

Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle

Movements, People Groups, and Melting Pots: A Personal and Historical Retrospective

R. W. Lewis

Editor's Note: This article was adapted from a lecture given at the Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship, March 3–5, 2022.

In addressing this subject of the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP), I'd like to share some insights I've gained about movements, people groups and melting pots from my personal life, from movements to Christ in history, and from my biblical reflections.¹ My husband and I have spent decades engaged in different cultural contexts and I've personally researched why some peoples either joyfully received or persistently resisted the gospel. The HUP principle, and various ways it manifests itself, is one of the vital sociological realities we have witnessed time and again, and it turns up consistently in the history of Christian movements. I've had the opportunity to observe the realities of cultural homogeneity on five different continents where I have lived for periods of five to fifteen years: Central America, North Africa, the UK, India, and North America. Each context yielded different insights, and I've decided to share those insights in a chronological manner. It's both a delight and a privilege to add this personal perspective on the HUP to this auspicious team of presenters.

Insights from Guatemala

I grew up in Guatemala, where across every region of the country there were Ladinos (or Meztizos) who spoke Spanish, the trade language. The Mayan tribal peoples each had their own distinct language and diet, and each individual clan within each tribe wore distinctive handwoven outfits. While the regional Mayan tribal peoples had a Latino Colonial veneer and many of the men spoke Spanish, there was an obvious need for separate Bibles and movements in each tribe based on their language and culture.

There are four pictures of people wearing typical Guatemalan Indian dress on pages 28 and 29. The first is a picture of a woman from the Atitlan region with yards of a colorful handwoven hair sash around her head making a type of brimmed hat (figure 1, page 28, left column). Her clothes are very distinct from the watercolor portrait of a Cakchiquel woman with the shawl hat and a very different woven

R. W. Lewis grew up in Guatemala, helped her parents start the US Center for World Mission, now Frontier Ventures, and with her husband, Tim, helped to found Frontiers. They have spent the last forty years working on behalf of blessing Muslim families.

blouse or huipil² (figure 2, top, right column). Then you have the watercolor of a Quiche (K'iche') woman with her elaborate tie-dyed skirt³ (figure 3, bottom, right column). The Quiche were the original Mayan feudal lords and were very proud of their technique for tie-dyeing threads before weaving—a closely guarded secret. You could easily tell which tribe a person came from, male or female, by their tribal outfits.

In 1917 in Guatemala, a Mayan tribal person asked Cameron Townsend (later the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators), “If your God is so big, why can't he speak my language?” Up until that time, the Roman Catholic churches which had been there for over four centuries only conducted mass in the Latin language, and the Protestant churches started by evangelical missionaries who had arrived in the 19th century, only conducted services in Spanish. Townsend was shocked by this question. He realized that these Indian languages also mattered greatly to God, and that the lack of translations in Mayan languages might explain why there weren't movements to Christ going on in the Indian tribal areas.⁴

Figure 1. Woman from the Atitlan region: woven sashes around their heads making a brimmed hat.



By 1958, when my parents arrived in the Mam Indian tribal region of western Guatemala, the Presbyterian missionaries Dudley and Dorothy Peck had learned the Mam language and translated the entire New Testament. (Both had gone out as Student Volunteers for Mission. Dorothy was a Greek major from Wellesley College and her husband Dudley was

Figure 2. Cakchiquel woman with a shawl hat and a very different woven blouse or huipil.



Figure 3. Quiche (K'iche') woman in elaborate tie-dyed skirt.



a graduate of Williams.) Here they are in the picture wearing the traditional Mam Indian clothing (figure 4 below). Dorothy, her friend, and two Mam Indian girls are dressed in the dark blue skirts, vivid colorful blouses (*huipiles*), and wide black and white woven sashes worn as belts that were typical for women of that tribe.

Figure 4. Women in typical Mam Indian women's clothing: dark blue skirts, vivid colorful blouses (huipiles), and wide black and white woven sashes worn as belts.



My father, Dr. Ralph D. Winter, quickly realized that the Mam Indian pastors were being trained in Spanish in the seminary that was down on the coast. As a result, they were only planting Spanish-speaking churches in cities, avoiding the poverty of the rural Mam tribal areas. *The first insight gained from Guatemala was that when pastors from minority people groups are trained in a foreign or dominant culture, they rarely return. When they do, they use the dominant language and culture in the churches instead of the local language and culture.*

To change this pattern of dislocation, he helped start the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) movement so that the Mayan tribal pastors could be trained in their own villages and maintain their own familial livelihoods. Today there are scriptures and strong movements to Christ in virtually all the Mayan tribes of Central America.

The second insight from Guatemala was that without “people group eyes,” the ones that are left out are usually the minority people groups, “hidden” in rural areas, mountains, deserts, and jungles—even urban jungles.

