From Multiculturality to Interculturality: The Aim of Theological Education in the Global Context

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What exactly is interculturality? It is important to acknowledge at the outset that this recently-coined terminology is still very unclear for many people. First and foremost, interculturality is not merely “internationality” or “multiculturality” whereby a community, which is comprised of people from different nationalities or cultures, can co-exist side by side with each other. Rather, the ideal intercultural community, which consists of members from different cultures, can interact with each other and thereby mutually enrich the individual members and the community as a whole. In a nutshell, interculturality may be defined as mutual multi-directional exchange and enrichment. It might be helpful to note that interculturality differs significantly from cross-cultural encounter. Interculturality is a multi-directional exchange whereby both parties are enriched in the encounter; cross-cultural encounter however is one-directional communication that does not necessarily involve in mutual exchange and enrichment. Consequently, these terms—interculturality and cross-culture—are not synonymous.

I propose that theological education today must be framed by the importance of interculturality and serve interculturality within the scope of its broader aims, especially as its faculty and students become more ethnically diverse. Interestingly, the Bible contains many illustrations or stories of ideal intercultural encounter, interaction, mutuality or exchange. Due to the limited length of this paper, I could only explore two paradigmatic examples that demonstrate genuine intercultural sensitivity and conciliatory interaction across cultural boundaries. I will begin by examining the ancestral figures of Abraham and Sarah, and then explore Jesus of Nazareth as the representative figure of the New Testament. I will conclude by offering some pedagogical

1 Robert Kisala noted that “our understanding has moved from assimilation to multiculturalism to interculturality.” See Kisala, “From Every Nation, People, and Language,” Verbum SVD 53, no. 1 (2012): 37.
2 Likewise, Kisala says that “Interculturality emphasizes the mutuality of the contact between cultures, that all cultures are appreciated for the gifts they bring to humanity. It promotes the active sharing of these gifts and evaluates positively the consequent changes such sharing causes in all the cultures involved” (“From Every Nation,” 37). See also his previous article entitled, “Formation for Intercultural Life and Mission,” Verbum SVD 50 (2009): 331-35. The clarification of the term “interculturality” by Kisala is similar to other scholars’ definition; for example see Hans de Wit, “Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Backgrounds,” in Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible, edited by Hans de Wit, et al. (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 3-48.
4 While the Bible has examples of the failure of cross-cultural communication and intercultural mutuality, in this article I shall highlight the good examples and the biblical foundations for cross-cultural and intercultural interaction.
implications for teaching the Bible and doing theology in a global church and context. The overall aim of this article is to show that Biblical intercultural hermeneutics can provide a model for reading, living, and ministering in an intercultural context.

**Abraham and Sarah as Mediators of Blessings**

Israel's ancestral history begins with Abraham and Sarah when they responded to God's vague invitation to leave their familiar surroundings in Mesopotamia and sojourn to the unknown land of Canaan (Gn 12:9). Abraham and Sarah moved about in Canaan searching for food and pasture for their livestock. They traveled without constraint through the length and breadth of the land. While Memre, near Hebron, became their principal place of residence (Gn 13:18), they settled in Shechem (12:8-9), Bethel and Ai (13:3), in the Negev between Kadesh and Shur (20:1-2), at Moriah (22:2), at Beersheba (21:33; 22:19), and for a time in Egypt (12:10; 13:1). They are clearly portrayed as immigrants, but what amazes me about the story of their migration is that the land they enter is not empty, for there were already present the Hittites, the Jesubites, the Perizzites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Jebusites, just to name a few (Gn 15:19-21). Noticeably however, Israel's ancestors were not treated with hostility. Canaan is depicted as a peaceful place and a welcoming host country for immigrants and settlers. Consequently, Abraham and Sarah were not unwelcome strangers or considered as hostile passing travelers. They were allowed to freely survey the friendly territory that belonged to the people of the land. No one seemed to object to their coming and going.

Throughout the whole narrative cycle, Abraham and Sarah are portrayed as “a model of how to live at peace with the host peoples of the land and share ownership of the land.” There is no explicit indication from the author of Genesis that the people of the land should be expelled or destroyed. Contrary to what is portrayed by some scholars who appear to have a politically motivated agenda, the immigrant couple acted in exemplary ways by showing deep respect for the entitlement of the people of the land and to their local rituals and practices. According to Carroll Stuhlmueller, Israel's ancestors accepted and interacted with Canaanite forms of worship and lifestyle and even worshiped at traditional Canaanite shrines. Because of their intercultural mutuality and exchange, Abraham and Sarah were able to share the benefits of the land, overcome conflict and crises, and even mediate blessings to the inhabitants of the land.

