and it is “not the result of works” (Eph. 2:8-9). It is a testament to God’s character. Markus Barth wrote,

This God proves true to himself and his creatures by creating man anew so that he will live on the way prepared by God himself. No longer is mankind sold out and lost on the road of lapses and sins. God’s eternal will is now realized: men are made to praise him by their works.¹¹⁰

Contrary to the typical evangelical reading of this passage, the significance of this passage was not on individual or corporate salvation, much less anything to do with going to heaven after death. The message of this passage was purely about God. Stephen Fowl wrote,

Here there is little emphasis on the future aspect of salvation. Rather, the focus is on God’s mercy and love. Salvation becomes an occasion for displaying some of the deepest elements of God’s eternal character. Rather than focusing on the salvation of individuals or of the church, this passage displays a strongly theocentric focus.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Thielman, 140.

¹⁰⁹ Thielman, 147.

¹¹⁰ Markus Barth, *The Anchor Bible*, 2nd ed., vol. 34, *Ephesians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 252.

¹¹¹ Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 82.

Paul established the gracious character of God in this passage to point to the ecclesiological ramifications of their salvation, which God granted them. The character of God was the foundation for the Ephesians' community life.

The most significant passage regarding multiethnicity in Ephesians came from Ephesians 2:11-22. This passage was directly linked to the previous passage by the beginning phrase, "So then." Paul wrote,

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

There were five aspects of this passage that deserved further attention: (1) the five disadvantages of Gentiles before Christ, (2) the theme of peace, (3) the dividing wall and hostility, (4) reconciling two groups into one body, and (5) the household of God.

To begin with, Paul went back to the former state of the Ephesians, talking about the five disadvantages they had as Gentiles before Christ. The Ephesians would not have thought of themselves in these terms. Fowl wrote,

Romans, Greeks and other non-Jews in Ephesus would never refer to themselves as Gentiles. That designation only had currency within Judaism or in relation to Judaism. From the perspective of being in Christ, and as part of their remember, Roman or Greek or Scythian Ephesians need to learn that they are Gentiles. They need to remember (or reconceive) of their past as a Gentile past. They need to learn both what being a Gentile meant when they were outside of Christ and what it means now that they are in Christ.¹¹²

Paul's designation of the Ephesians as "Gentiles" may have been new to them, but it was clear that Ephesians was written from the vantage point of someone very familiar with Judaism. Charles Talbert added, "Jewish consciousness drew a sharp distinction between Jews and Gentiles."¹¹³ It was clear that this distinction was what was in view in this section.

To begin with, Paul said the Gentile Ephesians were "without Christ" (Eph. 2:12). Talbert argued that this meant they did not share the hope of a messiah that the Israelites had.¹¹⁴ Next, they were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" (Eph. 2:12). Talbert understood this as excluded from Israel and therefore not part of the people of God.¹¹⁵ They were "strangers to the covenants of promise," meaning that God's promises to Abraham and David did not apply to them. Further, they had "no hope." And ultimately, they were "without God." This did not mean that they did not worship gods, but that they were without the one true God.

Paul's reminder of these disadvantages was not conducive to unifying Jews and Gentiles. The multiethnic tension that had existed between Jews and non-Jews was on

¹¹² Fowl, 85-86.

¹¹³ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, Paideia: Commentaries On the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2007), 77.

¹¹⁴ Talbert, 77.

¹¹⁵ Talbert, 78.

full display in the former status of the Gentiles. However, Paul was using a technique that he used in the previous passage as well, calling for the Ephesians to “remember” their status before Christ came. It was a previous status, not the status quo, which Paul had in mind. That was why the first two words Ephesians 2:13 had so much weight. Paul said, “But now.” This signaled that something has changed from their former state.

Further, there was an image Paul employed of a “dividing wall” to illustrate the relational distance between Jews and Gentiles prior to Christ. There were two primary schools of thought on what this dividing wall was. On the one hand, F. F. Bruce argued that it was a literal dividing wall that Paul was metaphorically using. He wrote,

A vertical barrier stood in the temple precincts in Jerusalem, preventing Gentiles from proceeding from the outer court (the court of the Gentiles) into any of the inner courts. Josephus describes how this barrier encircled the higher ground which contained the inner courts and had attached to it at intervals notices in Greek and Latin warning Gentiles not to proceed farther on pain of death.¹¹⁶

Bruce added, “According to Acts 21:27-36, Paul’s arrest came about because he was charged with aiding and abetting illegal entry by a Gentile Christian through the temple barrier.”¹¹⁷ That may be true and the imagery makes sense, but the shortcoming of this idea was determining how familiar Gentile Christians in Ephesus would have been with the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

The passage itself could be read as if the dividing wall was the law. Again, Paul wrote that Christ has broken down “the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances.” Bonnie Thurston wrote, “Verse 15 makes explicit that the hostility between Jew and Gentile was embodied by the

¹¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984), 297.

¹¹⁷ Bruce, 298.

law, which to the Gentiles seemed petty and meaningless.”¹¹⁸ This created a canonical conundrum when trying to mesh what is written in Ephesians with what Paul wrote to the Romans, and even with parts of the Gospels.

Fowl advocated understanding the “dividing wall” and “hostility” in a more general sense as the “fundamental division between Jew and Gentile.”¹¹⁹ This preserved Ephesians in relation to Romans and the Gospels, and it maintained the idea that God did not make covenants and promises with Israel simply to undermine them and create new promises and covenants with Christians.

Either way, Paul painted a bleak picture of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. There needed to be reconciliation with God and with each other. Bruce wrote, “Human hostility to God has to be overcome ... and hostility within the human family must similarly be overcome. Both forms of hostility have been ‘put to death’ by Christ through his own death on the cross.”¹²⁰ Paul recognized that in the cross reconciliation was found.

There was also in this passage a theme of “peace.” This word appeared four times in this passage and ends up being a major keyword in the letter. Peace was often conceived of as the absence of war or possibly the absence of conflict. However, the New Testament use of this term was dependent on the Hebrew meaning of peace. As Fowl points out, “Peace is, rather, talking about *shalom*, the peace that results from the

¹¹⁸ Bonnie Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 109.

¹¹⁹ Fowl, 90.

¹²⁰ Bruce, 300.

restoration of right relationships with God and others.”¹²¹ Roberts explained that the semantic range of peace includes “peace, friendship, happiness, well-being, prosperity, health, luck, kindness, salvation.”¹²² To recognize the *shalom* meaning of peace was very important in this text, but it did not quite capture the full meaning of what Paul was writing.

“Peace” in this passage should not be understood apart from Christ, who was more than just the peacemaking agent in the passage. John Paul Heil argued, “In this context the emphasis is on the peace that Christ himself is for the alienation between Jews and Gentiles.”¹²³ What Christ has done has ramifications not just for the Jews or for the Gentiles, but somehow has ramifications for how Jews and Gentiles exist together. Heil picked up on Paul’s use of pronouns in this passage, and pointed out that instead of Paul using the plural “you” to refer to the Gentile Ephesians or the plural “we” to refer to the Jews, that Christ is “our peace means that he is peace for all of us believers.”¹²⁴ The peace of Christ was a very significant idea that Paul was using in this passage and throughout the letter.

Roberts recognized the significance of Paul’s claim in light of the introductory remarks in the letter. He wrote,

Christ’s making peace in 2:14-18 expresses and exemplifies God’s cosmic purpose as revealed in 1:10 ... Paul could just as well have said in chapter 1 that God’s purpose is ‘to make peace among all things in heaven and on earth under

¹²¹ Fowl, 90.

¹²² Roberts, Longman and McKnight, 79.

¹²³ John Paul Heil, *Society of Biblical Literature Studies in Biblical Literature*, vol. 13, *Ephesians: Empowerment to Walk in Love for the Unity of All in Christ* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 116.

¹²⁴ Heil, 116.

Christ.’ Thus the peace that exists between Jews and Gentiles is one essential aspect of the uniting of all things in Christ.¹²⁵

The peace of Christ was the hope for this multiethnic community. Therefore, the language Paul used in this passage to express the hope of reconciliation that came through the cross is of Christ “reconciling both groups to God in one body” (Eph. 2:16). Fowl made clear that there is an order to this. He wrote, “At this point it seems clear that the reconciliation of Gentile and Jew in Christ is predicated on and enabled by their prior reconciliation with God in Christ.”¹²⁶ Through their reconciliation with God, they can be reconciled with each other. Thielman wrote, “Christ did all this, Paul says, through his death on the cross. His death made it possible for him to present to God both Jewish and Gentile believers, now united peacefully with each other as a newly created human being.”¹²⁷ Thielman here used the language of “a newly created human being” whereas the NRSV translates “one body.” Thielman was pointing to something new being formed. F.F. Bruce wrote,

Whereas Jews formerly tended to speak of the division of humanity into Jews and Gentiles, Paul makes a threefold classification into Jews, Greeks (Gentiles), and the church of God, the last embracing former Jews and former Gentiles. No wonder the Christians spoke of themselves as a “third race” or “new race,” no longer Jewish, no longer Gentile.¹²⁸

There was also the reference to the church being “his [Christ’s] body” in Ephesians 1:23, a metaphor that was picked up again in Ephesians seven times. This new

¹²⁵ Roberts, Longman and McKnight, 79.

¹²⁶ Fowl, 96.

¹²⁷ Thielman, 176.

¹²⁸ Bruce, 296.

body that has been established by the death of Christ on the cross was not separated by ethnicity but was united by Christ. God joined them together and created something new.

Paul used another metaphor to express this idea as well, expressing that the Ephesians were now being built “into a dwelling place for God” of which Christ is “the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Thurston pointed out the Jewish references to the temple that Paul was pointing to when she wrote,

For the Jews, the Temple was the place where God was uniquely present. Now, for Christians, be they Jews or Gentiles, God is uniquely present in the church, which owes its sanctity to Christ. . . . The implication is that, without other Christians, we cannot be built. It is in the church and in Christians that God is understood to dwell.¹²⁹

When Christ reconciled people through the cross, it was for a purpose. They were built together to form a dwelling place for God. Bruce expounded on this, “As the God of Israel had once taken up residence in the wilderness tabernacle and later in the Jerusalem temple by his name and his glory, so now by his Spirit he makes the fellowship of believers, Jewish and Gentile alike, his chosen dwelling place.”¹³⁰

Thurston wrote, “The equal partnership of Gentiles and Jews is perhaps the fundamental theological claim of Ephesians.”¹³¹ The cross of Christ, the peace of Christ, the grace of God, the work of God, the body of Christ, all of these themes pointed to the ecclesiological reality of the multiethnic community in which God resides. What God has brought together in Christ, man must not separate.

¹²⁹ Thurston, 111.

¹³⁰ Bruce, 307.

¹³¹ Thurston, 111.

In Christ Jesus, the doors have flung open and everyone was welcome, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality or birthright. This does not mean that they lost their ethnic identities. However, as William Campbell explained, “Pauline transformation in Christ does not mean the creation of a new group without ethnic identity but rather the transformation of those who are Greeks into transformed Greeks, and of Judeans into transformed Judeans in Christ.”¹³² This was Paul’s vision for the church.

In light of this, Paul wanted the Ephesians to live as one people. He called on the Christians to “live lives worthy of the calling...bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3). He again employed the analogy of the church as a body, with Christ as the head, and called on the church to build each other up in love (Eph. 4:15-16; 1:23). For the body to be healthy, the Christians were going to need to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). Jews and Gentiles were members of the same body, were one new humanity, and they ought to live in love toward one another.

Paul seemed to be very grateful for this church, particularly for their “faith in the Lord Jesus” and their “love toward all the saints” (Eph 1:15). The “all” in that statement was revealing. As Paul has painted this picture of a multicultural church, he was inspired by the way that this particular church loved one another. Regardless of race or culture, this church shared a common love. In that sense, Ephesians was a good model for what a multicultural church should be.

¹³² William S. Campbell, “Unity in Diversity in the Church: Transformed Identities and the Peace of Christ in Ephesians,” *Transformation* 25, no. 1, (2008): 15.

Conclusions

As more and more Gentiles put their faith in Jesus, the predominately Jewish church had to ask questions about what it meant for the Gentiles to be Christians. What was the relationship between faith in Jesus and the law? What was the relationship between circumcision and salvation? As Paul and others answered these questions, the multiethnic reality of the gospel became more and more clear. God's desire was for his church to be made up of people from all tribes and nations and tongues. God's church was multiethnic from the beginning.

Paul's letter to the Galatians represented the core truth that the Gentiles are included in the people of God without needing to become Jewish. The Jerusalem Council affirmed this truth, holding the Gentiles to simply observe the same rules and practices required of the Gentiles living among the Jews. The Romans were reminded that God has included the Gentiles with people of God, but God has not given up on the Jews. Paul's letter to the Ephesians laid out the multiethnic reality of the gospel, that in Jesus people of different ethnicities are brought together to form something new.

The world was divided between Jews and Gentiles in the eyes of the Jews, but when Jesus came he reconciled people to God and to each other. The early church began as a Jewish movement. Paul was one of the apostles who brought the gospel to the Gentile world, and the church became multiethnic. This was God's plan.

The division in the churches of the ancient world between ethnic groups is analogous to the division in the United States between Black and White Christians. The Scriptures are clear that God was reconciling these separated groups into a new humanity, and just as God reconciled people groups then, God is reconciling people groups today.

The division in Churches of Christ between Black and White churches is an affront to the gospel that reconciles us together. The power of the gospel is not fully experienced when people allow ethnicity to divide them. This project looks at few places where there has been a movement to reconcile churches through mergers across ethnic lines.

CHAPTER THREE: MULTIETHNIC CHURCHES, CHURCHES OF CHRIST, AND CHURCH MERGERS

Based on the parameters of this project, the researcher engaged with three distinct streams of literature: the multiethnic church in America, Churches of Christ, and church mergers. Each of these streams was examined individually and then brought together to form the research instruments for this project.

The Multiethnic Church in America

Having established the biblical foundation for the multiethnic church, it was necessary to look at the status of the multiethnic church in America. This section was further divided into three subsections: first, the researcher reviewed the literature concerning race and ethnicity in the American church, then the researcher focused on models of the multiethnic church found in the literature, and finally, focus on healthy markers of the multiethnic church gathered from the literature.

Race and Ethnicity in the American Church

The literature regarding race and ethnicity within the American church is not hopeful. According to Efreem Smith, “The great dilemma of the church today is that we are living in an increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural reality, but you’d never know it from the dominant picture of the church in the United States.”¹³³ Within the literature, this reality of the dominance of homogeneous churches became abundantly clear.

¹³³ Efreem Smith, *Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series*, vol. 59, *The Post-Black and Post-White Church: Becoming the Beloved Community in a Multi-Ethnic World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 118.

Michael Emerson and Christian Smith wrote *Divided By Faith* in 2000.¹³⁴ This was a key book that most of the other literature the researcher examined utilized. In their book, they offered a staggering reality for the evangelical church in America. They wrote, “Evangelicals come from all ethnic and racial backgrounds, but nearly 90 percent of Americans who call themselves evangelicals are white.”¹³⁵ In a follow-up book, the authors wrote, “The nation’s religious congregations have long been highly racially segregated. If we define a racially mixed congregation as one in which no one racial group is 80 percent or more of the congregation ... the percentage that are racially mixed drops to five and a half.”¹³⁶ This statistic was reiterated throughout the book. More than 94 percent of churches have at least one racial group that makes up 80 percent of the church. Emerson and Smith made clear throughout their book that race and ethnicity are the dividing lines in most congregations. Within this conversation, David Stevens added some statistics that were striking. He wrote, “Churches today are more segregated than they were prior to the abolition of slavery.”¹³⁷ He added that churches are ten times more segregated than their neighborhoods and 20 times more segregated than nearby public schools.¹³⁸ The reality is that the evangelical church in America is segregated by race.

Emerson and Smith make clear that race is a social construct. They write,

¹³⁴ Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7-8, Kindle.

¹³⁵ Emerson and Smith, 3, Kindle.

¹³⁶ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

¹³⁷ David Stevens, *God's New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 21.