When Cameron Townsend started Wycliffe Bible Translators to ensure that his insight about language and the Scriptures went global, it led to a huge explosion in movements among minority people groups all around the world. People groups that hadn't been affected by Christian missions before were suddenly in view. Ralph Winter and Jim Emery started the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) movement which *enabled natural leaders to be trained as pastors within their own people groups, ensuring well-disciplined movements in even remote groups.*

Insights from North Africa

We lived eight years in North Africa and had a team of forty adults working with three of the largest Muslim Berber tribal people groups. There are thirteen different large Berber tribes in North Africa each with their own distinct language, their own musical traditions, their own combination of spices, and their own crafts and rug designs. But Arabs had ruled them for the last 1300 years. It was people group thinking that revealed the plight of the Berbers to my husband and me when we decided to move there. It became apparent that these groups also had been overlooked by Bible translators who were restricted from working in “closed countries” without government permission. Even though there had been many Berber Christians before the Muslim Arab conquest (including St. Augustine whose mother Monica was Berber), in no century had there been Berber-language Bibles or sustained indigenous movements to Christ in any of the large Berber people groups. Thus, early Christian Berbers had assumed the Muslim religion of the Arab invaders, unlike the unyielding Armenians in Eastern Turkey who had their own Bible from early on. Arab invaders banned the alphabet of the Berber tribal peoples, and any trace of Berber Christianity was eventually erased except for some early Christian symbols like the fish and the cross still present in their hand-woven carpets or human tatoos. The recent movement to Christ among the Kabyle Berbers has also suffered severely, and they have only recently had a complete Bible in their own language.

Only in the last few years have Berber-language Bibles even begun to appear. The Rifi Berber tribal area where we lived for eight years finally completed their full Rifi Berber Bible just a few years ago. Now literacy is crucial, as are audio versions. Furthermore, there are very few Scriptures in the Moroccan Arabic language known as *Darija (derizha)*. Because Moroccan Arabic is not considered high class enough to qualify as a written Arabic language, no one is taught to read in the language they speak (like when people spoke French, Italian or Spanish, but the written language was still Latin). As a result, to this day I am aware of no indigenous movements among the Moroccan Arabs.

These observations led to the first insight gained from North Africa, which is that heart language scriptures and worship are key to developing resilient, self-sustaining, indigenous movements.

But these decades of failure yielded further insights. When we arrived in Morocco in 1981, there was only one church existing after one hundred years of pioneer outreach. There were elders for a small believing network across the entire country. When we moved to an inland city, within months we were able to gather up a fellowship of believers in our living room—sitting on Moroccan couches, complete with offerings for the poor. We noticed the Arabs would sit on one side of the room, and the Berbers would sit on the other side of the room. But, most importantly, we noticed that they didn't gather at all if we ourselves weren't there. After one hundred years of outreach to Moroccan Arabs, when we arrived fewer Arab believers remained in the country than the number of missionaries who had gone to reach them! So, without movements to Christ, single churches slowly die out.

This observation led to the second insight from North Africa, that *no people group becomes reached without a self-sustaining indigenous movement that spreads through whole families, pre-existing communities, or networks of trust.*

This insight was confirmed when we tried to get together a Rifi Berber church. This time we weren't trying to put Arabs and Berbers into the same group. We weren't even trying to put people from different Berber areas into the same group, because they would end up arguing about which Berber language was the correct one. We knew two believers from the Rifi Berber tribe, from distant Rifi villages. We assumed that if we introduced them to each other they would fall on each other's shoulders with big hugs at having found another Rifi Berber who was a believer. However, instead they barely talked to each other, barely looked at each other. Then we realized that there was long-standing distrust not only between the Berbers and the Arabs, but due perhaps to the surveillance of a totalitarian state and the secret police or perhaps to competition and enmity between feudal clans and chieftains, trust had eroded between groups and even between clans of the same Berber people group.

It's clear that *without trust in relationships, movements do not form.* Aggregate churches not only fail to start movements, but they also actually hurt families. What do I mean by an aggregate church? I mean churches where you bring unfamiliar people together, and you try to make them into a church—people who previously did not know each other. There's no trust relationship between them, so even if those believers might begin to trust each other and love each other, their families are often left out. They've been pulled individually out of their families, and their families frequently don't come to faith, because the families don't trust the other people that are in that new group. In addition,

the families now resent and fear the Christians for stealing their family members, like one would with some kind of cult. So *indigenous movements must spread through pre-existing trust networks to be self-sustaining.*

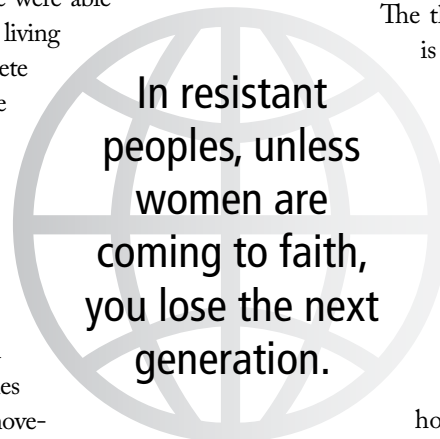
The third insight we discovered in North Africa is that *often the strongest leaders were those whose mothers had come to faith and had raised them as believers.* Again, family relationships were key in lasting movements, but the involvement of mothers was crucial.