The story of Abraham encountering and interacting with Melchizek, the king and priest of Salem or Jerusalem, is a good illustration of an ideal intercultural encounter. In this short intercalated vignette about the rescuing of his nephew Lot (Gn 14:18-20), Melchizedek met Abraham on his return from the mission and offered him bread and wine. Abraham clearly participated in table fellowship with Melchizedek, the Canaanite king and also a priest from a different religious tradition and culture. The intercultural exchange reveals that...
Abraham respected Melchizedek’s custom by openly accepting his hospitality. The king then blessed Abraham with these words: “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who delivered your foes into your hand” (vv. 19-20). By gladly receiving a blessing from Melchizedek, Abraham acknowledged the power and legitimacy of the Canaanite “God Most High” (in Hebrew El ‘Elyon). Norman Habel correctly noted that, “For Abraham to accept a blessing from Melchizedek is to acknowledge his power, his authority as rightful priest of a sacred site in Canaan, and his right to rule the territory of the Jebusites.” Abraham’s cultural adaptation and sensitivity are startling to say the least. But that is not all. Abraham even responded with a gesture of mutuality by offering a generous tithe, presumably from his looted treasures (v. 20). Abraham’s intercultural interaction obviously led to the promotion of peaceful relations with the settled inhabitants, and consequently he was welcomed as a friend in the new host country and culture.

Abraham always recognized himself as a ger or “resident alien” and identified himself as such. At the end of his life, he pleaded with the Hittites saying, “Although I am a resident alien among you, sell me from your holdings a piece of property for a burial ground, that I may bury my dead wife” (Gn 23:4). This is a clear indication that even until the very end of his days, Abraham never ceased being a stranger in the land of promise. In this episode, Abraham is shown as one who respects the law of the land and is willing to purchase a piece of property according to the terms dictated by the local residents.

In summary, Abraham and Sarah interacted amicably with the inhabitants from diverse cultures and tribes. Moreover, wherever they moved and lived, the immigrant couple fostered a way of life that mediated blessing. They did not simply co-exist but became ambassadors of good will to all the people they encountered, seeking to transform their own lives and the lives of others around them. As bridge-builders, they shared their resources and followed the appropriate local protocol and laws. Assessing their behavior and attitude, Abraham and Sarah clearly fulfill the three criteria or characteristics of real interculturality, namely: a) a recognition of other cultures; b) a respect for cultural difference; and c) a promotion of healthy interaction between cultures. Since they sought to create an atmosphere whereby each culture allows itself to be transformed or enriched by the other, Abraham and Sarah are considered paradigmatic figures of interculturality. Furthermore, from a theological-missiological perspective, one can see here the biblical foundations for the intercultural exchange and mutual enrichment of all nations in response to God’s mission, who is calling all of them back to God.

**Jesus an Intercultural Jew**

Jesus of Nazareth was born and brought up in a specific culture. He was a Jew who spoke a Palestinian Aramaic and was conditioned by a Semitic way of speaking and thinking. One must realize that Jesus dressed like a Jew, prayed like a Jew, taught and argued like a Jewish Rabbi. His life, mission, and teaching were totally rooted in the Jewish culture and identity. The Evangelist John puts it very plainly, “the Word was made flesh” (1:14). This simple yet profound statement indicates that the Word found human expression in a Jewish

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11 Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 126.
12 Ibid., 126-27.
13 Abraham (Gn 12:10; 17:8; 20:1; 21:23, 34; 23:4), Lot (19:9), Isaac (26:3; 35:27; 37:1), Jacob (28:4; 32:5), and Esau and Jacob (36:7), Joseph (47:4, 9) are designated as gerim (cf. also Ex 6:4). Abraham even described himself as a ger (Gn 23:4). In Exodus 6:4 the patriarchs are referred to collectively as gerim when YHWH declares to Moses that he had promised to give the fathers the land in which they were dwelling as outsiders. Even the psalmist refers to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as gerim who wandered about Canaan before their descendants took possession of the land at a later time (Ps 105:8-13). And in two other instances, Ps 39:13 and 1 Chr 29:15, Israel’s fathers are called gerim. While in Egypt, the Israelites were also identified as gerim (Ex 22:20; 23:9; Dt 10:19; 23:8). See Reinhard Feldmeier, “The ‘Nation’ of Strangers: Social Contempt and Its Theological Interpretation in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 241-70.
Jesus was a Jew, and it is within his Jewishness that he found his identity and belonging. Over the past several decades, New Testament scholars have correctly stressed that an understanding of first century Judaism is crucial to the reconstruction of the historical Jesus and the origins of early Christianity. Likewise, if we wish to understand and appreciate the intercultural dialogue or interculturality of Jesus, we must first recognize his deep Jewishness.