¹³⁸ Stevens, 21.

Although it may seem odd to many Americans, who are socialized into the reality of race from an early age, ‘race’ as a social construct arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to justify the overtaking and enslaving of whole people groups. . . . Furthermore, due to the origins of the idea of race, the placement of people in racial groups always means some form of hierarchy.¹³⁹

Race is a construct created by those with power to diminish the power of others, creating a hierarchy. The hierarchy that has been created results in racism. Smith wrote, “Racism is prejudice plus power used to discriminate or oppress a group of people solely because of their race.”¹⁴⁰ Most often in the literature concerning the church, authors chose to talk about ethnicity instead of race, usually referring to the church as multiethnic instead of multiracial. However, this was not always the case. Korie Edwards wrote,

While race and ethnicity overlap, they are distinct and have different consequences. Races are the basis of social systems that distribute rewards, such as good jobs, desirable neighborhoods, and political power, along racial lines. People placed in the dominant stratum establish their racial classifications and have greater access to and possession of society’s valuable resources and more power to reserve them for their group. They are recognized as worthy of their status even if they have not done anything to achieve it. Ethnicity is largely about claims of shared culture, history, or common descent. . . . Ethnic differences are important, but they have not produced nearly the same level of discord and disparities as race.¹⁴¹

Based on the literature, it is clear that race plays a significant role in the church along with ethnicity.

The predominately White church has been the face of American Christianity for the past 200 years. In his stirring and sometimes caustic book *The Color of Compromise*, Jamar Tisby wrote, “Historically speaking, when faced with the choice between racism

¹³⁹ Emerson and Smith, 7-8, Kindle.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, 76.

¹⁴¹ Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8-9.

and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous Christianity. They chose comfort over constructive conflict and in so doing created and maintained a status quo of injustice.”¹⁴² His book describes many of the ways that the American church has been complicit in the racial hierarchy that exists within society today by examining particular historical periods where this can be clearly seen.

According to the literature, there are a few forces at work that have bolstered this racial reality in the church. First, there is the force of White normativity. This is a significant emphasis of Korie Edwards’ book. She wrote,

White normativity reinforces the normalization of whites’ cultural practices, ideologies, and location within the racial hierarchy such that how whites do things; their understandings about life, society and the world; and their dominant social location over other racial groups are accepted as just “how things are.”¹⁴³

This perspective is most often not questioned. Edwards continued, “This hegemonic whiteness, hedged by a ‘commonsense’ ideology of how life ought to be, normalizes the practices and understandings of whites and affirms their interests.”¹⁴⁴ In the particular church that Edwards was studying, this exhibited itself in one particular exercise she conducted. She would meet with a church member and give them a stack of cards. Each card had an identity written on it, and she asked the participants to pull out the cards that they would identify themselves with and put them in order of significance. In the list of identities, by average African-Americans ranked race as fifth most

¹⁴² Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 1, Kindle.

¹⁴³ Edwards, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Edwards 11.

significant and Whites ranked race as fourteenth most significant. When asked about this, almost all of the Whites had trouble explaining what it means to be White.¹⁴⁵ This is evidence of White normativity, and it is a very strong force in the church. Mark DeYmaz wrote of White churches, “We can safely conclude that homogeneous church leadership has proven reluctant, unwilling, or unable to adapt their own majority culture in order to accommodate individuals of varying ethnic or economic backgrounds within the local church.”¹⁴⁶

Second, there is what Emerson and Smith called the “White evangelical toolkit.”

They wrote,

The racially important cultural tools in the white evangelical tool kit are ‘accountable freewill individualism,’ ‘relationalism’ (attaching central importance to interpersonal relationships), and anti-structuralism (inability to perceive or unwillingness to accept social structural influences).¹⁴⁷

According to the authors, these three perspectives are central to their entire worldview. At issue was the claim that they perpetuate the racism that has existed throughout the history of America. Concerning this perspective, Kathleen Garces-Foley wrote,

To challenge the way White evangelicals understand and seek to eradicate racism is to challenge the very basis of their worldview, and as Emerson and Smith argue, their faith in the American way of life. ... The myopic insistence that racial reconciliation must proceed from one heart at a time, and from the grassroots, forestalls the ability of evangelicals to fully comprehend and thus successfully combat racial divisions in America.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Edwards, 84-89.

¹⁴⁶ Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/John Wiley, 2007), 18.

¹⁴⁷ Emerson and Smith, loc1541, Kindle.

¹⁴⁸ Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church On a Mission* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.

These tools, coupled with White normativity, do not make sense of the reality of White privilege and racial disenfranchisement, both in society and within the church.

The third force was an idea that was popularized by church growth experts Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner: the homogeneous unit principle (HUP). McGavran wrote the following thesis in a book they published together, “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.”¹⁴⁹ On the back cover of his 1979 book *Our Kind of People* was the claim, “Wagner transforms the statement that ‘11 A.M. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America’ from a millstone around Christian necks into a dynamic tool for assuring Christian growth.”¹⁵⁰ Many churches, particularly those who were part of the church growth movement, utilized this principle. On the surface, this makes sense. It is what sociologists refer to as the “homophily principle,” which basically says that birds of a feather flock together.¹⁵¹ If a person wants to grow their church fast, the target audience should be co-ethnics. But DeYmaz made a poignant statement, “It might very well be the case that churches grow fastest when they are homogeneous. But I am not convinced they do so biblically.”¹⁵² This was a common criticism. Lisa Lamb wrote of Wagner and McGavran, “They borrowed heavily from contemporary marketing strategies, which blinded them to key

¹⁴⁹ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed., ed. C Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 163.

¹⁵⁰ C Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: J. Knox Press, 1979).

¹⁵¹ Garces-Foley, 130.

¹⁵² DeYmaz, 62.

components of the gospel.”¹⁵³ Rene Padilla went even further, “The use of the homogeneous unit principle for church growth has no biblical foundation. Its advocates have taken as their starting point a sociological observation and developed a missionary strategy; only then, a posteriori, have they made the attempt to find biblical support.”¹⁵⁴

Among the academic critics of the homogeneous unit principle was Bruce Fong. Fong’s dissertation critiqued the homogeneous unit principle in light of a practical theology perspective of mutual acceptance of one another in Christ as the badge of Christian love. He explained that the pragmatism that was the basis for the HUP is insufficient when he wrote,

Proponents of the HUP theory argue that their critics have never disproved McGavran’s thesis statement. But the validity of this statement is not the issue. Rather, the issue is whether the statement is at all germane to how the church ought to operate. It is not. Biblical theology directs the church to operate according to an ecclesiology that centers on who Christ is. The HUP theory can only exist when the church operates according to an ecclesiology that centers on what man wants.¹⁵⁵

Despite all the criticism, the HUP has been a strong force in the American church. Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez wrote that at least in part due to the HUP, “To this day the vast majority of churches in the United States tend to be ethnically or culturally specific with the related values and practices.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Lisa Washington Lamb, *Blessed and Beautiful: Multiethnic Churches and the Preaching That Sustains Them*, Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 42.

¹⁵⁴ C. Rene Padilla, “The Unity of the Church” in *The American Society of Missiology Series*, vol. 43, *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 301.

¹⁵⁵ Bruce W. Fong, *Racial Equality in the Church: A Critique of the Homogeneous Unit Principle in Light of a Practical Theology Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 98.

¹⁵⁶ Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 17.

Multiethnic Church Models

Despite the forces at work maintaining ethnic and racial segregation within the American church, there have been a number of churches that have taken the multiethnic ramifications of the gospel seriously. In the literature, a few models of the multiethnic church emerged that are worthy of consideration.

Rodney Woo told the story of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Alief, Texas, a suburb of Houston. Woo was the senior pastor at Wilcrest beginning in 1992, when he interviewed for the job with the clear calling to help the church transition into being multiethnic.¹⁵⁷ His goal was realized. As of 2008, Wilcrest had more than 44 countries represented in the congregation.¹⁵⁸ What began as a White-dominant church is now home to many people from different ethnic groups.

A second church that was discovered is Mosaic Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, founded in 2001 by Mark DeYmaz, one of the major voices in the multicultural church movement.¹⁵⁹ Mosaic has the following purpose statement:

Mosaic is not a church focused on racial reconciliation. Rather, we are focused on reconciling men and women to God through faith in Jesus Christ and on reconciling ourselves collectively with the principles and practices of local churches as described in the New Testament.¹⁶⁰

Mosaic meets in a converted K-Mart building and is now a church where more than 30 nations are represented in the communal worship.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Rodney Woo, *The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches*, (Nashville: B and H Academic, 2009), 4-6.

¹⁵⁸ Woo, 242.

¹⁵⁹ DeYmaz, xxvi.

¹⁶⁰ DeYmaz, xxvi-xxvii.

¹⁶¹ DeYmaz, back cover.

Another expression of a multiethnic church is Sanctuary Covenant Church in North Minneapolis. Efrem Smith planted this church in 2003 to be a culturally diverse church.¹⁶² The pursuit of Smith was to create a beloved community, a church that is post-Black and post-White.¹⁶³ The demographics of that church are 50 percent White, 40 percent African-American, and 10 percent a mix of Asian and Hispanic.¹⁶⁴

There were other churches discussed in the literature, including International Protestant Church in Zurich, Switzerland,¹⁶⁵ New Life Fellowship Church in New York City,¹⁶⁶ and Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles.¹⁶⁷ However, the churches examined above showed up repeatedly in the research and thus served as models for this movement.

Healthy Markers of the Multiethnic Church

The literature covered a wide variety of perspectives and conclusions that individuals and groups have made regarding healthy multiethnic churches. For the purposes of this chapter, the researcher covered a few ideas of what makes a healthy multiethnic church that seem most pertinent to this project.

One of the clearest themes that emerged in the literature was the need for the leadership of the church to reflect the racial identities of the church. Woo wrote, “With

¹⁶² Smith, xiii.

¹⁶³ Smith, 200.

¹⁶⁴ Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into your Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 217.

¹⁶⁵ Douglas Brouwer, *How to Become a Multicultural Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017).

¹⁶⁶ DeYmaz and Li, 186-7.

¹⁶⁷ Garces-Foley, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide*.

the biblical model of racially representative leadership clearly established in Acts 6 with the ‘Faithful Seven,’ God provided a clear mandate to incorporate racially diverse leadership.”¹⁶⁸ A common critique of this line of reasoning was that the most qualified person should lead, regardless of race. This color-blind criticism is what the authors of *United by Faith* had in mind when they wrote,

Our leadership philosophy sounds like affirmative action, and on that basis some may be inclined to reject it. One way to make this philosophy easier to accept is to think of racial identity as an additional asset for a given leadership position. If a congregation wants to reach a nearby Hmong population, then hiring a Hmong education minister will not only help to organize the church’s educational ministry but will also give visiting Hmong a visual presence that makes the church more attractive to them. Being Hmong allows the minister to bring an additional asset to the ministry that a non-Hmong cannot bring. Multiracial churches, then, should intentionally use race as a factor to help them maintain, or build on, their racial diversity.¹⁶⁹

Again, Woo added, “Racially shared leadership is not only one of the primary means by which to propagate the multiracial vision, but it is also one of the most effective ways to avoid conflict in the multiracial setting.”¹⁷⁰ For a multiethnic church to be healthy, the leadership of the church should be multiethnic as well.

One of the core concerns in a multiethnic church was the way that the different ethnic groups integrate into one church body. Are new groups of people forced to assimilate into the dominant culture? Or is there a path of inclusion?

Assimilating to the majority culture was a popular pathway, but it does not lead to integration. To put a numerical point on this, James Forbes said, “A truly diverse congregation where anybody enjoys more than 75 percent of what is going on is not

¹⁶⁸ Woo, 168.

¹⁶⁹ DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey and Kim, 177.

¹⁷⁰ Woo, 212.

thoroughly integrated.”¹⁷¹ Kathy Black wrote of assimilation, “Assimilationism, on the other hand, is an attitude that forces people to reject their own ethnic consciousness in order to adhere to the core principles and behaviors of the dominant group.”¹⁷² This sad state was the conclusion of the research on the church that Edwards examined:

“Interracial churches work to the extent that they are, first, comfortable places for whites to attend. This is because whites are accustomed to their cultural practices and ideologies being the norm and to being structurally dominant in nearly every social institution.”¹⁷³

For a multiethnic church to be healthy, assimilation cannot be the strategy for integration.

Rather, for a multiethnic church to be healthy, there needs to be a path of inclusion. In *United by Faith*, the authors wrote, “*Assimilation* – to become one and the same – is not the goal. *Integration* – to be united in our equally respected differences – is the goal.”¹⁷⁴ This aligned well with Stevens, who wrote, “Even all of this, however, is not a matter of *assimilation* (adopting to our culture or norms) or of *accommodation* (superficially adjusting to their culture or norms), but of *inclusion* (all adopting the biblical norms of diversity in unity) as we strive by God’s grace to become a healthy multiethnic church.”¹⁷⁵ Further, Black proposed a model of reciprocal assimilation, where

¹⁷¹ DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey and Kim, 82.

¹⁷² Black, Kathy. "Promises and Problems of a Multiethnic Church" in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century*, Todd Eric Johnson ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 142.

¹⁷³ Edwards, 139.

¹⁷⁴ DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey and Kim, 139.

¹⁷⁵ Stevens, 238.

“together we can create a new way of being a church that integrates elements from the various cultures present.”¹⁷⁶

This aligned well with Efrem Smith’s proposal of creating a “third culture.” Smith wrote, “Third culture is the creation of kingdom culture on earth – the beloved community.”¹⁷⁷ Near the end of his book, Smith concluded, “Third culture is the ethos that those in this church hope their discipleship focus will create. This beloved community is realized through a way of finding new identity in Christ. Instead of identity being about changing behavior alone, it’s a rethinking of race.”¹⁷⁸ This does not leave room for assimilation, because the dominant culture must give way to a new culture.

Healthy multiethnic churches must be intentional about integration, not seeking to make everyone become like the dominant culture, but rather create an inclusive culture that includes and transcends previous identities.

A third major theme that arose in the literature was the need for racial reconciliation. Reconciliation may be thought of as simply coming to a common ground of respect for one another, but the literature reveals that a significant aspect of reconciliation involves dealing with the past. In *United by Faith*, the authors emphasized that many African-American churches emerged as a result of being rejected by White churches.¹⁷⁹ On top of this, White culture perpetuated the myth that White people and African-Americans are now on an even playing field. History should make clear that this is not the case. Kenneth Greene wrote, “A first step would be for Whites to own their

¹⁷⁶ Black, 143.

¹⁷⁷ Smith, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Smith, 198.

¹⁷⁹ DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey and Kim, 111-113.

history, for White Americans to admit to their historic entitlements and to admit that there are good reasons—historic, economic, and political—why the myth of African American and White American sameness is a lie.”¹⁸⁰

In his essay in *Reconciliation Reconsidered*, William Lofton Turner wrote of the reality of historical trauma within the African-American communities in the United States, particularly focusing on the Churches of Christ. He wrote, “We will never truly move forward until we face our pasts.”¹⁸¹ Efreem Smith pointed in this same direction in his book. He concluded a chapter on race with this hope, “The more we know about the impact of race historically and today, the better chance we have at forging a new future as the beloved community.”¹⁸² The literature was clear, that without dealing with the past, there can be no moving forward.

Churches of Christ

This project focused on three Churches of Christ, so it was important to establish from the literature the ecclesial realities of this denomination. This again has been done in three steps: the history of the Churches of Christ, the values of Churches of Christ, and the ecclesial differences between Black and White Churches of Christ.

Before exploring this too far, there were a few particular pieces of literature that were extremely instrumental in this research. First, Wes Crawford’s thesis was a work that the researcher had been familiar with for some time and was extremely helpful in understanding the history of the division between White Churches of Christ and Black

¹⁸⁰ Holloway, loc. 2119, Kindle.

¹⁸¹ William Lofton Turner, “Seeking Higher Ground,” in *Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race in Churches of Christ*, ed. Tanya Smith Brice (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2016), 162.

¹⁸² Smith, 87.