We observed that in resistant peoples, unless women are coming to faith, you lose the next generation. I wrote an article about this insight in 2008,⁵ documenting how the "Bible women" of Korea and China became the basis of the movements in those previously resistant areas, despite the low status of women in those cultures. Native Bible women, often widows, would go from village to village, training women in the Bible (written or oral), and as a result the sons of those women became the leaders of the movements to Christ in Korea and in China.

Insights from India

We eventually moved to India because it was the second largest Muslim country in the world. We wanted to find out why India is the country with over 200 years of Protestant mission history but with relatively little progress of the gospel, except in a few specific areas. Some regions have been called "the graveyard of missionaries." Donald McGavran, who was a third-generation Indian expat, noticed that self-sustaining indigenous movements in India tended to expand within people groups and only crossed into other people groups through bicultural bridge people. These were his seminal insights from his analysis of the "Bridges of God" that led to the "Homogeneous Unit Principle."⁶

India is the quintessential multicultural, *non-melting* pot. The picture of marbles in jars (figure 5, page 31) can represent the multiple layers of high identity that exist in India. For example, marbles in the left-hand jar can represent the Sunni Muslim people groups—there are a lot of people groups inside that jar. The big black marble might represent the Kashmiri Sunni Muslims, who live in their own geographical area in the country, which would tend to make them easier to reach. The other colors represent other Sunni Muslim groups that are scattered all over different parts of India and who have a "dual high identity." One high identity is the language and people group that they are a part of, while their second high identity is that they are Sunni Muslims (which also is broken into multiple sub-groups, like the Deobandi branch or the Tablighi Jamaat movement).



Our first insight was that *India is a very complex situation of high identity people groups with multiple identities*. They have guarded their separate identities for many centuries, even thousands of years, though they frequently live side by side. They value their people group identity and do not succumb to a melting pot.

After three generations of his family living in India, McGavran was still an expat. I, too, have three grandchildren who were born in India. My son had to sign a document saying that they were never going to try to get Indian citizenship for their Indian-born daughter. This pattern is exactly the opposite of melting pot countries like the United States, where we offer citizenship to anybody born here, and we appreciate the inflow of many different people from many different places. While living in India, we observed that the Indian people groups have multiple layers of exclusive identities, that people groups with high identity are not necessarily homogeneous, either linguistically or generationally; however, that doesn't mean that movements don't follow along these people group lines.

Figure 5. Marbles in jars representing the multiple layers of high identity that exist in India.



For three thousand years India has resisted assimilation of cultures, or becoming a melting pot, and this continues even if these distinct peoples spread out globally. Just as the prophet Abraham sent for a wife for his son from his own people group, it is common for diaspora Indians to seek out their spouses from their own people group back in India—even if they no longer speak the same language. For example, in Calcutta there was a Tamil Muslim family we got to know, and they did not speak Urdu, Bengali, or any of the North Indian languages. They only spoke English and their Tamil from South India. The parents got wives for their sons from their Tamil Sunni people group from as far away as Singapore or Canada. A recent documentary-movie entitled, *Meet the Patels*, tells the story of families from the Patel

people group who have moved to other countries, how they meet each other, and how they get married. In the movie, the Patels have their own big giant telephone book-sized book of Patels from all over the world, so one can figure out who to marry (probably functions today through the internet).

In India itself, people's clothes reveal their religion, region and even often their caste status or people group. I had to carefully learn which style of clothes to wear to identify with a particular people group. But I did not realize this at first, so I just bought the clothing that I liked from the markets of Delhi. Then I found out later that my clothing identified me as being from Lucknow or from Jaipur or from Kashmir. Some clothes meant I was Hindu, or others that I was Sunni or Shi'a Muslim, even others identified me as a Sikh. Others literally shouted "tourist" because people in Delhi didn't wear those kinds of clothes. I couldn't just buy the clothes that I thought were the most beautiful. You'd think I would have learned this from growing up in Guatemala. I falsely expected a giant city to be a melting-pot rather than to have distinct people group lines visible even in the clothing.

A second insight we saw was that the churches in Delhi were multiethnic churches, but they were not multicultural—they were Christian melting pots. In other words, people came from all over India to Delhi and joined these churches. But the churches were fully English speaking and had a Western modern Christian culture. They would sing popular Western worship songs displayed on overhead screens. They would sit on plastic chairs. In no way did they represent the cultures of the different people groups that were in the church. The churches were a melting pot situation and so the Christianity represented there was what they had in common, which turned out to be an English, Western, modern Christian culture. It was multiethnic but monocultural, except at the potlucks when people brought food from their own backgrounds.

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A third insight that came from living in India was that today half of the largest Frontier People Groups in the world are in India, both by number of groups and by their population size. We were stunned not only by the huge number of Muslim people groups in India, but the huge number of untouched Hindu and other

groups. India, although a nation, is more like a continent, with nearly as many people as all of Africa. Africa has more than 2000 languages, but India has a similar number or more—according to the 2018 Indian census, India has more than 19,000 mother tongue dialects.⁷ In 2013, the Ministry of Education in India launched the Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL), <https://www.sppel.org/>, to document the endangered languages of India, in an attempt to preserve them.⁸ People groups are still highly important in India. This awareness has led to a new analysis of the least reached peoples of the world.

