

Editorial: Every tribe, language, people and nation, on earth as in heaven

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The young adult Sunday school class I teach recently requested a study of the Book of Revelation.

Not too far into the book, we read: “You (Christ Jesus) are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

This reference to “every tribe and language and people and nation” is repeated in various forms in Revelation 7:9, 11:9, 13:7 and 14:6.

As the teacher, I’m expected to take seriously these mentions of every tribe, language, people and nation. But how? What does God’s interest in every tribe, language, people and nation mean for us who still are in this world while trying not to be of it?

There’s really not much question about what it will mean for us in heaven, but we’re not there yet. So, how are we to regard every tribe, language, people and nation here on earth?

How this diversity of people comes to be in heaven isn’t too mysterious. They are those, according to Revelation, whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. Baptists would say they are those saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9).

While we debate particular understandings of the nature of salvation, we

don't argue much about how all these people end up in heaven. And we're fine with that ... as it pertains to heaven.

On Earth, well, that's a different matter entirely, it seems. How different people end up together anywhere on Earth is the stuff governments and politics are made of. And that means we find plenty to argue about when different people here try to be in the same place together.

How might the presence of a diverse multitude in heaven bear significance for us here on earth? Jesus may have given us a clue when he taught us to pray, "Our Father ... your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 5:9-10).

The Bible's story

The biblical story begins and ends at a similar place. In the beginning everything is as God created it to be. In the end, through Christ's redemption of creation, God's original intent will be restored.

In Genesis, humans are those beings created in the image of God. Every human being has that in common with every other human being. Sometimes, we try to get around that by qualifying who counts as a human being.

In Revelation, we see the vast spectrum of God's image bearers once again gathered and sharing in God's perfection together. John calls this the new heaven and new earth, using language from Isaiah 65 and 66. Sometimes, we forget this anticipated future already has broken into this world as demonstrated at Pentecost.

Between the beginning and the end, we see people turn away from God's original intent and suffer the consequences. We also see God's relentless pursuit of redemption and the pouring out of love for all people in and

through Jesus Christ.

Loving those not ‘from around here’

We might agree God loves all people, but when it comes to what happens to all people here on Earth, we might place that concern below the belief the most important thing is to get people saved and into heaven.

Scripture is consistent, however, in teaching how we treat people here on Earth is directly connected to our love of and obedience to God. From God’s law, to the prophets, to the Gospels, to the New Testament letters, we see God’s concern for vulnerable people, among them widows and orphans, strangers and foreigners.

The Bible is [replete with instruction](#) about God’s concern for strangers and foreigners—who we call immigrants—and how we are to treat them. Also clear in Scripture is how we are to treat those among them who are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

The way we welcome immigrants is a means by which we communicate the gospel, not only in deed, but also in word. Mario Alberto Gonzalez, director of Texas Baptists’ River Ministry and Mexico Missions, sees in immigration “[no doubt](#) that God is sending people from many nations to testify to them of his love and the gospel.”

Scripture commands us to be concerned for immigrants and to demonstrate our concern in acts of compassion and kindness like God’s actions toward Israel.

Loving those not like us

Our struggle with every tribe, language, people and nation isn’t confined to immigrants, however. We also struggle with our fellow citizens whose skin

color, names and possibly first languages are not like ours.

We tell derogatory jokes about, suspect motives of, ignore the suffering of, and demean and belittle those unlike us. We do this even in the church. I know; I've heard and seen it many times.

Some among us—especially [Black and Asian American Christians](#)—are voicing their pain. We can demonstrate God's love, and ours, for them by listening. Attempting to silence or criticize their vocalized pain may be more about self-protection than love.

If we see people who aren't like us as less than us—an inconvenience, a drain on our resources, as cause for fear or blame—then we will struggle to see people outside ourselves as worthy of Christ's redemption.

If, however, we behold others as made in the image of God, as equally loved by God, as equal recipients of God's grace, if we can extend to others the same kindness, compassion and dignity we want for ourselves, then we may begin to see God's will done here on earth as it is in heaven.

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