Churches of Christ.¹⁸³ The more recent collaborative work done in *Reconciliation Reconsidered* was helpful in considering more voices and recognizing the consequences of a half-century of division.¹⁸⁴

History of Churches of Christ

The history of Churches of Christ in America began with the union of Alexander Campbell's "disciples of Christ" movement with Barton Stone's "Christians" movement in Lexington, Kentucky in 1831, later called the Stone-Campbell Movement (SCM).¹⁸⁵ The focus of the movement was on uniting Christians by stripping away everything but the Bible and seeking to restore the church of the first century.¹⁸⁶ This restoration principle became the most prominent feature of Churches of Christ. Richard Hughes wrote, "The defining characteristic of Churches of Christ throughout their history, until late in the twentieth century, was the notion of the restoration of primitive Christianity – the attempt to recover in the modern age the Christian faith as it was believed and practiced in the first century."¹⁸⁷ The desire was to be "Christians only, but not the only Christians."¹⁸⁸ This unity restoration movement did not take place in a vacuum, however, but on the American frontier of the 19th Century. As the nation was dividing in light of

¹⁸³ Theodore Wesley Crawford, "From Segregation to Independence: African-Americans in Churches of Christ" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2008).

¹⁸⁴ Tanya Smith Brice, ed., *Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race in Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2016).

¹⁸⁵ Douglas A. Foster, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), xxi.

¹⁸⁶ Douglas A. Foster, *The Story of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁸⁷ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 1.

¹⁸⁸ John Mark Hicks, <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=3901>, May 25, 2019.

the Civil War, unity became harder to hold onto and the SCM reflected this North/South division. The Civil War had a profound effect on the brotherhood of the country, and this was true of the SCM as well.¹⁸⁹

Following the Civil War, the South entered a period of Reconstruction. This created some tension within the movement. David Lipscomb called for Christians to disengage from civil government. This plea coincided with the radical racism that followed the emancipation of slaves. When African-Americans needed their Christian brothers and sisters to stand in solidarity with them against hatred, instead they found people unwilling to be allies. Further, the North/South division in the country left its effects on the SCM. Disciples of Christ became the primary wing of the SCM in the North, while Churches of Christ took hold in the South. In 1906, David Lipscomb declared that there were now two fellowships, no longer a united SCM.¹⁹⁰

The chasm that was forming was not just between Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ. Within Churches of Christ, there was a deep-seated division based on race and ethnicity. From the end of the Civil War with the emancipation in place, segregated congregations of Churches of Christ were the norm. African-American preachers like G.P. Bowser, Marshall Keeble, and many others were instrumental in drawing African-Americans to Jesus and forming congregations in the South. As Foster wrote, “The remarkable work of such preachers created the black Churches of Christ that today number over 1200 congregations with almost 170,000 members. Yet segregation was and is virtually absolute. Whites in Churches of Christ were firmly in the grips of the

¹⁸⁹ Ben Brewster, *Torn Asunder: The Civil War and the 1906 Division of the Disciples* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 2006), 112.

¹⁹⁰ Brewster, 15.

prevailing American mindset.”¹⁹¹ Efforts were made to maintain a relationship between White churches and Black churches, but this often took the form of paternalism instead of unity. Again, Foster wrote,

Paternalism was the most common relationship between black and white Churches of Christ in the years before the Civil Rights movement. On the one hand, white benefactors supported preachers like Keeble who clearly knew their place, and white churches made sure that their black brothers and sisters had separate places to meet. On the other hand, blacks like Bowser, who took a more militant stance against racial discrimination, often found it difficult to survive financially. A. B. Lipscomb, a nephew of David, epitomized the paternalistic attitudes in a 1931 Gospel Advocate article describing the success of Marshall Keeble in an evangelistic effort among blacks in Valdosta, Georgia: “The work among the colored people here was sponsored and financed by the white disciples. We have never made a better investment for the Lord nor any which brought such quick and happy results. ... This means that we now have better farm hands, better porters, better cooks, better housemaids than ever before.”¹⁹²

The attitudes of prominent men within the White Churches of Christ exposed the distance between Whites and Blacks that was prevalent in Southern society as well. Trust was at a premium and it was not getting better.

The gap deeply widened during the Civil Rights era. An event in 1967 typified this. Beginning in the 1950s, there were two colleges associated with the Black Churches of Christ: Southwestern in Terrell, TX and Nashville Christian Institute. In 1967, the board of Nashville Christian Institute made up of both Black and White men, decided to close and sell the school for \$225,000 and create a scholarship fund for African-American students to attend Lipscomb University, a White Church of Christ school also

¹⁹¹ Holloway, loc. 1,555, Kindle.

¹⁹² Holloway, loc. 1,559, Kindle.

in Nashville.¹⁹³ This decision did not go over well. An African-American minister is quoted as saying,

For all those years you refused to allow any of us to attend your school, then you took by force and against our will one of the only rallying points we had, let it be swallowed up in your multi-million dollar operation and then you say to us, ‘You can come over here and be like us now. We still don’t particularly value your culture and history and the way you live, and act, and worship, but you can come over here with us, as long as you just do like we do.’¹⁹⁴

In a 1968 article in the *Christian Chronicle*, Jack Evans wrote that this event “was one of the first signs that many of the 100,000 who make up a negro brotherhood, separated from the white brotherhood by scars far deeper than the railroad tracks in Terrell, Texas, are ready to exchange servility and dependence for independence and, if need be, estrangement.”¹⁹⁵ There were other events and summits in these years that were meant to draw Churches of Christ composed of different ethnicities together, but the opposition was mounting and deafening.

During the Civil Rights era, the White Churches of Christ were not integrating, and the African-American churches declared that they no longer needed the paternalism of White church to stay intact. Crawford’s thesis includes this line: “By 1967, however, African Americans had sought independence and had found it.”¹⁹⁶ The division was formed and remains to this day. As Eugene Lawton recently said, “We still have two

¹⁹³ Theodore Wesley Crawford, “From Segregation to Independence: African-Americans in Churches of Christ” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2008), 137-146.

¹⁹⁴ Holloway, loc. 1610, Kindle.

¹⁹⁵ Holloway, loc. 1636, Kindle.

¹⁹⁶ Crawford, 99.

brotherhoods — the white brotherhood and the black brotherhood — and we don't have too much fellowship between us.”¹⁹⁷

Churches of Christ today are not perceived to be doing well. Using data gathered by the Association of Religion Data Archives, it is clear that Churches of Christ are in decline.¹⁹⁸ According to Stan Granberg, “The Churches of Christ have been in a negative growth pattern since at least 1990, a period of almost thirty years.”¹⁹⁹ It is against this backdrop of disunity and segregation that the Churches of Christ examined in this study decided to merge.

Shared Values of Churches of Christ

Contributing to the ethnic division was the fact that most Churches of Christ shared three particular values that are interrelated: autonomy, an interpretive hermeneutic, and the relation to broader evangelicalism.

Autonomy

Churches of Christ are a free-church tradition that places a strong emphasis on local congregational autonomy. Robert C. Douglas wrote, “Church of Christ ecclesiology has always insisted upon the complete autonomy of the local church, emphasizing this can be the only focus of authority in religious affairs.”²⁰⁰ As Douglas later stated,

¹⁹⁷ Bobby Ross Jr. and Hamil R. Harris, “Fifty Years After Historic Meeting, Race Still Divides Churches of Christ,” *Christian Chronicle*, June 25, 2018, 8.

¹⁹⁸ “Churches of Christ States,” Association of Religion Data Archives, accessed April 29, 2019, http://www.thearda.com/ql2010/QL_S_ALL_2_1033c.asp.

¹⁹⁹ Stanley Granberg, “A Case Study of Growth and Decline: The Churches of Christ, 2006-2016,” *Great Commission Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 88-111.

²⁰⁰ Robert C. Douglas, *The Exercise of Informal Power Within the Church of Christ: Black Civil Rights, Muted Justice, and Denominational Politics* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 2008), 12.

“Formal extra-congregational authority has been absolutely rejected.”²⁰¹ In the absence of formal extra-congregational authority, informal authority has taken its place, namely through colleges and universities, newspapers, and occasionally through prominent preachers in the tradition speaking at lectureships.

Barclay Key optimistically wrote of the autonomy of Churches of Christ of the Civil Rights era, “the radical autonomy of local churches also meant that an individual church could pursue racial reconciliation when and as it pleased.”²⁰² While this meant freedom for a few churches to pursue reconciliation, it also meant that no churches would be forced to pursue reconciliation. During the era marked by division between Black and White Churches of Christ, informal sources of authority were highly instrumental in perpetuating the division, specifically from the White churches. White colleges were slow to integrate until the federal government forced it, White newspapers were largely silent on the racial division that existed, and prominent preachers like Lemmons were on the frontlines of demonizing leaders like Martin Luther King Jr.²⁰³

These colleges, lectureships, newspapers, and preachers are still sources of authority today within White Churches of Christ today, but now there are different informal sources of authority within the Black church tradition. Crawford ended a chapter of his dissertation with this thought:

Following this turbulent decade, African Americans mediated their theology and framed their identity from their own institutions, virtually losing all contact with the white constituency of Churches of Christ.

²⁰¹ Douglas, 139.

²⁰² Barclay Key, “Race and Restoration: Churches of Christ and the African American Freedom Struggle” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Florida, 2007), 267.

²⁰³ Crawford, 121.

Future generations would send their children to SWCC, read the *Christian Echo*, and attend the National Lectureship, the Annual Youth Conference, and the annual Thanksgiving lectureship held at SWCC. By 1967, a new denomination was forming.²⁰⁴

It is no accident that separation was easier in a tradition that values autonomy over cooperation. There has never been an official pronouncement that the Black Churches of Christ are a distinct group from the White Churches of Christ, but the reality bears out that this is the case. The value of autonomy within Churches of Christ has been a contributor to the division that exists today.

Interpretive Hermeneutic

The common way Churches of Christ read the Bible has been another contributor to the division. Crawford asserted, “As a biblicist denomination, biblical hermeneutics have stood at the center of Churches of Christ identity since their beginnings.”²⁰⁵ In recent years, much has been written about Alexander Campbell’s hermeneutic and the societal and philosophical forces that helped shape it, and in turn, shape the hermeneutic of the SCM. Hughes wrote of Campbell’s Baconian method of interpretation, “We recognize this procedure as the scientific method, and Campbell’s faith in this method of inquiry underscores the extent to which he viewed the study of the Bible as a kind of scientific enterprise.”²⁰⁶ Hughes added, “In Campbell’s view, the Bible was not so much a book of theology as a kind of scientific manual or technical blueprint, laying out in precise, factual detail the outlines both of primitive theology and the primitive church.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Crawford, 136.

²⁰⁵ Crawford, 182.

²⁰⁶ Hughes, 31.

²⁰⁷ Hughes, 32.

The result of this interpretive hermeneutic was a demarcation of what was considered theological and what was considered social or political. Hughes points out that while Campbell rejected slavery, he would not do so based on theology.²⁰⁸ Campbell's contemporary, Walter Scott, concluded, "Slavery is radically a political, not a religious evil."²⁰⁹ Further, Hughes argued that Campbell's hermeneutic "led him to a place of disproportionate emphasis on the conversion process."²¹⁰ This focus was at the cost of the ethical content of the Christian life, and this focus has been perpetuated ever since, known in Churches of Christ as the plan of salvation. In another work, Hughes wrote,

What happens when a Christian tradition defines the 'plan of salvation' not in terms of what God has done for us but rather in terms of the human response to divine commands? What happens is this – that the Christian tradition that fails to proclaim God's unmerited grace has severed the driving force behind the love and grace that, according to the gospel message, we must extend to others. ... And without that perspective they were powerless to speak or act in biblical and prophetic ways on behalf of people who, because of the color of their skin, had been marginalized and oppressed throughout the course of American history.²¹¹

Buster Dobbs' perspective is a good example of how the hermeneutical perspective contributed to the growing division:

The gospel of Jesus places the emphasis on the individual. The social gospel puts the emphasis on the community. The gospel of Jesus teaches soul salvation. The social gospel proclaims a community salvation. The gospel of Jesus encourages an emphasis on heaven and not on earth. The social gospel employs all of its energy in worldly, not heavenly interests.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Hughes, 274.

²⁰⁹ Walter Scott, "Reply," *The Evangelist* 4, (6 April 1835): 81.

²¹⁰ Hughes, 275.

²¹¹ Richard Hughes, "Reflections on Civil Rights and the White Churches of Christ," in Smith Brice, 88-94.

²¹² Buster Dobbs, "The Social Gospel is Not the Gospel," *Spiritual Sword* 4, (July 1973): 26.

Relation to Broader Protestantism

Churches of Christ have historically not associated with broader Protestantism. It is common to refer to Churches of Christ as non-denominational and for members of Churches of Christ to refer to other churches as “the denominations.” A significant reason for this was the confluence of the previous two values mentioned: autonomy and the pervasive hermeneutic. Douglas wrote, “Within the Church of Christ tradition no extra-congregational organization has had any right to exist. It is further claimed that none does exist, for that would be a violation of New Testament injunctions.”²¹³ This has created a certain deserved perspective on Churches of Christ from broader Christianity. Foster wrote, “Churches of Christ have often been known for the attitude that they were the only true Christians.”²¹⁴ It has been a common experience of many members of this group to have people ask, “Are you the ones who think you are the only ones going to heaven?”

At the time of the formal division between Black and White Churches of Christ, there was a shared perspective among most Churches of Christ. Hughes wrote, “By the 1950s and 1960s, the notion that one’s salvation depended on one’s belonging to the one true church had become for many members and congregations in this tradition the most important consideration of all.”²¹⁵ This exclusivism that permeated Churches of Christ often led to editors and churches writing formal letters of disfellowship with other churches and leaders.

²¹³ Douglas, 12.

²¹⁴ Douglas Foster, *The Story of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2013), 37.

²¹⁵ Hughes in Smith Brice, 96.

It is not difficult to imagine that during the height of the Civil Rights movement in our country the exclusivist attitudes that often functioned in the realm of theology could spill over into the realm of politics and social change. That is what happened from both sides. White leaders wrote off Black leaders, and Black leaders returned the favor. The die was cast; the division was happening.

Ecclesial Differences between Black and White Churches of Christ

Over the past 50 years, significant differences between Black and White Churches of Christ have emerged. There are differences in leadership, with African-American churches having a higher view of the preacher while White churches tend to be led by a plurality of elders.²¹⁶ There is a difference in worship style, with cultural practices and preferences, as well as hermeneutics, influencing the order of services and the choice of music.²¹⁷ The role of politics in the life of the church can vary from place to place, but in general White Churches of Christ are less politically open while Black churches can be very politically engaged. And ultimately, there is a difference between what both sides expect regarding reconciliation. White churches often want to leave the past in the past, while Black churches insist on dealing with the issues that led to the divide. The chasm has widened due to years of distance between the two groups.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. "African Americans in the Movement" (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 17.

²¹⁷ Crawford, 218.

²¹⁸ Crawford, 224.

Church Mergers

This project focused on three churches that came about through the merger of two homogeneous churches so the researcher believed it was critical to review the literature around church mergers.

There was an incongruity of definitions for a church merger within the literature. Derek Chinn defined a church merger as “joining together two or more distinct church congregations to form one congregation. In the process, both churches unite their people and assets to form a new identity and organization.”²¹⁹ Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, on the other hand, simply wrote about “two or more churches becoming one,” and the vast majority of their books was focused on a “lead church,” that will continue through the merger, and a “joining church,” which will become like or a part of the leading church.²²⁰ Inherent in Chinn’s definition was the idea of two equal parties working together to create a new church, whereas, in the second definition, it was assumed that the parties are not equal. This range of definitions in the literature creates some confusion about what constitutes a merger. Tomberlin and Bird were writing from the perspective of megachurches and consider Chinn’s definition part of “old math mergers,”²²¹ while Chinn was writing in favor of “joining single-race congregations together.”²²² Tomberlin and Bird’s expertise in the field was helpful but the scope of Chinn’s work more closely

²¹⁹ Derek Chinn, *1+1=1: Creating a Multiracial Church From Single Race Congregation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 7, Kindle.