In 2018, a new demographic analysis sorted out these people groups with no progress of the gospel and called them “Frontier People Groups.”⁹

A Frontier People Group (FPG) is a subset of unreached people groups that has less than 0.1% Christians (1 out of 1000) and no known indigenous movements among them. Globally there are 293 “mega” Frontier People Groups that are over a million in size, and 155 of them live in India.¹⁰ These nearly 300 mega FPGs have a combined population of 1.6 billion (80% of all the FPGs, and 20% of humanity). The total population within all the Frontier People Groups globally is about two billion, and over one billion, a little more than half, are in India.¹¹

India’s Frontier People Groups are virtually untouched by the churches of India, many of which are western-style churches. There are 600 million people in Other Backward Castes (OBCs) that are virtually untouched by the gospel. There are 200 million Muslims that are in Sunni groups, Shia groups, Sufi groups, and in other sects like the Deobandi and Bareilvi. There is also an amazing global Sunni Muslim reform movement called the Tablighi Jamaat, which started in India around a hundred years ago. They now have over 100 million adherents globally in more than 150 countries.¹²

Besides the immense variety of Hindu castes there are also Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and tribals. Therefore, a town of 100,000 could have several dozen distinct unreached people groups in the same town, whose people don’t intermarry and interact little.

Fourth, we realized that the vast majority of people groups in India are not concentrated in a distinct geographic area, and this pattern makes working with specific people groups significantly more difficult. People groups in most of the world are geographically concentrated, as are most of the people groups which have been reached in India—mountain tribes and other people groups outside the caste system. However, because the caste system is based on occupation or trades, most of the caste

people groups are distributed throughout virtually every town in all of India, identifying with one another even though they do not share the same language.

This distribution does not mean we can ignore the principle of working with people groups. The Sunni Tamil Muslim family in Calcutta I mentioned above has a higher commitment and connection to the other Sunni Tamil people groups all over the world than they do to the other Muslim peoples who live around them in Calcutta. The people groups living side-by-side rarely become close, and even in megacities they do not make friends with their neighbors but relate only through people group networks. Our Shia friends who lived in

a Sunni neighborhood pretended to be Sunni most of the time, because they were afraid of what the people in their Sunni Muslim neighborhood would do to them if they found out that they were Shia Muslims. It is counterproductive to extract these people from their households and try to put them into Westernized, English-language churches like those formed by other Christianized Indian people groups in Delhi. Indian people groups need to understand, as did the Samaritan village that Jesus reached out to in John 4, that *Jesus is their savior, too, without having to leave their people group.*

Insights from North America

The contrast with life in North America also provided missiological insights about the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP). The US is a quintessential “melting pot” (see figure 6, page 33). Because of their history as immigrants wanting to leave their past behind, Americans resist and even oppose people group thinking, putting a high value on multiculturalism and idealizing melting pot culture. As a third culture kid who grew up speaking both Spanish and English, who then learned to speak various levels of Arabic, Berber, Hindi, and Urdu, I have learned to love the differences in language and culture. I love eating and dressing like my friends in the local culture, and they love helping me learn about their customs, their religions, their rituals, and their cuisine. In the cultural foment and confusion about the HUP, one can suspect my behavior: is it a cultural appreciation that honors the culture of others, or is it a more harmful cultural appropriation that dishonors the culture of others by adopting their ways?

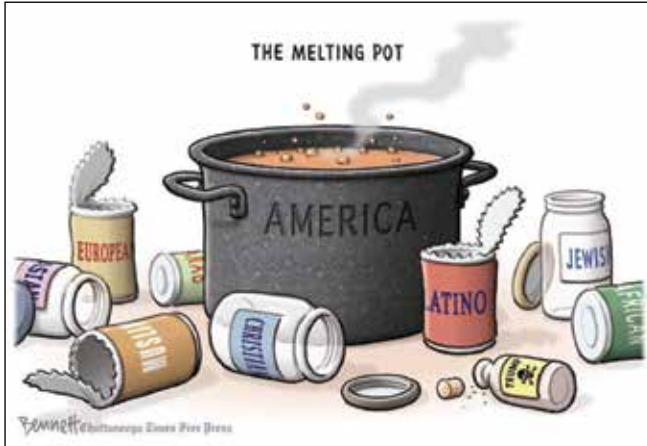
In our re-entry to the US, we saw *a huge tension between wanting to erase distinctive people group identities and the basic human need to have some form of people group identity.* Needing a people group identity seems like a natural desire for all people, which has led some to ask the question: is the melting pot the best way to honor people from different backgrounds?



Half of the largest Frontier People Groups in the world are in India, both by number of groups and by population size.

By comparison, India is truly multicultural, like marbles in a jar, which appears to encourage prejudice between people groups, even fear and violence. On the other hand, melting pots are not truly multicultural, compelling hybridity with the dominant culture, so while they eliminate some forms of prejudice, they can breed other forms which are just as virulent.

Figure 6. The US is a quintessential “melting pot.”