Jesus’ mission was primarily to his people and normally took place within the Jewish territory (Mk 6:7-13). He clearly said that he “was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15:24). Even so, he healed both Jews and Gentiles (Mk 5:1-8; 7:31-37). The story of Jesus healing the daughter of the Syrophoenician (Mk 8:24-30) or Canaanite (Mt 15:21-28) woman is a very good example of mutual inter-cultural exchange. The belief and strength of this poor and widowed foreigner impressed Jesus to the point of acknowledging her “great faith” and granting her whatever she wished. Many commentators have noticed that Jesus’ attitude toward Gentiles in general became more favorable after this crucial encounter and eventually led Jesus to commission his disciples to inaugurate a universal mission (Mt 28:18-20). In addition to healing those of other races, Jesus also proclaimed the gospel to them. Jesus’ dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:4-42) is a fine example of cross-cultural exchange, whereby the woman and her people were enriched and transformed in the cross-cultural experience. When Jesus asked her for a drink, her first reaction was disbelief that he, a Jew, would even talk to her, a Samaritan. The disciples’ shocking discovery of Jesus conversing with the woman at the well is a clear indication that his behavior was unusual. Nevertheless, Jesus took the initiative and broke the cultural barriers of race, gender, and religion. Despite her seemingly tarnished past, Jesus accepted her as she was without judgment and condemnation. I believe that it was through open dialogue and respectful exchange that Jesus was able to transform this ordinary Samaritan woman to become a missionary and an evangelist (4:39, 42). The story ended with the whole town coming to know Christ and believing in him. I believe that Jesus too was enriched and transformed in this unique cross-cultural encounter, for he no longer remained at the edge of town but accepted their hospitality and stayed with them for two days (4:40).

Jesus also demonstrated cross-cultural sensitivity in his teaching, especially in his parables. The central message of Jesus’ ministry was “the coming of the Kingdom of God” (Mk 1:14-15). One of the ways to get this message across was through story telling. Like a good teacher, Jesus loved to tell stories and was very good at it. Jesus’ stories however are unique for they usually have unexpected twists and are often subversive. More than just telling stories, Jesus spoke often in parables, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The simplest definition of parable is a short story, metaphor, or simile usually drawn from everyday experiences to communicate a certain lesson or truth that intends to shock the listener by its vividness or strangeness. Jesus often begins by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like ….” While parables are down to earth with high verisimilitude and are easy to remember, they are not always obvious and easy to understand. Jesus' parables have the power to grab attention for those who hear them. They have the potential to transcend space and time as well as the culture of the original speaker and listener to speak even to us today messages that are still pertinent and images that are still powerful. To farmers he spoke in images of fields and wheat, to housewives in images of bread making and housecleaning, to builders in images of stone and mortar, to fishermen in images of net and fishes, to merchants in images of pearls and treasures. Jesus’ parables of the kingdom can be appreciated by listeners of diverse background and profession.15 The most famous example is the Good Samaritan, who helped a man who had been robbed and beaten nearly to death (Lk 10:29-37). While religious Jews avoided the injured man in the ditch, the Samaritan showed compassion to the stranger who was probably a Jew and a potential enemy.

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14 Legrand, Bible on Culture, 75.
Although being steeped in his Jewishness, Jesus was a different kind of Jew. Jesus touched the lepers, befriended sinners and outcasts, and liberated those who were possessed by impure spirits. Jesus recognized the dignity in the people he met and restored them to their rightful place. More than simply associating with them, he participated in table fellowship with them. This was a radical move, for people in Jesus’ time did not just eat with anyone. To sit at table with someone was a sign of respect, trust, and friendship. Jesus surprised everyone by sitting down to eat with anyone. Jesus excluded no one at the dinner table. Moreover, Jesus offered his very self as food and drink for those who hunger and thirst for the Kingdom of God. Many who came in contact with Jesus were transformed, for example, Zacheaus the tax collector (Lk 19:1-10), the woman who anointed Jesus (Mk 14:3-9), Martha and Mary (Lk 10:38-42), and the two distressed disciples from Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). Noticeably, Jesus did not simply interact with people; rather he and those he encountered were mutually enriched. In short, I have shown that Jesus was a very cross-cultural Jew and on various occasions can be considered an intercultural Jew. In any case, Jesus is ideal in showing that God’s mission includes all peoples, and this lays the biblical foundation for intercultural exchange and mutual enrichment of all nations in response to God’s mission.