²²⁰ Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, A Leadership Network Publication (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 3-5.

²²¹ Tomberlin and Bird, 16.

²²² Chinn, 6, Kindle.

aligns with the scope of this project. Therefore, Chinn’s definition of a church merger was preferable.

A considerable amount of literature has been devoted to the motivation behind church mergers. Tomberlin and Bird devoted a chapter of their book to “merger motives.”²²³ They differentiated between “wrong motives” and “potentially healthy motives.” Wrong motives included preservation, denial, personal gain, personal glory, and financial motivation only.²²⁴ On the other hand, potentially healthy motives included mission-driven mindsets, economic driven pressures, multisite driven momentum, succession driven strategies, reconciliation driven hope, and a desire to be multiethnic.²²⁵ They also made it clear that most often “a merger represents a blending of many of these motives at different levels.”²²⁶

Thomas Bandy and Page Brooks wrote, “Churches initially raise the question about merger because they are either experiencing a panic attack or a *kairos* moment.”²²⁷ They wrote that a panic attack can be brought on by just about anything and that behind the panic is a self-focused agenda. On the other hand, a *kairos* moment “describes an unexpected moment of divine revelation that changes everything for the good.”²²⁸ The orientation of a *kairos* moment is on what God is doing. Churches need to believe that God is leading them to merge.

²²³ Tomberlin and Bird, 35.

²²⁴ Tomberlin and Bird, 37-38.

²²⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, 41-54.

²²⁶ Tomberlin and Bird, 57.

²²⁷ Thomas G. Bandy and Page M. Brooks, *Church Mergers: A Guidebook for Missional Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 1, Kindle.

²²⁸ Bandy and Brooks, 2, Kindle.

Other authors agreed with this sentiment, although they phrased it around the mission of the church. The Alban Institute conducted an interview with Alice Mann. She said about mergers, “It must be determined whether the congregation and leadership are fundamentally focused on God’s mission in their community ... most positive merger experiences involve people who are more committed to the continuity of their faith than the building.”²²⁹ Matt Rogers wrote, “The primary motive for church mergers must be the glory of God demonstrated through the multiplication of disciples of Jesus.”²³⁰ He added to this, “Ethnic diversity is also a needed catalyst for discipleship. By merging believers from different backgrounds and cultural milieus, church mergers allow for unique disciple-making relationships that are not found in homogenous churches.”²³¹ Chinn added to the conversation in his book about multiracial mergers, “As a church considers why it would become a multiracial church, motive should be examined. One way to determine motive is to eliminate the reason for wanting to unite with another church by fulfilling it. For instance, if a church needed a new place to meet and this need was satisfied, would it still join another congregation?”²³² Chinn clearly articulated this potential pitfall when he wrote, “If the incentive to create a multiracial church is not driven by a God-conceived vision, a flawed motive can threaten the efforts of merging

²²⁹ Alban Institute, “And The Two Shall Become One,” April 7, 2009, accessed May 25, 2019, <https://alban.org/archive/and-the-two-shall-become-one/>.

²³⁰ Matt Rogers, *Mergers: Combining Churches to Multiply Disciples* (Alpharetta, GA: The Send Network, 2014), loc. 187, Kindle.

²³¹ Rogers, loc. 225, Kindle.

²³² Chinn, 47, Kindle.

for a kingdom purpose.”²³³ The consensus seemed to be that the primary motivator for the merger to be successful must be God.

A second major theme that was prevalent in the literature was the importance of a good process for a church merger to be effective, although the authors disagreed on what makes for a good process. Bandy and Brooks wrote about mergers unfolding in Four Steps, “merger in principle, merger in practice, merger in fact, and merger in ministry.”²³⁴ Tomberlin and Bird wrote about mergers happening in five different stages: “exploration, negotiation, implementation, consolidation and integration.”²³⁵ Rogers wrote, “There is a series of stages or gates one must unlock to move toward successful partnership.”²³⁶ He then went on to list eight gates to unlock.

While the number of steps along the journey was debated, a few common processes emerged that seemed to be universally agreed upon. Prayer was a common practice at the beginning of all the processes. Matt Rogers said the first act in unlocking the first gate is prayer. He wrote, “Established churches and church plants alike should begin the process by asking the Lord to sovereignly position their churches for the potential for merger. The process of merging churches is fully contingent on God bringing two unique churches to a perfect position for healthy partnership.”²³⁷ This seemed to align with the idea that God is the primary motivator for mergers. James Rodgers told the story of an interim ministry he was doing with a church, and how one

²³³ Chinn, 49, Kindle.

²³⁴ Bandy and Brooks, 20, Kindle.

²³⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, 63.

²³⁶ Rogers, loc. 430, Kindle.

²³⁷ Rogers, loc. 431, Kindle.

particular time of prayer became the catalyst for the merger for the church he was serving.²³⁸ Prayer is sometimes assumed instead of stated, but for a merger to be successful, prayer is necessary.

The necessity of good leadership was also a common ingredient. Tomberlin and Bird wrote, “Successful church mergers do not happen without effective leadership.”²³⁹ They went on to explain, “All great leaders do three things. They define reality ... they cast a vision for the future ... and they chart the course.”²⁴⁰ Among church leaders they spoke with, the virtue of humility was seen as essential for the effectiveness of church mergers.²⁴¹ Reflecting on their own research, Bandy and Brooks wrote, “The key requirements of leadership are credibility and courage.”²⁴² Leaders must have the credibility that people will follow, and the courage to make difficult decisions. Effective leadership has been critical to the success of church mergers.

Further, excellent communication seemed to be an incredibly important barometer for the success of mergers. Chinn wrote of the churches he interviewed, “A consistent indicator of success was communication.”²⁴³ Early on in Rodger’s discernment process, it became critical for him to communicate to the church he was serving that God was leading them, even if the details were not coming together quickly.²⁴⁴ Tomberlin and Bird

²³⁸ James Rodgers, “Merge Ahead: A Way Forward for Declining Churches,” *Leadership Journal* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 69.

²³⁹ Tomberlin and Bird, 156.

²⁴⁰ Tomberlin and Bird, 157.

²⁴¹ Tomberlin and Bird, 159.

²⁴² Tomberlin and Bird, 14.

²⁴³ Chinn, 62, Kindle.

²⁴⁴ Rodgers, 65.

wrote, “The most important step after recommending a merger to your church is to overcommunicate to both congregations the why, the how, and the benefits of merging.”²⁴⁵ Their book was full of examples where this was done well and where this was done poorly. Effective communication was integral to the success of church mergers.

Finally, maintaining a kingdom perspective was important. Matt Rogers wrote of the need for “a kingdom mindset that would allow individual churches to sacrifice preferential or territorial concerns for the overall health and growth of the church in the city.”²⁴⁶ Quoting a pastor he interviewed in Seattle, Derek Chinn wrote, “We started to talk about what it meant to have a “kingdom-mindedness” and to ask what’s good for the kingdom of God and for the cause of Christ and the larger picture.”²⁴⁷ Chinn added toward the end of his book, “Merging churches can advance the kingdom by modeling redemption.”²⁴⁸

This kingdom mindset conceptually appeared in Bandy and Brooks. Although not stated as such, this was the idea that they were pointing to when they wrote, “The first word of the Great Commission is: Go! This is why the outcome of the experience with Jesus that was described in the Gospels is not so much a Christian church as it is a Christian movement.”²⁴⁹ The idea that seemed to be coming through the literature was that a merger is good for the kingdom, not just for the local church. Keeping that mindset was critical to successfully merging churches.

²⁴⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, 98.

²⁴⁶ Rogers, loc. 189, Kindle.

²⁴⁷ Chinn, 54, Kindle.

²⁴⁸ Chinn, 112, Kindle.

²⁴⁹ Bandy and Brooks, 10, Kindle.

If a merger goes well, the literature suggested ways to measure the effectiveness of mergers. Tomberlin and Bird suggested that there be one-year, three-year, and five-year milestones to pursue.²⁵⁰ Each year there are goals for mission and vision, integration, attendance, finances, and community impact. While these were helpful in general, the only measurable outcome that directly measures the merger is integration. The other measurable they suggested are things most churches already measure or at least aspire to.

Bandy and Brooks devoted a chapter of their book to measurable outcomes. First, they made clear that each new church should decide on its own measurable outcomes. They wrote, “outcomes are customized for each church and context, and they provide examples of measuring statistics, stories, and feedback.”²⁵¹ The leaders of the new church must determine what the church is seeking to accomplish. Further, they said that the purpose of these outcomes is to move the church forward. “This is why church leaders need to define the one (or perhaps two) key measurable outcomes, the achievement of which would cause the church to move people forward in maturity and mission.”²⁵² They gave some examples, but overall their suggestions were largely abstract instead of concrete.

The literature, in general, left something to be desired when determining the best way to measure success. Numerical growth is good, but does it account for transfer growth versus conversions? Integration is to be desired, but what concrete ways can this be measured? Ultimately, the measure of success has to have something to do with

²⁵⁰ Tomberlin and Bird, 82.

²⁵¹ Bandy and Brooks, 112, Kindle.

²⁵² Bandy and Brooks, 111, Kindle.

reaching the community as well, but again, how would someone go about measuring this? The literature lacked clarity on the best way to measure success.

On the other hand, the literature is full of examples of pitfalls in mergers. In a chapter within a larger book, Kersten Bayt Priest and Robert J. Priest wrote of an experience they had with a church merger. They wrote about two churches that had a similar theological outlook but differed in worship practices. When the churches had a trial period of integration, issues around worship style and a lack of communication completely derailed the effort and sunk the merger.²⁵³ Derek Chinn told the story of one church that he referred to as New Creation, which was riddled with distrust, a clash of cultures, and pastors that thought they would be able to work together and in the long run were not able to.²⁵⁴ In *Better Together*, the authors drew on the expertise of a change specialist named William Bridges, suggesting that transition processes are full of landmines that can destroy mergers. Significant issues of overpromising and underdelivering, as well as unclear organizational structures, were pitfalls to beware.²⁵⁵ Bandy and Brooks pointed out that in the end, the potential for failure is real because mergers primarily happen between people. People who are driven by mission will lead to successful mergers while self-centered people will derail them.²⁵⁶ The potential pitfalls for a merger were numerous.

²⁵³ Kersten Bayt Priest and Robert J. Priest, “Divergent Worship Practices in the Sunday Morning Hour: Analysis of an Interracial Church Merger Attempt,” in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity and Christian Faith*, ed. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275-291.

²⁵⁴ Chinn, 59-61, Kindle.

²⁵⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, 99-101.

²⁵⁶ Bandy and Brooks, 263, Kindle.

The statistics about church mergers were not good. Leadership Network conducted a phone survey, where 5 percent of Protestant churches had considered a merger in the next two years. Of those churches, 71 percent decided against it.²⁵⁷ The information that was found in *Better Together* was largely focused on unequal partnerships, with large churches absorbing smaller churches into their ministry. Based on the definition of church merger offered by Chinn at the beginning of this study, that did not seem like plausible statistics for this particular study. Further, information regarding the practice of merging across ethnic lines was lacking. Chinn wrote,

The odds of success for merging congregations to create a multiracial ministry appear grim. It seems that it is hardly a pathway for ministry success. However, it is this author's contention that it is these very figures that justify the need for this book. The experiences, good and bad, described are the very things that ministries considering this type of change need to hear. The issues leading to "failure" are solvable but they have to be identified, and avenues to minimize impact and/or lead to resolution are needed.²⁵⁸

The literature around church mergers was lacking, particularly due to the disagreement on what exactly constitutes a church merger.

Converging Three Streams

These three streams of literature converged in this project. The role that race and ethnicity have played in the American church cannot be overstated. The particular dynamics of race and ethnicity in Churches of Christ have been unique. The literature made clear that there has been a division in Churches of Christ between White churches and Black churches, and this division has created two unique fellowships with their own

²⁵⁷ Tomberlin and Bird, 229.

²⁵⁸ Chinn, 121, Kindle.

traits. When a Black Church of Christ and a White Church of Christ begin to consider a merger, those traits unique to each fellowship must be accounted for.

Based on the literature, there were four areas that the researcher explored in the multiethnic Churches of Christ: (1) integration between the two ethnic groups, (2) leadership in the multiethnic church, (3) the perceived identity of the church, and (4) God's perceived role in the merger.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Review of Project Research

The researcher designed this project to evaluate multiethnic Church of Christ mergers and discern best practices for churches that may consider this in the future. To collect relevant information and data, research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. Research was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods, with the majority of the research being qualitative. The researcher determined that this would provide the clearest path to determining best practices for multiethnic Church of Christ mergers.

Research Methods

Quantitative Research Methods

The researcher believed that quantitative research was necessary to gather sufficient data to represent the perspectives and attitudes of church members, as well as pick up on themes. Creswell wrote, “Quantitative research is a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures.”²⁵⁹ Each member of the congregation was a variable in this study. This quantitative research was conducted as part of the congregational questionnaire.

²⁵⁹ John Creswell, *Research Design*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 233.

Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research lends itself well to case studies and discerning best practices. As Creswell explains, “We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study.”²⁶⁰ Qualitative research was done through interviews, a congregational questionnaire and field observations.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, with most lasting close to one hour. Creswell wrote of two advantages to Qualitative interviews. First, interviews allow participants to “provide historical information.”²⁶¹ Additionally, interviews allow the researcher “control over the line of questioning.”²⁶²

The researcher also asked open-ended questions on one section of the congregational questionnaire. This was to allow the church members to express in their own words the effects of the merger.

The final qualitative tool utilized was the gathering of field observations. Creswell pointed out that field observations give the researcher first-hand experience with the participants, allows the researcher to record information as it occurs, and provides an

²⁶⁰ Creswell, 48.

²⁶¹ Creswell, 179.

²⁶² Creswell, 179.

opportunity for unusual aspects to be noticed.²⁶³ The researcher traveled to the churches that were part of this study and took notes on what he observed on Sunday mornings.

The goal of utilizing three distinct research processes was to triangulate any themes or data that was gathered. Sensing wrote, “Triangulation...is a way to cross-check your data that provides breadth and depth to your analysis and increases the trustworthiness of your research. It is a means of refining, broadening, and strengthening conceptual linkages and perceptions.”²⁶⁴ The purpose of having multiple methods and steps is to increase the validity of the research findings and conclusions.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Questionnaire

The researcher created a questionnaire to get as many perspectives as possible on the mergers in these churches. The congregational questionnaire (Appendix A) consisted of three parts: demographic information, Likert scale statements about the merger, and open-ended questions about the post-merger state of the church.

The researcher gathered demographic data through the questionnaire to ensure a valid cross-section of the congregation participated. This is what Leedy and Ormrod referred to as “purposive sampling.”²⁶⁵ The researcher determined that the following demographic information was needed: the number of years with the current church, gender, and ethnicity. This provided the necessary information to ensure a purposive sampling.

²⁶³ Creswell, 179.

²⁶⁴ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 72.

²⁶⁵ Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 10th ed. (Boston: Pearson Education, 2013), 215.

The researcher provided a series of Likert scale statements about the mergers and asked the respondents to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement. Leedy and Ormrod wrote, “Whenever you use checklists or rating scales, you simplify and more easily quantify people’s behaviors or attitudes.”²⁶⁶ There were six statements on the questionnaire that focused on the impressions and attitudes of the congregants. Congregants were asked to respond with strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. In many Likert scale questionnaires, a neutral option is given. The researcher chose not to allow respondents to “straddle the fence.”²⁶⁷

Finally, open-ended questions were asked to gather data that could be coded and analyzed. This section of the questionnaire was qualitative and was analyzed in conjunction with the interviews and field observations. The questions were designed to analyze four key streams: initial impressions of the mergers, current perspectives on people of another ethnicity, current perspective of merged church, and the impact of the merger on the larger community.

The bottom of the questionnaire included an informed consent statement, and this was expressly stated to the congregations prior to handing out the questionnaires.