Some of the negative consequences of desiring a melting pot civilization, and therefore minimizing people group distinctions, can include things like: the sending of children of minority groups to local or boarding schools to assimilate them into the dominant culture (as happened in Native American tribes); intentionally fostering a loss of identity with the culture of origin (often with good intentions at the hands of the original immigrant parents); the loss of one’s native tongue, food, and culture in a generation or two; and insuring that one’s identification with the dominant culture erases one’s old identity. A person or family’s old identity is usually subsumed, and most minorities in America, native or immigrant, have eventually lost their original languages and cultures. If the immigrant or native minority is sufficiently large, they may become a bicultural people

Figure 7. Characteristics of “multicultural” or melting pot civilizations.

Characteristics of “multicultural” or melting pot civilizations	
Loss of identity with culture of origin, often loss of language in a generation or two.	Intolerance of opposing ideas. Best ancient example of a melting pot was Rome. “When in Rome do as the Romans do.”
New identity with dominant culture of the melting pot. Old identity either subsumed or 3rd culture.	Those who became Roman citizens were expected to adopt the language and culture and support the cultural and political imperialism of Rome.
Ethnically diverse, but monocultural. Like America, Rome gave Roman citizenship to people from hundreds of ethnic backgrounds, even former slaves.	The Roman Catholic church conformed to the Roman expectation: use our language and forms. The Roman Catholic leadership largely had an anti-HUP approach to the Gospel.

group—fluent in both languages, with an understanding of both cultural systems, but often not feeling completely at home in either. They’re essentially a third culture.

Also, melting pot civilizations are often intolerant of opposing ideas and cultures. The classical example of a melting pot was Rome, where “when in Rome do as the Romans do.” You weren’t supposed to bring in your other non-Roman ideas and ways, but you were supposed to become like the Romans. Ethnically diverse situations can become monocultural. As in America, Rome granted Roman citizenship to people from hundreds of different ethnic backgrounds.¹³ Even former slaves could eventually become Roman citizens.¹⁴ However, those who became Roman citizens were expected to adopt the Roman language and culture, and to support the cultural and political imperialism of Rome. When the Catholic Church conformed to this Roman expectation by using the Roman language and forms, the Roman Catholic leadership exercised an “anti-homogeneous unit principle” approach to the gospel. For centuries, everyone had to learn Latin to read the Bible or any literature, to worship with the same Latin language liturgy, and to accept the Roman hierarchical form of leadership. (See figure 7 below.)

And what about the crisis of mass immigration on melting pot civilizations? Eventually Rome was overrun by other people groups to the extent that Italy lost its own native language. In the US, an astonishing number—some estimate as high as ten million people, counting those estimated as “got aways,”¹⁵ from over 150 different nations—have come across the southern border in the past few years (2020 to 2024). This influx is undoubtedly one of the greatest migrations of human beings in history.¹⁶

Many Guatemalans have streamed across the US Southern border. Some studies say over eighty percent of the people from Central and Latin America coming into the country are Christians and twenty to thirty percent of those are evangelical Protestants.¹⁷

Pictures of the migrants show all the people dressed in Western clothes to fit into an American melting pot. Having grown up in an Indian tribe in Guatemala, I was sad to see that they were not only giving up their land, but they were giving up their tribal cultures, their languages, their tribal ways of dressing, and their heritage as native Mayan tribal peoples. I would venture to say, if they realized what they were losing, most immigrants would have preferred to be helped to thrive in their own homeland, with their own family members nearby, rather than give it all up to come to the land of promise. Most of these masses of people, half of them young men, are no longer fleeing looming starvation and famine, or drug cartel violence and murder (though most end up indebted indefinitely to the cartels who helped them cross illegally). They are fleeing persistent poverty and are hoping to get richer in their American Dream, unaware of what it's going to do to their own language, culture, and family heritage. The path to wealth is full of hurdles, including temptations to become permanent welfare cases thereby continuing their persistent poverty in the US.

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Melting pot societies seem to destroy minority languages and cultures by the third generation. Some recommend replacing “melting pots” with a “salad bowl” form of multiculturalism, where each of the individual cultures represent distinct flavors. This plan is hard to accomplish, even at global meetings, like the UN, with simultaneous translations available through headphones—replicated in smaller ways in our global meetings of churches and agencies. In actual practice, if communities living together maintain their independent languages and cultures, it ends up with more like a “jar of marbles” than a salad bowl, like in India where the different people groups do not interact.

Is there something better than melting pots and salad bowls?
Mohammed Berry comments,

Food metaphors like the melting pot and the salad bowl theories have illustrated different approaches to integration by explaining the political and power dynamics between dominant and minority groups. By combining ethnic identities into homogeneous and/or multicultural outcomes, food metaphors empowered dominant ethnic groups. For refugees, this obscures their actual sociopolitical circumstances and embraces their harsh historical experiences.¹⁸

The principal difference between the melting pot and the salad bowl theory of civilizations is our ability to see with “people group eyes.” But these people group eyes will result in true mutual respect only when rooted in a biblical view of humanity—that all peoples are created in God’s image and are of equal value.