Pedagogical and Theological Implications

This article began by clarifying that real “interculturality” is more than just co-existing side by side with people from different nationalities or cultures. Rather, the ideal intercultural setting for interculturality provides a space or opportunity for people from different cultures to interact with each other and thereby mutually enrich and transform each other and those around them. With this understanding, I have turned to the Bible by exploring the stories of Abraham–Sarah and Jesus of Nazareth as paradigmatic examples that illustrate ideal intercultural encounter or interaction. What follows are some pedagogical implications of teaching the Bible and doing theology interculturally in a global church and context. But first, let us look at the inevitable demographic and theological shifts on the horizon.

According to projections of the US Census Bureau in 2008, the US population will change drastically by race and ethnicity in the near future. By 2050, the white population of 201 million is expected to reach 215 million; African Americans will grow from 40 to 59 million, Asians from 16 to 38 million, and Hispanics from 50 to 133 million. What this means is that, by midcentury, the ethnic minorities in the US will become the majority, while the whites will be a minority, consisting of only 48 percent of the total 450 million population. As for Christianity worldwide, it is estimated that by the year 2025, the majority of the 2.6 billion Christians will be found in the “global South,” namely Africa, Central and Latin America, and much of Asia. With Christianity growing at a phenomenal pace in the global South, it is believed that in the near future most Christian scholars will be concentrated there. Consequently, the shift in Christianity’s center of gravity from the global North to the global South will not only be demographic but also theological. This shift will have a seismic affect on

16 What Jesus did in the Gospel of Luke, the disciples imitated in the Acts of the Apostles. A very good example of such a parallel is found in the story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1—11:18). Peter’s table-fellowship with Cornelius and his household caused no small confrontation with the Jerusalem church. However, it was through this watershed encounter that the way was opened for Paul to evangelize in Gentile territory and among Gentile folks. See vanThanh Nguyen, “Dismantling Cultural Boundaries: Missiological Implications of Acts 10:1—11:18,” Missiology: An International Review 40, no. 4 (2012): 455-66.

17 Lester Edwin J. Ruiz and Eleazar S. Fernandez, “What Do We Do with the Diversity that We Already Are?” Theological Education 45 (1, 2009): 45. The 2010 population projected at 312 million will reach approximately 452 million. By midcentury, whites will be approximately 48 percent of the population; African Americans, 12 percent; Asians, 8 percent; Hispanics, 30 percent; and others, 2 percent.

18 According to Philip Jenkins, 595 million would live in Africa; 623 million in Central and Latin America; and 498 million in Asia. Europe might still be in third place with 513 million. See Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity (Revised and Expanded Edition; England: Oxford University Press, 2007). 2. Jenkins predicts that by 2050 only about one-fifth of the world’s three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites (Next Christendom, 3).

doing theology as it is moving away from the “center” to the “periphery.” The demographic and theological shifts will significantly alter the theological landscape.

How should theological educators in the US prepare for this monumental change when the minority will become the majority? I suggest that we need to begin to move from a multicultural model to an intercultural model of theological education whereby people from different cultures and backgrounds do not simply co-exist but rather interact with each other and thereby mutually enrich and transform each other both in the classrooms and beyond. From a pedagogical viewpoint, this model requires from teachers active, sensitive, and respectful listening skills to hear the diverse voices represented in the classroom and to humbly acknowledge that such wisdom and insight can be tapped in that context.

Moreover, by applying the intercultural model of education educators recognize and affirm that there is not a single dominant perspective for doing theology or reading the Bible, but rather there are multiple or polycentric perspectives. Furthermore, by listening to the voices of all people in the church, especially to those on the periphery, for example, women and people of color, the model recognizes that everyone has something to offer to the theological endeavor and can be mutually enriched. In addition, this model not only acknowledges but also addresses the global issues of culture, class, ethnicity and race, leading to a truly global intercultural theology.


**Works Cited**


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