The questionnaires were handed out at the end of a Bible class. The researcher traveled to each of the three congregations and taught a Bible class at the invitation of the congregations. The researcher explained the research that he was doing and taught a class that was related to the Biblical chapter of this project, with particular regards to

²⁶⁶ Leedy and Ormrod, 193.

²⁶⁷ Leedy and Ormrod, 193.

Ephesians. At the end of Bible class time, the researcher handed out the questionnaire and offered about 10-15 minutes to complete them. Additionally, questionnaires were handed out to some individuals who were not at the Bible class and arrived for worship.

Interviews

Sensing wrote, “The main purpose of the interview is to obtain a special kind of information.”²⁶⁸ The interviews were conducted with key leaders who were a part of the church mergers to gain information that is unique to their experiences and insights. It was very important that the interviews be conducted with people who were directly involved in leading the mergers, from beginning talks to the culmination of the merger, to determine best practices. A semi-structured interview guide was created for this project. Sensing writes, “An interview guide lists the questions or topics that the interviewer desires to explore. It ensures that the basic information is obtained from each person...and the interviewer is free to probe and explore for more depth.”²⁶⁹ The particular questions were created after completing the Biblical review and the literature review. This process brought to light several issues that were addressed in the questions, from worship style to leadership integration to the particular dynamics of Churches of Christ. The researcher limited the questions to 10 to be respectful of the participants. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B. The leaders gave informed consent for the interviews to take place and be utilized in this study. The interviewees also received the interview guide prior to the interviews.

²⁶⁸ Sensing, 104.

²⁶⁹ Sensing, 107.

Most of the interviews were conducted over the phone after the initial visit with the respective congregations. The reason for this was two-fold. First, the researcher was only going to be able to spend a limited time with the respective congregations. Having the interviews over the phone allowed the researcher to utilize his time with the congregation for field observations. Second, the researcher believed that by meeting the people who would be participating in the interviews in person, they were more likely to feel confident in their interview conversations with him. Only one of the nine interviews was conducted in person, and that one happened after the Sunday worship service.

The data from the interviews was analyzed and coded along with the other qualitative data from the questionnaire and the field observations. The researcher coded the data by looking first at the child themes, words and phrases that repeatedly occurred throughout the data. The child themes were then grouped into parent themes.

Observation and Notes

It was important for the researcher to be able to attend the churches and observe the dynamics. Leedy and Ormrod wrote,

Observations in a qualitative study are intentionally unstructured and free-flowing. The researcher shifts focus from one thing to another as new and potentially significant objects and events present themselves. The primary advantage of conducting observations in this manner is flexibility. The researcher can take advantage of unforeseen data sources as they surface.²⁷⁰

The researcher focused on the worship services, the observed interactions between the people, and the perceived dynamics of the congregations. By traveling to the churches, the researcher was able to gather physical materials from the churches that

²⁷⁰ Leedy and Ormrod, 152-153.

were pertinent to this research. The purpose of this step was to be able to convey what Creswell called a “rich, thick description” of the churches themselves.²⁷¹

Participants

Churches

The researcher contacted four Church of Christ churches in February 2019 to open lines of communication and ensure that the research could be conducted. Representatives from all four churches were willing to dialog with the researcher. After initial conversations with those representatives, the researcher decided to study three churches that would fit the parameters of this project. One church had been formed in 2005 in the South, another church had been formed in 2017 in the South, and the third church was formed in December 2018. The fourth congregation, which the researcher did not visit, merged in 2008, but was no longer merged and had new leadership as well.

The research instruments were created in summer 2019, and the researcher set up a series of trips to visit these churches. Once the leaders agreed to these visits, the researcher sent the interview questions, the congregational questionnaires, and the informed consent documents via email. Each church asked the researcher to prepare a Bible class to explain to the congregation the reasons for the visit. The researcher visited a church in the South that had been merged for 14 years in early September 2019, which will be referred to as Church A. The researcher then visited another church in the South that had been merged about two years in mid-September 2019, which will be referred to as Church B. Finally, the researcher visited a church in the Northeast that had merged at

²⁷¹ Creswell, 191.

the beginning of the year in October 2019, which will be referred to as Church C. The steps in the research process at the churches were the same from church to church with one minor change. With the first church, the researcher initially traveled to the congregation, conducted an adult bible class and gave out the questionnaire, wrote his field notes during the worship service, and then conducted interviews with the key leaders through phone calls. Likewise, this was the process at the second church as well. With the third church, this process was the same except that one interview was conducted in person after the Sunday morning church service, while the other two conversations happened over the phone.

Questionnaire Participants

At each congregation, the questionnaire participants were adult members who were present in the Bible class, as well as several adult members who attended the worship service. The congregants were given a paper questionnaire and asked to return it at the end of the worship service. Handing these out in person gave the researcher the best chance to receive the maximum number of completed questionnaires.

The demographics of the participants were important in verifying the validity of this research. Tables 4.1-4.3 provide demographic information. In addition to the categories below, the questionnaire required the participants to list their year of birth to make sure the research was only from adults in the church. Any material gained from minors (<18 years old) was discarded, as was any questionnaire received that did not list a year of birth. The demographics of the respondents are shown in the tables below.

Table 4.1 Years at Current Congregation (N=154)

<1 year	1-5 years	5-10 years	11-15 years	15+ years
14 people, 9%	33 people, 21%	16 people, 10%	16 people, 10%	75 people, 49%

Table 4.2 Gender (N=155)

Male	Female
65 people, 42%	90 people, 58%

Table 4.3 Ethnicity (N=159)

Asian, Asian American, East Indian, Pacific Islander	Black, African American, African	Hispanic, Latino American	Native American, Native Alaskan	White, Caucasian American	Multi-ethnic, Bi-racial
1, <1%	86, 54%	1, <1%	0, 0%	67, 42%	4, 3%

Interview Participants

The contact persons of the respective congregations chose the interview participants. At each church, the current minister was one of the interview participants. The researcher requested that representatives from each of the original congregations participate. Elders of the various congregations participated as well as one associate minister and one former male leader who does not hold an official position at this time. The researcher interviewed four African-Americans and five Caucasians. The researcher attempted to contact two additional men who were instrumental in the mergers but no longer serve the respective congregations. However, they were unwilling to participate.

All the individuals interviewed were men. The leadership structure of all three churches was male-led. Consideration was given to interviewing female participants as well, but gender roles is a touchy subject in many Churches of Christ and the researcher was concerned about offending the leaders of the various congregations.

CHAPTER FIVE: EXAMINING THE CHURCHES

The researcher designed this project to evaluate multiethnic Church of Christ mergers. To collect relevant information and data, research was conducted through questionnaires, interviews with key leaders, and field observations.

A coding system was developed to see trends in the open-ended questions from the questionnaire. The responses to each question were divided into subgroups and then color-coded.

The interviews with the key leaders were divided by church and used to discover the process and results of the mergers from the leaders' perspectives.

Questionnaires

At each of the three churches, the researcher distributed a questionnaire to the congregants in Bible class and before the worship service. Approximately 250 questionnaires were distributed and 176 were returned to the researcher. Of those 176 questionnaires, 163 had adequate information to be used in this study. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: demographics, Likert-scale questions, and open-ended questions.

Demographics

The first section of the questionnaire sought demographic data. The results of this were given in Chapter 4 of this study in Table 4.1, Table 4.2, and Table 4.3. This data proved that the respondents represented a reliable cross-section of the congregations.

Likert-Scale Questions

The second section of the questionnaire contained six statements that the respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed. The questionnaires gave four choices: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Agree (A), or Strongly Agree (SA).

The first statement was, “Our church merger was a success.” The results are in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Merger Success (N=162)

Church A	SD – 0	D – 1	A – 15	SA – 43
Church B	SD – 0	D – 1	A – 17	SA – 26
Church C	SD – 1	D – 1	A – 19	SA – 38
All	SD – 1	D – 3	A – 51	SA – 107

The second statement was, “I am glad our churches merged.” The results are in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Glad For Merger (N=155)

Church A	SD – 0	D – 0	A – 11	SA – 48
Church B	SD – 0	D – 3	A – 17	SA – 26
Church C	SD – 1	D – 1	A – 7	SA – 41
All	SD – 1	D – 4	A – 35	SA – 115

The third statement was, “I have new relationships with others in the church because of the merger.” The results are in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 New Relationships from Merger (N=156)

Church A	SD – 0	D – 0	A – 18	SA – 42
Church B	SD – 0	D – 0	A – 18	SA – 28
Church C	SD – 2	D – 0	A – 19	SA – 29
All	SD – 2	D – 0	A – 55	SA – 99

The fourth statement was, “I believe God was leading us to merge.” The results are in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4 God Led Merger (N=154)

Church A	SD – 0	D – 0	A – 17	SA – 43
Church B	SD – 1	D – 3	A – 14	SA – 27
Church C	SD – 1	D – 0	A – 10	SA – 38
All	SD – 2	D – 3	A – 41	SA – 108

The fifth statement was, “I believe our church merger was handled well.” The results are in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5 Merger Handled Well (N=164)

Church A	SD – 0	D – 0	A – 33	SA – 38
Church B	SD – 0	D – 2	A – 18	SA – 24
Church C	SD – 1	D – 0	A – 14	SA – 34
All	SD – 1	D – 2	A – 65	SA – 96

The sixth statement was, “I am excited about the future potential for the merged church.” The results are in Table 5.6.

Table 5.6 Future Potential of Church (N=155)

Church A	SD – 0	D – 0	A – 12	SA – 49
Church B	SD – 0	D – 1	A – 15	SA – 28
Church C	SD – 1	D – 1	A – 8	SA – 40
All	SD – 1	D – 2	A – 35	SA – 117

Open-Ended Questions

The third section of the questionnaire asked four open-ended questions or prompts. Once the researcher received the questionnaires back, the responses were input into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet was color-coded according to themes within each question.

Initial Feelings

The first prompt stated, “Describe what you originally believed or felt about the church merger. Was it a good idea or not? Why?” This question was meant to see the confidence that people had in the idea of the merger and how that may or may not have changed.

Of the respondents from Church A, 43 indicated that they believed the merger was a good idea. One person wrote, "Good idea, the church and the world need to see all of God's people getting along and worshiping together." Another person wrote, "I had thought for years about a merger and why so many churches in this town when I moved here. I definitely believe it is and was a great need in [our community]."

Seven other respondents from Church A indicated that they were initially worried about the idea, but eventually came to believe it was a good thing. One person wrote, "I was sort of against it because I felt things would be different and they were. Change was good for everyone."

Of the respondents from Church B, 33 expressed that they believed the merger was a good idea. One person wrote, "I thought it was a good idea! They needed us and I believe we needed them." Additionally, someone added, "It was a wonderful idea. It would be a testimony of God's power and an example of biblical unity."

Six respondents from Church B expressed some caution. Someone wrote, "I was concerned about the cultural difference but believed it was the right course to take and God's wish that it occur - it was definitely a good idea."

There were also two respondents from Church B that indicated they did not believe the merger to be a good idea. One person wrote, "Concerned - we lost many families because of the merger. Some of both races. The financial obligation of this congregation has increased but contributions have decreased. Why?" The other person simply wrote, "Not, money problems."

Of the respondents from Church C, 38 people clearly expressed that they believed the merger was a good idea. One person wrote, "I was very excited and felt that we were

doing what God wanted us to do. I have been Church of Christ since I was 14 years old and over that time I have been and seen a lot. But this has been one of the best things that has happened to the church.” Another person wrote, “I think it was a good idea. It gives me a vision of what Heaven will be like all races and colors of people.”

Eight respondents from Church C indicated that they were initially worried about merging. One person wrote, “I was concerned that it would not work. I thought the cultural and racial differences were too great to overcome.” Another person wrote, “I wasn't happy initially - not a fan of changes. That being said, our family decided to try out the [the other] services and loved it and change can be a good thing.”

Overall, of the 137 people from all three churches that responded to this question, 114 wrote that they believed the merger was a good idea, 21 wrote that they were initially worried, and two wrote that they did not believe the merger was a good idea.

Changed Perspectives

The second question was, “How has this merger changed your perspective on people of another ethnicity?” The purpose of this question is to gauge the integration of the members of the church with each other.

Of the respondents from Church A, 34 responded that their perspective had changed while 15 people wrote that theirs had not. One person wrote of their experience, “It has torn down old stereotypes and increased my love for all people.” Another person wrote, “The merger has not changed my perspective. I always felt we should be together. The merger only indicated it can be done.” Many of the people who responded that their perspective had not changed wrote of their experiences with people of another ethnicity.

Of the respondents from Church B, 26 responded that their perspective had changed while eleven indicated that theirs had not. One person wrote that they are learning to “understand others,” while another person wrote that the merger has made them “a better person and a better Christian.”

Of the respondents from Church C, 24 wrote that their perspective had changed while 22 expressed that theirs had not. While several remarked that “we’re all God’s people,” several others answer the question with a simple, “No.”

Overall, of the 132 people from all three churches that responded to this question, 84 wrote that the experience of the merger has changed their perspective on people of another ethnicity, while 48 wrote that their perspectives were unchanged.

Church Health

The third question was, “Do you believe your church is now stronger/healthier than before you merged? Why or why not?” This question was asked to perceive if they now view the merger as a positive or a negative event.

Of the respondents from Church A, 46 responded that they believed the church was stronger now. One person wrote, “Yes, it has given people the example of how to love everyone, as God loves everyone.” One person seemed unsure if the church was stronger. She simply wrote, “Not sure.” Two people responded that they did not think it was healthier, with both remarking on the trends in Churches of Christ.

Of the respondents from Church B, 32 responded that they believed their church was now healthier or stronger. One person wrote, “Yes. Now we all come together despite differences and that makes one stronger. Conquering outdated fears is hopeful to the future.” Two people were unsure if they believed that the merged church is stronger.

Four people do not believe the church is stronger or healthier. Three of those respondents mentioned financial issues, while one person wrote, “No - it appears that we have changed to be a "black" church rather than a merged church.”

Of the respondents from Church C, 43 wrote that they believed the merged church was stronger and healthier. There were a variety of reasons listed, but one person summarized most of those well, when he wrote, “Yes, stronger numbers, renewed enthusiasm.” Three people indicated that they were unsure. For example, one person wrote, “I'm not 100% sure. I do see that some are no longer with us, but I cannot say the reasons why.”

Overall, of the 133 people from all three churches that responded to this question, 121 wrote that they believe that the merged church is now healthier and stronger, six wrote that they unsure, and six responded that the church is not healthier or stronger.

Community Impact

The fourth question was, “What would it be good for those in your community to know about your church?” The purpose of this particular question was to see if the multiethnic identity of their church was something that the church members wanted their community to know them for.

There were 27 people from Church A that wrote about the multiethnic identity of the church. One person wrote that the church “fellowships together both races coming together as one.” There were 25 other people who responded to this question, and their answers ranged from “love” and “family” to responses about “worship.”

There were just twelve people from Church B that wrote of the multiethnic nature of the church. One person responded, “This is the way it should be.” There were 27 other responses to this question dealing with “love” and “unity” and “God’s word.”

There were 18 people from Church C that wrote about the multiethnic identity of their church. One person wrote, “God can remove prejudices. We can love one another once we know each other. Having the same goals, the same confidence draws us to one another and it feels right and good.” There were also 27 other responses to this question, ranging from “love” to “unity” to being a “Scripture-based church.”

There were 136 responses to this question about what they want the community to know about their churches, and 57 of those responses focused on the multiethnic identity of their church. There were 79 other responses to that question.

Interviews with Key Leaders

The researcher conducted interviews with nine men who were active leaders of the merger processes for their respective churches, including at least one leader from each of the original churches. The researcher asked each man a series of scripted questions with an occasional additional question based on their responses. Table 5.7 is provided below to show the churches, key leaders and their associations with their respective churches.