Is People Group Thinking Dangerous?

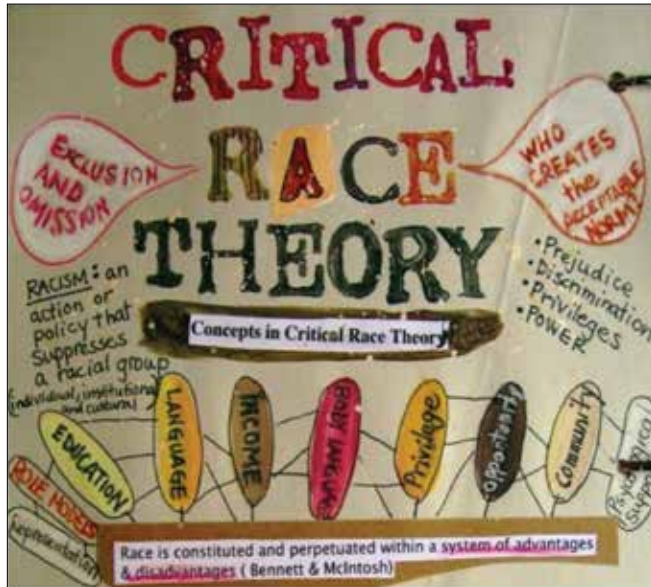
History gives witness to various forms of people group thinking around the world. All people groups everywhere have tended to be ethnocentric, believing their own group to be superior, and in some cases, the only true humans. While slavery was universal until the popes banned it in Europe and the New World,¹⁹ it raised its head in Europe again during the colonial period, sparked by the industrial demand for workers on sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations. Amazingly, after over 100 years of persevering work, and eventually a bloody civil war, British and then American evangelicals spearheaded a social uprising to put down both the slave trade and slave ownership, championing the equality of all humans before God.²⁰

It happened just in time! The centuries-old practice of slavery just missed getting a huge boost from Darwin, who generated the “scientific” justification for an ethnocentrism based on racial theories of inequality. Within a decade after the American Civil War, Darwin’s theory of evolution dealt both biblical truth and human equality a crushing blow, fueling white supremacy and eugenics as it spread globally through the late 1800s. It legitimized the false idea that there is not one human race, but different races, implying some races are “more evolved” than others. Eugenics, with its goal of breeding a better human species, was supported by the US Supreme Court in 1927 (Buck vs. Bell), when it upheld sterilizing humans who seemed unfit to be parents. This perspective was already being championed by socialist and Marxist groups in England and throughout Europe, eventually culminating in the genocidal ideology of the National Socialists of Germany (Nazis). Organizations like Planned Parenthood were explicitly founded to promote the limiting of births among those deemed less evolved.²¹ Clearly, without a biblical grounding in the creation of man, people group distinctions can be twisted in a darker direction.

More specifically, people group focus can seem to support adversarial or hierarchical views of people group identity which emphasize animosity or revenge instead of biblical views of common humanity and the breaking down of walls of hostility. Darwinism and the caste system are not the only examples. More recently, Critical Race Theory tries to right some of these wrongs, focusing concern on the people who have been suppressed and condemned historically. While it champions justice for the oppressed, it does so without promoting reconciliation.²² Ironically, CRT is resulting in a resurgence of racial animosity and segregation, building a new moral hierarchy based on race. (See figure 8, page 35)

So yes, it seems that focusing on people groups can have dangerous consequences. “People group eyes” alone cannot lead to the blessing of all peoples—those family groups (*ethne*) of the world which God promised to bless through Abraham 4000 years ago (Genesis 12:1–3). *Only in the context of God’s love for all the peoples of the earth is blessing and healing fulfilled in people group relationships.*

Figure 8. Concepts in Critical Race Theory (CRT).



Insights from Scripture

So, what can we learn from Scripture? Is the goal of the gospel to bring blessing and peace through extinguishing or diminishing people groups? Should we welcome an increasingly global modern melting pot church culture? Or is the actual goal of the gospel to bless the people groups of the earth and to end hostilities between them? In Ephesians, Paul says:

But now in Jesus Christ you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for He, himself, is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. By abolishing the law of commandments expressing ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near for through him we have equal access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2:13–18)

One might assume from these verses that the goal is a melting pot, one new man, who emerges after the hostilities have been broken down. But is that what we see Jesus doing? Is that what we see God doing down through history? Not only does Scripture uphold the truth that God has created all people equal and that his desire is to bless all the peoples of the earth,

it reveals that Jesus is our peace—bringing harmony, not hostility, unity without uniformity. Whether people groups are distinct, mixed, hybrid or melting pots, he loves them all.

The fundamental insight is that God blesses all the people groups of the earth by breaking down the walls of hostility between them. In him they become brothers and sisters in Christ. He does not do that by breaking down ethnofamilial identities, for he has promised that people from every tribe, tongue, and people group will be praising him before his throne (Rev. 5:8–14).

