

# **‘God does not show favoritism,’ João Chaves asserts**

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BROWNWOOD—“God does not show favoritism,” João Chaves, assistant professor of history of religion in the Américas at Baylor University, reminded Howard Payne University students in chapel on Jan. 29.

Taking as his text the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:34-35, Chaves read: “Then Peter began to speak, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation, the one who fears him and does what is right.”

In his first presentation on “Faith Crossing Borders: How Immigrant Churches are Shaping the Future of Christianity” for the Currie-Strickland Lectures in Christian Ethics at HPU, Chaves challenged students to consider the interplay of faith and culture.

Attempting to “mix both lecture and sermon” for the chapel crowd, he said, Chaves provided historical, theological and personal background for his discussion before unpacking the text.

One of the more radical elements of Christianity, Chavez noted, is that “Christians are called to live as people on the move, people whose identity is grounded in a reality that transcends our world.

“Christians are challenged to live as strangers on earth, even though they are tempted to live as if they are legacies,” he said.

Philippians 3:20 says “Our citizenship is in heaven,” Chaves emphasized.

Yet the tendency of Christians to see themselves as “legacies” on Earth instead of “strangers” leads to entitlement, contributing to conflict among

Christians.

These specific conflicts among Christians—differences or prejudices relating to how they view ethnicity, class, gender or otherwise—aren't primarily about "who gets into heaven," but about "how we live our lives together here," Chaves pointed out.

Major theological conflicts have centered around these issues relating to diverse ways of understanding how to live out Christianity here and now, Chaves continued.

But, "God often surprises God's followers by welcoming people they could not," he said.

## **Diversity of Christianity worldwide**

Christianity worldwide is radically diverse, dynamic and growing, he said. Chaves noted the shifting of Christianity's center from Europe and the United States to the Global South in African, Asian and Latin American countries where more than 78 percent of the world's Christians now reside.

While the United States still maintains the largest number of Christians, that's partly from the many Christians who have immigrated to the nation and revitalize the faith here, diversifying U.S. Christianity, too, Chaves said.

The diverse groups are informed by ancestral traditions and the exchange of religious ideas among differing Christian traditions and other religions, "opening up spaces for cross-pollination and introducing innovations that shape Christian forms and meaning."

Despite the explosive growth of Christianity in other areas, some groups of Christians reject other self-described Christians because they practice Christianity in forms that are different from their own.

However, creativity and diversity in Christian belief and practice is not new. In fact, it's very old, Chaves said.

Multiracial, multinational exchanges between religious imaginations have been part of Christianity's growth and development since ancient times.

Diversification of Christianity in the United States is fueled by immigrants and informed by believers' diverse cultural heritages and ancestral traditions, he noted.

And in the first century, the church was comprised of Christians from many ethnicities, races, classes and cultural backgrounds, yet they coexisted in a complex arrangement.

Transnational theologians, including Augustine, the "*mestizo* son of a Roman father and Berber mother, who was often torn between his Roman and African roots and traditions," developed theologies Christians look to still today in multicultural environments.

The Christian Diaspora saw the gospel message sometimes disputed, yet it spread in this setting. As Christianity spread and indigenized, many did not recognize God in "the other," even when they claimed to worship the same God, he said.

"The gospel, nevertheless, grew amid disagreement."

The indigenizing principle means the gospel should be "at home anywhere"—for the gospel message to grow, it must be adaptable and accessible to local people of any background—yet it "is never really entirely at home. It challenges individuals to look beyond our culture because it points to a kingdom that is not of this world," Chaves said.

God calls his people to look beyond their own cultures to relate to people of other cultures for the mission of spreading the gospel. Scripture is replete

with examples of God's people "being called to leave their places of comfort in order to fulfill God's call for their lives."

In the Old Testament, "stranger" is a common element in several passages Chaves cited: Genesis 12:1 and 39:1-6; Exodus 2:22; and Joshua 6:25.

God's command to "love the foreigner among you" weren't just theoretical. It was given after the Hebrew exile in Egypt, pointing God's people back to the experience of being strangers in exile for 400 years.

Scripture repeatedly indicates "God's welcome is more extensive and complex than even God's followers might like," Chaves said.

He acknowledged as an immigrant to the United States from Brazil, where he grew up in a Baptist church after coming to Christ through the witness of a charismatic street preacher, his reading of the Peter and Cornelius story is not objective.

Being a Baptist in predominantly Roman Catholic Brazil, at that time, was countercultural, he said.

Immigrating to the southern United States to study and teach often has meant continuing to feel like a stranger.

He has seen the phenomena of "strangers like [him]" being either sincerely celebrated or subjected to extreme pressure by the majority culture to adjust to its preferences, so Peter's interaction with Cornelius is personal for him, Chaves explained.

## **Seeing God in diversity**

In Acts 10, God challenges Peter, telling him: "do not call anything impure that God has made clean." God proves Peter wrong by compelling him to encounter a person from another culture and see God in him, Chaves said.

Though Peter continued to struggle with this tension at times, he does seem to realize in the key passage what God has been doing all along. “God is much bigger” than Peter’s ethnic or religious identity had allowed, Chaves noted.

“God will not allow Peter to confuse ethnocentricity for divine truth,” he said. “God is a God whose work in nature pours forth diversity, and complexity in unity.”

The mystery of God’s triune nature—three persons in one essence—is itself a challenge for Christians to strive to find unity with other believers in their diverse ways of viewing and being in the world.

Peter’s interaction with Cornelius also points to the danger that even leaders in the Christian community can fail to realize “our cultural expectations of the people whom God should accept can keep us from seeing who God actually is.”

The story of Peter teaches “we have much to learn about God by understanding that relationship with people from other places and cultures.”

Before Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius, “he was completely sure that people like Cornelius—uncircumcised Gentiles—were beyond God’s reach unless they changed into who Peter wanted them to be.”

But Cornelius taught Peter “he had too little a God,” Chaves explained.

He encouraged chapel students to be open to encountering and learning from each other.

“God calls us to be a beautiful celebration of diversity ... in the hope that we can endure. It is a strange hope. Praise the Lord. God have mercy. Amen.”