Table 5.7 Aliases

Merged Church Alias	Number of Years Church has been merged	Alias names for two churches that merged together	Alias for key leaders who were interviewed
Church A	14 years	First Church (W) Second Church (B)	WN (minister) JD (associate) DC (elder)
Church B	2 years	South Church (W) T-Street Church (B)	WA (minister) LF (elder) LW (steering team)
Church C	10 months	Oak Church (W) State Church (B)	DR (minister) JF (elder) PK (elder)

Interviews with Church A Leaders

The researcher set up three interviews with key leaders of Church A. First, the researcher interviewed DC, a white man who was a key part of First Church and is now an elder in Church A. Next, the researcher interviewed JD, a white man who is the associate minister of Church A, who was also a part of First Church. Finally, the researcher interviewed WN, an African American man who is the current minister for Church A and the founding minister for Second Church.

Church A came into existence through the merger between First Church and Second Church in a small city in the South. First Church was created in 2005. DC and JD began their interviews by telling the story of two other predominantly white Churches of Christ in town. In December 2004, both of those Churches of Christ had significant portions of their churches decide to leave over unrelated decisions made by their respective elderships. According to DC, these groups began meeting together in a rented office building in early 2005, and they were averaging around 100 people each week. This was the beginning of First Church.

Second Church was founded by WN in the 1990s as a predominantly black Church of Christ. He had grown up in this town, been baptized by a former minister of one of the white Churches of Christ, and had gone off to college to study to be a minister. Second Church was financially supported by one of the white Churches of Christ in town for a number of years.

When the two white Churches of Christ in town had both experienced splits in 2004, a couple of months later one of the white churches asked WN and another gentleman to come and see if they could mediate reconciliation between the elders of the church and the members who had gone on to form First Church. They set up a meeting where this would happen. WN said that he went to the meeting and the elders from the white church were there, but no one from First Church showed up. They were not interested in reconciling with the church they had come from.

First Church was a joyful and excited new church according to all three leaders. They were quickly outgrowing their rented facilities and were looking for a new place to meet. DC said that they were averaging “well over 100 people in a room that seated 50.” WN said that First Church was still new, but they had “a positive atmosphere.” Second Church was good, vibrant and fun according to JD. WN talked about Second Church being healthy and overall good prior to the merger.

After the reconciliation effort had not worked, WN asked to meet with the people from First Church and invited them to merge with Second Church. He said that he told them, there is no need for another Church of Christ in this town, just come and merge with us. He urged them “not to waste the Lord’s money.” JD said this meeting exhibited “the visionary leadership” of WN and made the people of First Church excited.

Both First Church and Second Church believed it was a good idea to explore a merger, so they created a steering committee of men from both churches. Neither church had elders. The minister from each church was a part of the steering committee, as was DC. When the talks began, WN remarked that the conversations were positive and the purpose was “to maintain unity.” DC said that only two issues became important: the way the white members dressed on Sundays and the length of services.

WN said that the reason dress mattered to Second Church people was that he was trying to “impress upon the young black men to give God their best.” The people from Second Church were much more casual in their dress. They agreed that for people to serve during the service, they needed to dress appropriately.

Also, there was a concern from the members of First Church about the length of services. Traditionally, Second Church’s worship services were a couple of hours, while First Church usually only lasted about an hour. WN agreed to shorten his sermons and both sides were appeased by this.

When they decided to merge together, the only official leaders in the church were WN at Second Church and the minister at First Church. They agreed to share the preaching and teaching responsibilities down the middle. WN said that he has a “Type C” personality, so he could work well with anyone. This arrangement was agreed upon and lasted for about two years. Neither church had elders or deacons.

The steering committee members talked about the possible merger in their respective churches, looking at pros and cons, recognizing as best they could the challenges they would have to deal with. They talked about needing people to step up and getting more involved, letting them know that they have a lot to bring to the table. WN

said emphatically, “This was not an experiment, it was intended to last.” The two churches agreed to merge and began meeting as Church A in late 2005.

DC and JD could not think of anything in particular that the church did to integrate the congregations. WN, on the other, recalled a particular event in the region that impacted his church. Hurricane Katrina made landfall around the same time the merger happened and created opportunities “for the members to serve each other.” WN said that while God did not send Hurricane Katrina, God used Hurricane Katrina to strengthen his church.

Church A has dealt with some issues around race and ethnicity. JD believes that socioeconomic issues have been the main cause of those problems, but he also admits that things like political views and racial stereotypes have been a problem. DC says that they do not talk about race as much anymore, although “there are baby and wedding showers that come sometimes be segregated.” WN said that he has tried to cultivate a culture that views race and ethnicity in a positive way. He said “each ethnic group has value” and “you should be proud of who you are.” He was convinced you can do this “without condemning other cultures.”

The worship style of the congregation was another topic of conversation. WN said of the style, “It has been a coming together of the two, not where one overrules the other, but they both adapt.” DC said the only difference between Church A and First Church from his perspective is that the congregation speaks more during the sermon.

Since the merger, Church A has elected a plurality of elders and deacons representing both ethnic groups in the congregation. The minister from First Church left

after a couple of years and was not a part of this research project. JD, who was already attending, was selected to be the Associate Minister for Church A.

The ecclesial values of Churches of Christ were an important part of this research project. When asked if those values had any impact on the merger, DC and WN did not think so. They both thought of those values in a negative way, each talking about the dogmatic decisions of leaders. JD, on the other hand, had a more nuanced response. He believes it was thanks to those values that this merger was a success. He said, "It was the Spirit of the Restoration Movement in the black church (let's interpret scripture without slaying your brother) that was fostered while there was also the breakdown of traditional values in White church (fellowship, disfellowship, divorce/remarriage)." WN and JD agreed that the focus is on being "principally centered," and not "legalistic."

The merger has had some impact on the wider community the church is in, although the degree of the impact is hard to determine. JD said that Church A is viewed positively in the community "in more areas than they could imagine." He also said the merger has "given them the opportunity to dispel myths" associated with churches of Christ. WN agreed that their community received the merger positively. He said, "People know us as the integrated church." He also talked about the tendency for Churches of Christ to "preach and teach unity," but showing it has been a new experience for him. He said that visitors see the love and experience the love and unity among them and are amazed that it is real. DC was not as sure about the impact on the community. He said that there have not been any problems, but he was not as sure that it had made a positive impact.

To finish each interview, the researcher asked if the leaders had any other thoughts they would like to share that might be pertinent to this project. WN said that he hopes more churches will have conversations about mergers because the world needs to see more unity from the church “in these divisive times.” DC did not have any additional thoughts. JD said, “Merging never stops. New people have to be taught the values that made the merger a success. They will bring in things that don’t matter and try to make them matter.” He also added that it is important to allow people to be proud of who they are “without putting another culture down.”

Interviews with Church B Leaders

The researcher set up three interviews with key leaders of Church B. First, the researcher interviewed LF, a white man who was an elder of South Church and is now an elder in Church B. Next, the researcher interviewed WA, a white man who is the part-time minister of Church B, who was also a minister of South Church. Finally, the researcher interviewed LW, a black man who was a key leader within T Street Church.

Church B is a church in a small town in the South that was formed by the merger of South Church, a predominantly white Church, and T Street Church, a predominantly black church. Previously, these churches existed only a few blocks away from each other. This merger took place on December 31, 2017.

All three men talked about how a merger was an idea that had been coming up in conversations for a number of years. LF was under the impression that the T Street Church was not ready to pursue a merger. WA, the minister of South Church, said that he had become good friends with the minister of T Street Church and that they had a plan to begin merger conversations in 2020. LF said that there came a time where the men of T Street Church requested to have a meeting with the elders of South Church. The building

that the T Street Church met in had all sorts of issues, including termites and structural issues. At one point during this meeting, the T Street Church men asked if they would be accepted at South Church. The South Church elders did not answer that question immediately, but went back to their church and gave them a questionnaire asking how the church would feel about this. LF said they had 98 percent in favor of trying a merger.

The merger process began by having some Sunday evening services together. They also agreed to have joint worship services every fifth Sunday. They did this over the course of a year to facilitate fellowship and integration. On New Years Eve 2017, the two congregations merged together to form Church B.

Prior to the merger, the health of the two churches was not great. WA called South Church stagnant. He said that there used to be a Bible College on the campus of the church, with several buildings dedicated for classes. However, the board of the school had closed down the Bible College in December 2009. Since then, WA said that South Church was reeling. They had previously had a slew of Bible College faculty attending the church, but once it closed down they left. The church went from about 150 people per week to 75 per week. LF mentioned that the closing of the school was discouraging for South Church and that it left the property maintenance and insurance for the church to manage and has been a burden for the elders.

T Street Church was a pretty healthy church according to all three men. LW said that they were averaging about 75 people as well, so they saw themselves on an equal footing with South Church. WA said that T Street had more momentum in outreach than South Church had at the time. However, T Street Church was struggling financially as well and was looking at needing to make significant improvements on their property.

With that being said, LW was emphatic that the reason for the merger was not the problems with the building, but rather about choosing how the church was going to go into the future.

When asked about the biggest sources of tension in the merger talks, all three men had very different responses. WA told the researcher that the tension in the merger was all about fear. He said, “The vast majority were not against it, they were just afraid. This kept them from jumping in fully.” He talked about a fear of the unknown and a fear of it not working out. LW said T Street had a survey sheet for the church to get everyone’s opinions about the potential merger. They only had two out of all the surveys that were negative responses, and they made it clear they were going to trust the church to be honest with them. When LF talked about the tension, the only issue he mentioned was the financial stress. He said that T Street had a parsonage that came with the merger, and they had a mortgage with that. He said that both churches were struggling financially and they were talking about putting those problems together.

While they were working toward the merger, the question arose about how they would merge leadership from the two churches. South Church had a few elders, and T Street did not have any. According to LW, T Street did not have any men that were “qualified” to serve as elders. He also said that T Street talked about merging leadership a lot and did not have an issue with coming into the merged church under the elders from South Church. Two men from the T Street Church were elected to be deacons in the merged church, and LF was clear that the future plan is to have at least one black elder once someone is qualified.

When it came to the ministers of the church, this was a more significant conversation. LW said of the preacher at T Street, “Most of everything that was done at [T Street] was led by [the minister].” LF said that there was a lot of fear in South Church of the minister coming over from T Street and taking the job of their minister. Additionally, there was the issue of compensation. The minister of T Street was making more money preaching at T Street than the merged church could offer him, given all of their debt and expenses. Both LF and WA expressed that the minister from T Street was positive all the way, and they were able to reach a compromise on pay and staff position, with that minister becoming the Outreach Minister in the church.

When the researcher spoke with WA about this minister, he spoke with a deep fondness for the other minister. He said that they worked well together and that they had “complementary strengths and weaknesses.” He said that working with him was outstanding and that he would do anything to help the church. LF said that he “went at [outreach] all the way.” Though this partnership seemed to be working well, the financial issues of the church resulted in the need to make budget cuts. LF said that the elders asked the minister from T Street to go part-time. He tried it for a while but eventually found an opportunity in his hometown to go back and preach. Because of his departure, the merged church was under the leadership of all white elders and a white minister.

There were initially some discussions about changing the name of the merged church. However, this conversation was mostly happening within South Church and the people from T Street did not seem to have a preference. LW said that this “wasn’t a big conversation for [them].” WA mentioned that sometimes they used the language of South Church and other times they used the [name of the town] Church interchangeably. He

said this conversation seemed to be in the minds of South Church members but not T Street members.

According to WA, the two churches began having a service together about once a month to facilitate integration with one another before the merger was official. He remarked that during this season there were a lot of activities and “a whole lot of food.” The theme of this season was togetherness.

One of the key questions for the merged church was how the worship would reflect the multiethnic community. WA said that the new style “largely depends on the song leader.” He believed that the song leaders have the most influence over the worship style of the morning. He also mentioned that South Church was very subdued in their worship before the merger, and he said now that they have merged, “the most subdued days are still more lively than it was before the merger.” LW says from his point of view the worship style is pretty much the same and that T Street “did not do a whole lot of ad-libbing and stuff.” He mentioned that the only difference he noticed is that South Church leaders sing from hymnals while T Street leaders just sing songs they know. LF was not as optimistic about the worship style, saying, “It has slowly fallen into the normal pattern for a predominately white church.” He attributes some of this to the minister from T Street leaving.

When asked how Church of Christ values impacted the merger, the responses were unique to each individual. LF talked about the difference in leadership dynamics between white churches that have a plurality of elders and black churches that give the authority to the preacher. He believed that those preachers do not want to give up power. His experience with the members of T Street was different because the preacher was

willing to work under the elders and the members have expressed to him that they “need to be under a good eldership.” He believes the Church of Christ values has made the merger stronger.

LW was much more interested in the value of unity. He said, “We were just a block away from each other and believed we ought to be together.” He made it clear that unity was a more important value for him than autonomy.

WA talked about the “serious theological similarities” between the two churches that allowed the merger to happen. He said that South Church had a great reputation with the people of T Street as well as black churches all across their state.

Due to of the newness of the merger, the impact of it on the larger community is still being discerned. WA and LF both remarked that there is greater awareness of the church in the community thanks to of the merger. WA said that he has heard people say, “Let’s see how long that lasts.” He was clear that the community is still a racially divided community with “a lot of conventional thought.” LW was more optimistic in his assessment. He said that he has been getting feedback from the community that this is a good thing that all churches need to do. He said people he knows are happy for the church, and that “people are coming to see what is going on.”

To conclude the interviews, each man had some additional thoughts. LF shared his hopes for more qualified “black leaders” within the church. He also hopes that the new members of Church B might have confidence to come to the elders with their problems. LW shared that he believes if churches are going to consider a merger, they need to think long about it and do their homework. He also said it is very important to have the majority on board. Finally, WA wants to see more situations where multiethnic

mergers are happening. He said, “We could show the people what the Lord wants to show the world.”

Interviews with Church C Leaders

The researcher set up three interviews with key leaders of Church C. First, the researcher interviewed JF, a white man who was an elder of Oak Church and is now an elder in Church C. Next, the researcher interviewed PK, a black man who is an elder of Church C, who was also a key leader of State Church. Finally, the researcher interviewed DR, a multiethnic and bilingual man who is the current minister for Church C and the founding minister for State Church.

Oak Church was a majority-White church that had just celebrated its 75-year anniversary. During the 1990s, the church had experienced rapid growth and was full of vibrant young families, averaging at its peak around 350 people per week. By 2017, the town had experienced a decline and the church with it, now averaging between 80-90 people per week. State Church was a majority-Black church that began in 2004 under the leadership of DR. The group had left another Church of Christ in the area and begun its own church. The church had periods of growth and periods of decline, but would usually settle between 40-60 members. DR believed that State Church was at a point where it was time to chart a new course for the church. The official merger between these two churches happened in December 2018.

All three men interviewed told the same story of how the merger considerations came about. DR and the other unofficial leaders of State Church were looking for a new building to meet in and were exploring any and all scenarios. DR had heard that Oak Church was struggling a little, and he decided to drive to the church and meet with the preacher to talk about the situation. When DR showed up, a volunteer was there getting

the food pantry ready for the evening event. The volunteer showed DR around the building and during the course of the conversation, suggested to DR that the two churches should merge together. The volunteer invited DR and his family to come back that evening and volunteer with the pantry and meet a couple of the elders. They met and began a series of meetings that resulted in the merger.

Prior to the merger, both State Church and Oak Church were struggling. State Church was struggling because the ministry was solely reliant upon the minister. DR said that he was “the driver” of the church, but at some point, he lost his “mojo.” He said that he attempted to raise up some other leaders within the church, but this led to some internal strife. He concluded that the church was not productive it was stagnant.

Additionally State Church had some building issues. DR and PK mentioned that they were meeting at a leased space that was near the local river and they had experienced some flooding issues that they were required to fix. PK said that the lease agreement was nearing its end and the congregation did not want to renew the lease. They were considering a number of options on how to move forward at that point.

Oak Church was a church that had experienced significant decline in the last two decades. JF said that the church had declined and in 2017 the demographics of the church were much older as well. He said that the church was on “the wrong side of the bell curve.” With dwindling membership came financial issues, and the building that was made for a larger church was a big expense. He also said the salary for the minister of the church was a big expense as well, taking half the budget. The minister for Oak Church had not been able to perform his duties because of significant illnesses over a few years.