Secondly, God also keeps family lines and people groups with their own identities. Abraham’s descendants, for example, spent four hundred years in Egypt, but God still organized them by family lines and by tribes when they came out of Egypt after four hundred years and settled into the Promised Land. In Genesis 10 through 11, we see him enumerating all the families of the earth that he’s going to bless. And Jesus let the Samaritans be Samaritans (John 4), encouraging them to be worshippers in spirit and truth, and not requiring them to go up to Jerusalem to worship. Again, in Revelation, people from every tribe, tongue, and ethne are in God’s Kingdom.

Thirdly, the New Testament describes distinct movements to Christ in distinct people groups. The Jewish people refused to melt into the Roman pot; but, conversely, the Judaizers thought believing Gentiles should become like Jews, which the Scriptures make clear would have undermined the very essence of the gospel. Instead, Paul told the Galatians that being circumcised or not is unimportant; what counts is a new creation and faith expressing itself in love (Galatians 5:6, 6:15). In the Bible, the Jewish movement to Christ is called “The Way.” There were also distinct Samaritan movements to Christ. And believers were first called “Christians” in the city of Antioch—a melting pot city of all different kinds of Gentiles and diaspora Jews.

Insights from Church History

Throughout the history of Christianity, there are also insights relevant to the Homogeneous Unit Principle. When studying the diffusion of the gospel, it appears that *each completely distinct people group needs its own indigenous movement—that movements to Christ predominantly follow people group lines* (including even melting pot peoples). And secondly, *indigenous church structures, that fit the culture appropriately, best develop after a movement has been growing for some time.*

Within the Roman sphere, the movements to Christ among Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, and Romans all had their own unique characteristics and languages.²³ *And as the Christian movement spread out from the Roman regions, movements to Christ resisted the Roman multiethnic melting pot idea and spread along people group lines.* Some enduring examples are the MarThoma churches in India, the Armenians, and the Ethiopians.²⁴

The Celtic and Irish people managed to have their own movement to Christ that lasted two hundred years before they were forced back into the Latin melting pot. The Nestorians (the Syriac-speaking Church of the East) freed the Persian believers from Roman authority. The Greek Orthodox churches broke away because they preferred their Greek language over Latin, and their own traditions and calendars. Later, the Germanic and Northern European peoples rejected Roman dominance during the Protestant Reformation, desiring indigenous translation of the Scriptures and self-governing of their own faith and churches.

Likewise, history makes clear that *Protestant mission movements have moved forward by language and people groups around the world*. Even in today's American megacities, distinct congregations of immigrants thrive (Vietnamese, Chinese, Iranian, Central American, East African, Russian, etc.). Once the children and grandchildren have lost their languages and cultures of origin, they often prefer to join multiethnic churches within the dominant American language and culture.

History also reveals that *the more Christian leaders have tried to force distinct peoples into a single language, structure, or "Christian" culture, the greater the animosity that develops between different branches of Christianity*. To the contrary, it creates peace when we allow everyone to thrive in their own culture, to read Bibles in their own language, and not be forced into the same melting pot church culture.

Indigenous church structures can develop appropriately if organic movements to Christ come first. In each culture, movements to Christ soon became organized in a way that reflects the indigenous patterns of the people groups involved—unless others were imposed from outside. For example, the initial church structures seem to be modeled on the synagogue structures that were prevalent in the Jewish communities around the Roman Empire—where heads of families were the elders in the synagogue. Later, when the movement to Christ had reached close to thirty percent of the Roman population, Constantine legalized Christianity in addition to paganism (313 AD) and Theodosius I made it the only legal religion (380 AD). The Roman Catholic church then took on the form of the Roman political structure with each diocese governed by a bishop—an indigenous structure familiar to both the Roman people and their civil leaders. In Ireland, the movement to Christ took on a more tribal structure for succession, where the sons of their chiefs, lords, or kings became Celtic monks and governed the faithful in areas controlled by their families.

Homogeneity, Identity, and Movements

In conclusion, movements to Christ have historically flowed along people group lines, even when the people groups belonged to a multiethnic, multicultural civilization. People groups of high identity usually follow family lines but aren't

necessarily homogeneous. Many people belong to more than one identity group, which means they could become a follower of Jesus in either one or another identity group. Bicultural people can bridge the gospel into new people groups. Paul was able to win Roman people to the Lord, as a Roman citizen, more easily than someone who, like James, was completely within the Jewish branch of believers in Christ.

Dominant people groups, not minorities marginalized within their societies, are the most invested in having everybody leave his or her own culture and join their melting pot. But people like to belong to distinct identity groups, and these are most stable when they are multi-generational family-based people groups, not ones based simply on ideology or interest.

Is the goal of the gospel to bring blessing and peace through extinguishing people groups? Should we welcome an increasingly global modern melting pot church culture?

In the West, we like the idea of all the people in our churches being from a variety of different backgrounds. Our openness makes us feel good, that we're giving them the respect due them. We'll occasionally sing a song in Spanish, or any another language represented among those attending our churches, but really *the people groups who feel the most suppressed in multi-cultural or multi-ethnic fellowships are the minority people groups*. To survive in those fellowships, they are forced to assume the culture of the dominant people group—more often a western globalized culture. It does not respect them in the way that we assume it is.

By emphasizing the Frontier People Groups—those who have no indigenous movements to Christ and virtually no believers in their own group who can lead them to Christ²⁵—we can make sure that no people group is left out of the Kingdom, and that the Kingdom fully expresses the beauty of each separate culture and language.

These insights show the Homogeneous Unit Principle to be fundamental to human nature and God's way of blessing the families of the earth. Movements to Christ within people groups can bring peace between groups—reconciliation rather than retribution, harmony without homogeneity, and unity without uniformity.

Thank you very much for this chance to reflect with you on this crucial principle. **IJFM**

Endnotes

- ¹ For emphasis and clarity certain of these insights will be italicized throughout the text.
- ² Carmen L. Pettersen, *The Maya of Guatemala: Life and Dress* (Ixchel Textile Museum Publishers, Guatemala City), 183.
- ³ Pettersen, *The Maya of Guatemala*, 69.
- ⁴ Townsend spent the following decade learning and translating the Bible into one of the Mayan languages. In the 1930s he established Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) to train others to do what he had done among the thousands of other forgotten tribal people groups. They even set up a “jungle camp” to train workers how to survive in isolated jungle tribes. His insights led to the third era of Protestant missions, which focused on the people groups that had previously been overlooked.
- ⁵ R. J. Lewis, “Underground Church Planting Movements: The Surprising Role of Women’s Networks,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 145–150.
- ⁶ Donald A. McGavran, *Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005; reprint of 1955).
- ⁷ “More Than 19500 Mother Tongue Languages Spoken in India: Census,” *The Indian Express*, July 1, 2018, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/more-than-19500-mother-tongues-spoken-in-india-census-5241056/>.
- ⁸ Agnee Ghosh, “The Race to Find India’s Hidden Languages,” *BBC International*, October 1, 2021, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20211014-the-man-who-found-indias-hidden-languages>.
- ⁹ R. J. Lewis, “Clarifying the Remaining Frontier Mission Task,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 154–168.
- ¹⁰ “Frontier Peoples: Interactive,” accessed April 18, 2024, <https://joshuaproject.net/frontier/interactive>.
- ¹¹ “Frontier Unreached Peoples,” accessed April 18, 2024, <https://joshuaproject.net/frontier>.
- ¹² This site says 100 million plus: “Tablighi Jamaat: 100 Years of Da’wa and Reviving the Ummah,” accessed April 18, 2024, <https://tablighi-jamaat.com/en/home/>. And this article says 150 countries: “Muslim Networks and Movements in Western Europe: Tablighi Jama’at,” Pew Research Center, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-tablighi-jamaat/>.
- ¹³ Douglas Boin, “Ancient Rome Thrived When the Empire Welcomed Immigrants,” *TIME*, June 9, 2020, <https://time.com/5850622/rome-immigrants/>.
- ¹⁴ “The Roman Empire in the First Century: Slaves and Freemen,” *PBS*, https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves_freemen.html.
- ¹⁵ “Senator Tom Cotton, Immigration Reform, and the RAISE Act,” interview by Peter Robinson, *Uncommon Knowledge*, Hoover Institution, March 9, 2017, <https://www.hoover.org/research/senator-tom-cotton-immigration-reform-and-raise-act>.
- ¹⁶ Kurt Christopher, “Forced Out: The Ten Largest Migrations in Human History,” History Collection, August 23, 2017, <https://historycollection.com/ten-largest-forced-migrations-human-history/#1-the-african-slave-trade-at-least-12-000-000-people-displaced>.
- ¹⁷ “Most Undocumented Immigrants Are Christians From Latin America and Caribbean,” *The Christian Post*, May 20, 2013, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/most-illegal-immigrants-are-christians-from-latin-america-and-caribbean.html>.
- ¹⁸ Mohammed Berry, “A Critical Literary Review of the Melting Pot and Salad Bowl Assimilation and Integration Theories,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 142–151.
- ¹⁹ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- ²⁰ Rebecca Winter, *The Night Cometh: Two Wealthy Evangelicals Face the Nation* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977).
- ²¹ Melissa Jeltsen, “Reckoning with the Feminist, Eugenicist Founder of Planned Parenthood,” *HuffPost*, July 30, 2020, accessed May 6, 2024, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/margaret-sanger-eugenics-birth-control-planned-parenthood_n_5f1f2a40c5b638cfec4893a8.
- ²² Anthony Zurcher, “Critical Race Theory: The Concept Dividing the US,” *BBC News*, July 21, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57908808>.
- ²³ Rodney Stark’s book, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).
- ²⁴ This is a reference to the Ethiopians having their own translation of the Bible as one of the earliest non-Greek, non-Latin Bibles in history, “The Ethiopian Bible is the Oldest and Most Complete on Earth,” African History Books, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://www.africanhistorybooks.com/2021/11/23/the-ethiopian-bible-is-the-oldest-and-most-complete-on-earth/>.
- ²⁵ See an explanation of the term Frontier People Groups at [JoshuaProject.net/frontier](https://joshuaproject.net/frontier).