This minister was now gone from the church and Oak church was having discussions about hiring a new minister.

When DR and the elders from Oak Church initially met, the idea they were considering was a building share program. They created a “workgroup” of leaders from each church, five men from Oak Church and four men from State Church. The group met on Saturday mornings initially to discuss the building share program, and this was quickly agreed to. State Church would have an early worship service and Oak Church would have a later service with a shared Bible class time in between the two services. This agreement addressed some of the issues for both sides: State church would pay for having their services in that building, helping with the financial issues of Oak Church. State Church would be able to get out of their lease and be in a better building for their future. In April 2017, the two churches began meeting in the same building.

Even after the building share agreement was reached, this group of leaders continued meeting throughout the summer. According to PK, the suggestion to combine the two churches had come up in some of the earlier meetings, and it was an idea they wanted to explore further. DR and PK both talked about these conversations making it clear to them that God was behind the potential merger. After one of the meetings, DR went to PK’s home. DR believed this was “God-ordained” and PK told him “This is it. We need to move forward on this and we need to do it expeditiously.” JF did not mention any of these sorts of conversations going on with Oak Church; he said they “believed coming together would be good.”

As they began to move toward this, the conversations about merging were mostly relaxed. There were lots of conversations about doctrine and worship practices. There

were some small differences between the two churches, but to work through these, JF said that each congregation would send people from their respective churches to worship with the other group. PK was the only one to mention any compromises, and it had to do with where communion was during the worship service.

The only issue that was challenging in the merger discussions was the name of the church. JF called the name of the church “the biggest sticking point.” DR and PK were clear that for State Church to move into merging with Oak Church, they needed to adopt a new name for the new congregation. This was tough for some of the people from Oak Church who had just celebrated its 75-year anniversary. JF said that all parties decided that they wanted to make sure this was a “true merger” and not “an acquisition.” DR said that it took about six weeks to “convince some holdouts.”

Once the name for Church C was agreed to, the conversation moved to merge leaders. Oak Church had three elders who served their church and State Church did not have any elders. DR was the leader of State Church and Oak Church did not have a minister. DR had not worked under elders before, so they wanted to work through this deliberately. JF mentioned that they wanted to make sure there was a “blending” of State people, so PK was chosen to be an elder along with the current elders of Oak Church. DR felt like he was “the man in the middle.” He said that he willingly gave up the leadership role he played with State Church for the elder/minister model because “he was being respected in the process,” and his input “was valued and included.” He said that he was treated as a partner to the elders.

With the leadership structure in place, the merger was able to officially take place. They set a date and merged as Church C in December 2018. DR mentioned three ways

that they went about integrating: lots of meals, nametags for everyone, and a picture directory in the foyer. JF said they had the shared Bible class time and shared the building, so there was already some integration happening. PK mentioned the excitement of coming together helped the people initially integrate as well.

Since Church C has come into existence, all three leaders were clear that there has not been any ethnic tension. DR said that he does not speak much about race and ethnicity, particularly in regard to politics. PK said that the only time he heard about race or ethnicity when people recognize “the qualities they bring to each other.”

The worship style of Church C is still a work in progress. DR said that they are still trying to figure that out and still working through it. JF mentioned that the person who had led the worship at Oak Church for many years had moved away prior to the merger. DR said that State Church did not have particularly great worship prior to the merger, so this is something they were working on.

As far as Church of Christ values went, DR and JF did not think that they had any impact on the merger. PK shared his personal story of his experience of Churches of Christ to illustrate that he had overcome the tendency to believe that he was always right. DR mentioned that both congregations “were conservative with a progressive slant.”

The impact on the community of the merger is still to be determined. JF said that they are having new guests at this point. DR said that the new energy from the merger has been “really contagious.” PK talked about the desire of Church C to fellowship with other churches in the community.

To conclude the interview, PK said he believes that Church C has a great opportunity ahead of them. DR and JF did not have additional thoughts.

Field Observations

Finally, it was important for the researcher to see the churches in action and examine them. The field observations are a means of validating the other two streams of data. The researcher desired to test and see how his experience of the congregation and his observations lined up with the themes that developed in the questionnaires and interviews. This will be a key part of chapter six.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCOVERING BEST PRACTICES

Findings

Based on the data presented in the previous chapter, the researcher discovered the following findings. These findings will be interspersed with relevant observations from the researchers' field observations. For ease of reading, the researcher included Table 5.7, from chapter five, below.

Table 5.7 Aliases

<u>Merged Church Alias</u>	<u>Number of Years Church has been merged</u>	<u>Alias names for two churches that merged together</u>	<u>Alias for key leaders who were interviewed</u>
Church A	14 years	First Church (W) Second Church (B)	WN (minister) JD (associate) DC (elder)
Church B	2 years	South Church (W) T-Street Church (B)	WA (minister) LF (elder) LW (steering team)
Church C	10 months	Oak Church (W) State Church (B)	DR (minister) JF (elder) PK (elder)

God's Will to Unite

The majority of questionnaires made clear that the members in these merged churches believe that God desired for the churches to come together. The data in Table 5.4 showed that all but five respondents out of 154 either agreed or strongly agreed that God led them to merge.

There were telling moments in the interviews that reinforced this conclusion. For instance, WN from Church A spoke of knowing that they ought to merge since "God doesn't want another church in [our town]." When all three men from Church C talked

about the story of their merger, each of them had particular moments when in the story they would remark that God was moving them toward a merger. DR from this church said that they were constantly having conversations about whether this was from God or not, and their conclusion was that God was leading this.

The people of these churches expressed that they merged because they believed that this was what God desired from them. It seems as if this was the launching place for many of these merger conversations. When visiting Church A and Church B, members of each congregation told the researcher that they believe heaven will be multiethnic and that it was their responsibility to come together and get along now.

Merger Does Not Fix Churches

Another finding was that the merger did not resolve previous problems. Several of the interviews made clear that the churches brought with them into the merger the problems they had before.

LF from Church B explained that one of his frustrations was that the fringe members of South Church and the fringe members from T Street are now fringe members of Church B. The reasons that people do not attend church regularly vary from person to person, but his disappointment was that the merger did not lead those people to commit to being active members in Church B.

Of the three churches, Church B exhibited the most pressing issue with the financial pressures they had. T Street had its own financial difficulties with the building and the parsonage and South Church had all of the expenses they inherited when the Bible College closed down. The financial difficulties for these leaders and for Church B multiplied when they merged. The significance of these problems is clearly exhibited when the only minister they have is part-time, and when they had to have the other

minister go part-time, he had to leave to support his family. The financial strains of each church have created a significant financial strain for this church.

The financial pressure of the church was a topic of conversation the morning the researcher attended the church. There was an article in the bulletin explaining their desire to sell the parsonage that formerly belonged to T-Street, but they found structural issues and were not going to be able to get much money for it. LF made clear that another issue was that people in the church are not “giving as they should.” The researcher spent some time that morning walking around the campus and observed that the size of the property they own is much too large for the size of church they are.

Another realization was that merging did not magically help these churches start growing. It is true that together there were more people than they had individually, but at some point, especially with Church A who has been merged the longest, the church plateaued and does not appear to be growing. Evangelism and Outreach do not automatically happen with more people attending, although the leaders indicated that the community has paid attention to them since they merged.

Admitting Biases

The open-ended question on the questionnaires that elicited the most varied responses was the question asking if the merger had affected their perceptions of people of another ethnicity. Approximately 63 percent remarked that it had in some way changed their perspective, but many people remarked that it had not.

The results showed that 36 percent of the people did not believe they held ethnic biases. Some of the responses came across as defensive with people noting that they had always appreciated and been friends with people of another ethnicity. The defensive respondents to this question were Black and White, young and old, male and female.

This question was one of two questions the researcher employed to assess the integration of the church. The researcher believed that integration would be shown through people's changing perceptions of other ethnicities. These results, by themselves, were inconclusive in determining the integration of the church.

One of the challenges of discerning the integration of the church is that people's perceptions of themselves are usually biased in their own favor. Therefore, when the respondents were asked if they had changed their perceptions through the merger, it was not surprising to see people respond defensively. This may raise some important questions about privilege in the church and the need for ethnic reconciliation for these mergers to be successful.

The researcher observed in Church A people of both ethnicities hugging each other and having conversations about family, life, and illnesses. A woman at Church A told the researcher that the high level of noise in the church was a sign that these people loved each other. In Church B, the people were cordial during the service, but there was a special lunch fellowship in one of the other buildings afterward where many people from the church gathered. The majority of people sat close to people of other ethnicities, but there were a few pockets of people of one ethnicity sat together. At Church C, the merger was largely between an older White church with elderly people and a younger Black church with young families. There were members of the church who talked about an event they had the day before that brought together people of both ethnicities to have fun and get to know each other.

Worship Style Matters

As with most Protestant Christian groups, the style of worship in the church service matters to the people. The difference in worship styles between White Churches of Christ and Black Churches of Christ was established in chapter 3.

Some of the common perceptions of worship in Churches of Christ are that White churches are slower, more contemplative, and they pay attention to the shape notes. Black Churches tend to be more upbeat, much more free-flowing and sing songs from memory instead of from books. In both churches, song leaders have a great deal of influence on the way the worship is done.

There was not a question on the questionnaire for the members to address the topic of worship, but the key leaders who were interviewed were asked about the worship in the church. The leaders from Church A made it clear that they were seeking a style that incorporated elements of White church worship as well as elements of Black church worship. Church B was very much a work in progress, but WA was clear that the multiethnic worship is much better than the worship of South Church before the merger. Church C is working through this as well, and DR was adamant that the worship of State Church was not good before the merger.

All the leaders talked about concessions that were made and efforts that had been made to incorporate both worship styles into one. This shows that the worship style of a merged church is an essential issue to work through for the church to be healthy and sustainable.

The researcher observed in each church that the men who got up in front of the congregation were representative of both ethnicities. The Black preachers preached for almost 40 minutes each, while the White preacher preached for 27 minutes. In the two

churches with Black preachers, White men led songs; in the church with a White preacher, a Black man led songs. It seemed apparent that in each church, they believed multiethnic representation from the stage is important.

Strong Leadership is Critical

The importance of strong leadership through mergers is impossible to overstate. The first Likert scale statement, “Our church merger was a success,” along with the fifth statement, “I believe our church merger was handled well,” was an effort to assess how church members believed the merger was handled by the leadership of the churches.

The people who responded to those two questions overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed that the merger was handled well. Several respondents from each church remarked that the minister of their church is “great.” Further, there were moments in the interviews where the leaders were praising the other leaders for their leadership during the mergers. JD talked about the “visionary leadership” of WN at Church A. LF and WA both spoke highly of the minister of T-Street during the merger process for Church B. JF talked about DR as “a gift” to the people of Oak Church.

Leadership is necessary in the church already, but in the case of a merger, and a multiethnic merger at that, the importance of strong leadership is absolutely critical. In the above examples, it was the extraordinary leadership of the minister of the Black Church who was praised for their leadership.

A key finding in this research that may be particular to Churches of Christ was that the Black leader’s influence in the merger was disproportional to the White leaders. WN and DR were the key voices for their respective churches, while the White churches were usually represented by a plurality of leaders. The stories about Church B also seem

to make it clear that the merger may not have happened without their minister making some concessions.

Evaluation of Findings

Trends

The first trend the researcher noticed was in the Black churches. WN and DR were the founding ministers of their respective churches prior to the merger and had long tenures leading those churches. WN had planted Second Church in 1987 and had been leading it for 17 years when the merger conversations began. DR had planted State Church in 2004 and led it for 14 years prior to the merger. The researcher found that of the three Black churches that were part of these mergers, two of them were still led by the founding minister at the time of the merger. Because the former minister of T-Street did not participate in this project, the researcher was not able to determine the length of his tenure with that church prior to the merger.

Another trend that the researcher noticed was in the White churches. South Church and Oak Church had experienced much growth in membership in the 1980-1990s. JF of Oak Church said that their church had 350 people in the 1990s. None of the leaders of South Church were able to give specific numbers, but they estimated that at their height they had 200 active members every week. These churches experienced growth in their past but experienced significant decline leading up to the merger.

First Church did not experience this growth and decline as a church because they were formed after the splits in the other two White churches in town a year before they merged, but DC was clear that those two White churches had formerly been larger and experienced a lot of growth. DC said that one of those two churches declined out of existence and the other was dwindling in membership rapidly.

These White churches seem to be aligned well with the overall trends of the larger denomination. Stanley Granberg wrote that Churches of Christ experienced growth into the 1980s, but “possibly hit its high point sometime in the mid-1980s when the trend shifted from growth to decline.”²⁷² The trend in the White Churches prior to the mergers was of decline.

Another trend that the researcher noticed is that by the time the researcher got to know these merged churches, only one of the ministers from the churches that merged was still on staff. In Church A, the minister from First Church was on staff for a few years but ended up leaving. At Church B, only the minister from South Church remained. Church C was a little different in that Oak Church was without a minister at the time of the merger.

Finally, in each merger, there was an issue with one of the places a church was using prior to the merger. For the people of First Church, they were meeting in an office space that was inadequate for the number of people worshiping with the newly formed church. The T-Street building was in need of serious repairs and was part of the agenda when they met with the elders of South church. The lease on the building that State church was meeting in was up and they were looking for a building share opportunity prior to the merger.

Questions from Data

What were all the reasons for mergers? It appeared that in each case, there were a variety of factors that converged and led to the mergers of these churches. Each church had unique issues coupled with the trends of declining numbers in the White churches,

²⁷² Granberg, 94.

the long tenure of the Black ministers and the presence of building issues. It would be far too simplistic to point to a single reason that these churches decided to merge together.

Another question emerged as well. Did theology drive the decisions to merge or was the decision later theologized? All the leaders and over 90 percent of the questionnaire respondents pointed to God as the catalyst for these mergers. They believed that God was directing them. However, the variety of factors that led to the mergers raises the question of which came first, the theology or the decision.

Another question that the researcher wrestled with was about integration. How do you measure the integration of ethnic groups with one another? Based on the field observations, the researcher believes that Church A is the most integrated, while Church B seemed the least integrated. That leaves Church C somewhere in between. The data would point to the length of time that Church A has been merged versus the reality of no Black representatives in the leadership of Church B. However, the data and methodology of this project did not create a clear way to measure the integration of these churches aside from the researcher's perspective.

Finally, all of these churches considered themselves to be healthy. On the one hand, they exhibited certain signs of being healthy. They were optimistic about what God had done and believed that their futures are bright. They believed that together they are stronger than they were alone. On the other hand, prior to the merger, these churches had a variety of issues that led the researcher to question how healthy they initially were. Some churches referred to themselves as "stagnant," some churches had serious financial issues and one church came into existence through a church split. Can churches exhibiting unhealthy tendencies come together and be healthy?

Best Practices

Even with the questions this project raised for the researcher, the purpose of this project was to discern best practices for churches that may consider multiethnic mergers in the future. To that end, the following best practices were discovered.

Churches Should Pursue Unity

The biblical review supports churches pursuing unity, particularly across ethnic lines. Romans 10, Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2 all speak of Christ's saving work in both Jews and Gentiles. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been for all people from the beginning. Churches have an obligation to pursue unity.

This is not to say that churches have an obligation to pursue mergers. Each of the churches represented in the mergers had a relationship with the church they merged with prior to the mergers. Some of those relationships were longer than others, but all had relationships before merging. In each case, there was a previous relationship demonstrated before the merger.

The churches in this study that eventually merged had relationships already established before talking about merging. WN was asked to mediate for First Church and knew some members there. T-Street and South Church members had participated in door-knocking campaigns together, and the two ministers were friends. DR served with the Oak Church members and elders in their food bank and they had a building share program before merging together. For mergers to even be an option, churches should pursue relationships with other churches.

Patience

Each of the mergers in this study came about slowly and deliberately. There is a necessity for churches to take their time and work through as many details as possible

before a merger takes place. These churches worked through details to get to the point where they were ready to come together. Important details included worship style, leadership in the church, name of the new church, and how the ministers would function in the new church.

It was clear that each of these churches had issues that were particularly important to their mergers. Church A needed to pay special attention to the way people would dress to serve in the church. The leaders from Second church cared deeply about this for reasons that were not as apparent to First church. Church B had financial issues and needed to come to a decision on how to incorporate the minister from T-Street church. T-Street church and South church had to be clear about the financial obligations that came with them into the merger. Church C had the history of Oak Church and the desire for a new name as a high value. Certain representatives from Oak church wanted to keep the name and legacy of the church while leaders from State church wanted a new name to symbolize a new start and the equality of the two groups becoming one. These mergers had the potential to be more successful when they took the time to work through these issues before merging.

The leaders of Church C talked about the members of the churches getting excited about the potential for the merger and trying to get the leaders to move faster. These leaders believe that the success of their merger was due, at least in part, to taking things slow.

For churches considering a merger, it would be prudent not to rush the process. In his closing remarks to the researcher, LW from Church B said, “[The merger process] is something that you have to take serious and think long and do your homework. Don’t just

do it because someone says you need to do.” Merging takes time, and patience is a virtue in the process.

Steering Team

Each of the churches in this study talked about the importance of the steering committees in helping the churches merge together. Representative leaders from each of the congregations were assembled to work through the details of the merger prior to the official mergers. These teams were assembled to have difficult conversations and make sure that there was a fit between the churches.

Church A had a group from each congregation who worked together and talked openly for months before merging. Church B had a group of trustees from T-Street as well as the elders and minister from South Church working through a process to pursue a merger. Church C had the leaders and minister from State church as well as the elders and a deacon from Oak church. These leaders were largely responsible for the process and for identifying potential obstacles.

For a church merger to be successful, assembling the right steering team is a must. Church C talked about a leader from State church who almost derailed the steering team. He was removed from the leadership of State church and the steering team and the merger went forward without him. Churches should select the leaders who will best represent them and their people. These conversations must be open, extensive and executed with great care.

One Minister

The information gathered about these churches suggests that over time, one of the ministers from the pre-merged churches will stay and the other will leave. The researcher could not confidently say that mergers would not work with two leaders, but it seemed

likely that the merged churches would only work with two ministers for a period of time. At some point, one minister would remain as the leader.

One consideration is that the ministers were initially the only person on staff in their respective churches. It is a significant change to go from being the single leader to a team approach. The minister from T-Street was given an Associate Minister role in Church B, hierarchically under the minister from South Church. The ministers in Church A were trying to be equals, but the different personalities did not work out long term.

If future merging churches were working toward a merger with two ministers, it would be important to consider the possibility that one of the ministers will remain past five years. In both Church A and Church B, the ministers talked about their fondness for the other minister and how they thought they worked well together. Even with that closeness, the other minister left.

Eldership Reflects Diversity

The literature review revealed the importance of the leadership of the church reflecting the diversity of the church. This project supports that conclusion. Church A did not have elders at the onset of their merger, and overtime as they moved to selecting and installing elders they made it a priority for the elders to be both Black and White. Church B only has White elders, and LF is concerned about this for the church. He said that it is a priority to equip and qualify Black individuals of the congregation to be elders. When Oak church and State church were working toward their merger, State church did not have elders while Oak church did. The elders of Oak church believed it was vital to recognize the leadership of State church and installed PK as an elder prior to the merger to ensure that the eldership reflected the diversity of the new church.

For churches to merge successfully, the diversity of the church needs to be reflected in the leadership positions of the church. This was one of the key conclusions based on the literature regarding multiethnic churches. Woo wrote, “Racially shared leadership is not only one of the primary means by which to propagate the multiracial vision, but it is also one of the most effective ways to avoid conflict in the multiracial setting.”²⁷³

Strengths of Research Design and Implementation

This project was designed to discern the best practices for a multiethnic church merger. Reflecting on the project, the researcher found three strengths of this project.

Biblical/Theological Foundation

The researcher believed that the biblical and theological foundations for this project were very strong. Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians all provided clear depictions of God’s desire for the church to be multiethnic. There has been an ample amount of theological work done promoting this truth. God does not desire for his people to be divided based on ethnicity.

Site Visits

The researcher made it a priority to visit these churches in person. These site visits gave the researcher a third data stream to consider. Elizabeth Bachrach wrote, “Site visits provide context for and add depth to quantitative data, such as surveys, and other qualitative data, such as interviews.”²⁷⁴ These site visits offered the leaders of the churches an opportunity to get to know the researcher prior to the interviews. The

²⁷³ Woo, 212.

²⁷⁴ Elizabeth Bachrach, “The Value of Site Visits,” accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.grginc.com/documents/TheValueofSiteVisits.pdf>.

researcher believes the church leaders were more willing to share details than they would have been without the visits.

Questionnaire Responses

Leedy and Omrod cautioned readers that questionnaires have “a low return rate.”²⁷⁵ The researcher, however, was able to receive more than 50 percent return rate to the questionnaires. This was due to visiting the churches in person, teaching in the Bible classes, and spending time with the people. More responses meant the data better reflected a larger portion of the congregation.

Weaknesses of Research Design and Implementation

Time

A weakness of this project was time. While the researcher was able to visit each of these congregations, that only provided the researcher with a snapshot of the health of the churches and the success of the mergers. The health and success of these churches are not static. While the churches may exhibit health today, there is no way to know if these same churches will be healthy a year from now.

A key piece of this puzzle would be the integration of Church B and Church C. These two mergers are still relatively new, and it would be helpful to see if the churches are more integrated in a year than they were at the time of this project.

A suggestion for improvement would be to revisit these churches in the future. A researcher could conduct similar interviews and distribute similar questionnaires and compare future results with the results of this project.

²⁷⁵ Leedy and Ormrod, 191.

Churches of the Same Size

Another weakness was that the three churches observed were all similar in size, with each of them averaging less than 200 members. While this is helpful for the majority of churches in America, this data may or may not be as helpful to churches that are larger in size.²⁷⁶ None of the churches, prior to the mergers, had multiple ministers on staff. None of the churches had experienced rapid growth in attendance prior to the mergers.

The researcher was not able to identify a larger Church of Christ that had participated in a merger like the ones described in this project. If larger churches were to pursue a merger in the future, a researcher could compare the findings of this project to the data from that merger.

Ministers and Members Who Left

The researcher was not able to interview the ministers who left from Church A and Church B. Their perspectives may have aligned with the merged church, but their departures raised questions about how the mergers affected them. This would have been a helpful data point for churches that might consider mergers going forward.

The researcher only received feedback from people that attended the church on the Sunday morning that he visited them. Each church had small groups of people that left due to the mergers. While their perspectives would not represent the whole of the church, it would be helpful in adding layers to this research.

The researcher asked for and received contact information for the two ministers who left, but neither would return phone calls or messages. There may not be a good way

²⁷⁶ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Fast Facts About American Religion," accessed November 15, 2019, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#sizecong.

to get this information, but the researcher acknowledges the results would have been better had he been able to communicate with these men.

Interviews with Women

The churches of Christ who participated in this project maintain beliefs and practices that limit the formal participation of women in leadership. It would have been interesting to hear from women who were active in these mergers. Women represented the majority of respondents to the questionnaires, but they were not consulted for interviews. This might be an opportunity for future research.

Unconscious Biases of Researcher

Finally, to begin this project, the researcher acknowledged some of his biases and assumptions. The researcher also acknowledges that he likely had unconscious biases that affected his perceptions of the data and research. The researcher grew up in a White Church of Christ in a White community and has only served in White Churches of Christ. Those realities undoubtedly influenced the perception of the researcher.

It would be good for another researcher of a different ethnicity to conduct the same research and discover if the findings are the same. In particular, it would be good for a Black person who grew up in a Black Church of Christ to conduct the research and compare his or her findings to the findings of this project.

Other Suggestions for Future Research

Korie Edwards' Research

A book that deeply impacted the researcher was Korie Edwards' book, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*. Edwards concluded, "Interracial churches work to the extent that they are, first, comfortable places for whites to attend. This is because whites are accustomed to their cultural practices and ideologies

being the norm and to being structurally dominant in nearly every social institution.”²⁷⁷ A sociological examination based on Edward’s work may be more able to determine the health of these churches than this project was able to do.

Compare

Since the beginning of this project, the researcher became aware of several multiethnic Churches of Christ in a variety of locations that were not formed through mergers. It would be interesting to examine these churches and compare the health of these churches with the health of the churches in this project. It would be helpful to know how the process of merging two churches factors into the overall health of the multiethnic church. There is a wealth of information on healthy multiethnic churches that could be explored and examined.

²⁷⁷ Edwards, 139.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Academics

This project has been a great opportunity to grow as a student. The researcher has written many papers and studied many topics, but those tended to be isolated to a particular field of study. Textual classes required students to produce exegesis papers, theological classes required students to engage with many authors, and the practical ministry classes would require students to create a contextual project. This thesis has asked the researcher to bring all of those skills together and produce a project and report on a higher level. The researcher believes that this has illuminated the importance of being diligent, persistent and productive.

As a minister, those traits can be very important. There were moments where the researcher just had to set a timer and make himself read through books related to his research, and it was in those times where key discoveries were made. As a minister, sometimes the answers people seek require that same level of diligence. There were many moments where the tedious work of editing was a challenge, but the researcher recognized that being persistent in this work was important. In ministry, persistence is extremely valuable. There are times where you need to just keep talking with someone or where you need to just keep pursuing someone. Persistence is important.

The importance of being productive was a huge breakthrough for the researcher. There were ways that the researcher learned to begin studying or to stay focused. The researcher learned that some music is productive and some music is distracting. The

researcher learned that working in the living room is far less productive than working at a coffee shop or in a public library. The researcher learned that turning off the email client and silencing the phone helped get over the initial hurdles. The researcher learned that taking short breaks to walk outside or get a beverage is more sustainable than longer breaks.

Productivity in ministry is crucial. There are many opportunities to be distracted, to produce work that is less thoughtful, and to fail to accomplish the things that need to be accomplished. This process has made the researcher aware of techniques to guard against this.

One of the great privileges of this project was the opportunity to study Ephesians at the depth that the researcher was able to. Ephesians was already a favorite of the researcher, but engaging with scholars on their perspectives of this text was illuminating. The SCM has always valued Ephesians 2:1-10, as most Protestant groups have, but the importance of Ephesians 2:11-21 was new to the researcher. The researcher felt like when that text opened up, the whole project became much more important.

A challenge in this project was studying church mergers across ethnic lines. The reality is that this has not been studied much. The researcher did not expect there to be any literature about multiethnic mergers, and so when he found $I+I=I$,²⁷⁸ that was a wonderful discovery. Chinn did not lead the researcher to believe that this would be easy, but the book made the researcher believe in the possibility of this research. Chinn dealt

²⁷⁸ Derek Chinn, *I+I=I: Creating a Multiracial Church From Single Race Congregation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

with reality, gave hope, and inspired the researcher to believe that discerning best practices for these mergers was a worthwhile endeavor.

Ministry

This project was incredibly important for the researcher in his ministry. In March 2019, the researcher resigned from the church he had been a minister in for the past four years. This decision was difficult and painful, and the decision was made without securing another ministry job first. It was not a hasty decision or a decision made in a vacuum, but it left the researcher without a ministry while pursuing a ministry degree.

This change led to a question of identity. Church ministry had become a core part of the identity of the researcher, and not having a ministry context was extremely difficult. This project gave the researcher an outlet to continue ministry and prepare for the next ministry opportunity. The researcher was very grateful that his ministry context was not a key part of this project. The value of this project on the mental and spiritual health of the researcher cannot be overstated. The researcher was asked to teach Bible classes in the three churches he visited, and the members and leaders of those churches affirmed his gifts. This reminded the researcher of his calling and encouraged him to continue pursuing opportunities. This whole project has been incredibly affirming.

Thanks to this project, a variety of ministry opportunities have arisen. The researcher has had the honor of speaking within a Black church twice during this project, and that experience was incredible. A multiethnic Church of Christ has invited the researcher to speak at their church twice as well. The researcher interviewed for a position with a large multiethnic church in the South, and they said that part of their interest in the researcher was due to his research focus. At the point of writing this

project, the researcher is still seeking and pursuing the right ministry context, but doors are opening up thanks to this project.

This project will change the way that the researcher functions in a multiethnic church. The researcher now has a far deeper and better understanding of the Black Churches of Christ than he had before this project. The researcher now better understands his privilege and the way that impacts people who do not experience the same privilege. Learning about the experiences of people who have not enjoyed the same privilege has been a deeply meaningful corrective for the worldview of the researcher.

If an opportunity were to arise for the researcher to serve in a multiethnic church, this project will have been instrumental in shaping the ministry practices. The researcher now understands the value of having the diversity of the church represented in the leadership of the church. The researcher will seek to empower people to lead. The researcher will make sure that the illustrations used in preaching and teaching represent the people of the church, not just people of his ethnicity.

If the researcher ends up serving in a homogenous church, one of the first priorities will be establishing relationships with pastors of churches of other ethnicities. Hopefully, there will be service opportunities for the two churches to serve alongside each other. The researcher is not going to be seeking to facilitate a merger opportunity, as that seems to be God's work. Were a merger opportunity to arise, the researcher believes he will have some insight that will be helpful in that process.

This project has also brought about opportunities for sharing resources and findings with people. One leader in the Nashville area has talked with the researcher about a church that is exploring the possibility of a multiethnic merger. Additionally, the

researcher has had conversations with a minister in Texas who is considering a merger proposal with a Black church in his town. This project has the potential for real-world ministry impact, and that reality has been very encouraging for the researcher.

Finally, this project has been a pursuit of two things that the researcher strongly believes in. The researcher recognizes and takes up the “unity plea” of the Restoration movement to which he belongs. The SCM has always had the value of unity while practicing division. This project was a means of looking at potential remedies.

Additionally, the researcher is deeply engaged in relationships with people of other ethnicities and desired to develop tools for better understanding and relating to people of other ethnicities. This project has helped the researcher develop relationships and skills to pursue relationships. The researcher entered the Doctor of Ministry program to develop tools for ministry, and this project has helped him do that.

APPENDIX A: CONGREGATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Please fill out the following information.

How long have you attended the current church?
 Less than 1 year 1-5 years 5-10 years 11-15 years 15+years

Gender
 Male Female

Year of Birth

Ethnicity

Asian, Asian American, East Indian, Pacific Islander

Black, African American, African

Hispanic, Latino American

Native American, Native Alaskan

White, Caucasian American

Multi-ethnic, Bi-racial

Please indicate the degree to which you agree.

Our church merger was a success.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am glad our churches merged.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have new relationships with others in the church because of the merger.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe God was leading us to merge.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe our church merger was handled well.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am excited about the future potential for the merged church.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Describe what you originally believed or felt about the church merger. Was it a good idea or not? Why?

How has this merger changed your perspective on people of another ethnicity?

Do you believe your church is now stronger/healthier than before you merged? Why or why not?

What would it be good for those in your community to know about your church?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide: Key Leaders

Questions for Key Leaders of Mergers:

- 1) Describe the first event/moment that led you to consider a merger.
- 2) Describe the health of the two churches prior to the merger.
- 3) When thinking back on the merger talks, describe 2-3 sources of tension that existed.
- 4) Since the merger, how would you describe the worship style?
 - a. Which of the pre-merger churches does this style most closely resemble?
- 5) How did you go about merging leadership?
 - a. Who are the current leaders?
- 6) Describe how the name of the new church factored into the discussion?
- 7) Since the merger, describe any multiethnic tension within your church, if there has been any.
 - a. Describe how your church currently talks about race and ethnicity?
- 8) Describe the process of how the two churches went about integrating with each other?
- 9) Churches of Christ have a unique set of values. How did those values (autonomy, hermeneutic, exclusivity) impact the merger?
- 10) Describe the impact the merger has had on your community?
 - a. More guests?
 - b. Outreach initiatives?

Closing Question

What last thoughts do you have regarding the topic of multiethnic Church of Christ mergers?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview.

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