

Jamaal E. Williams & Timothy Paul Jones | **Cultivating
a Multiethnic
Kingdom Culture**

IN CHURCH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN



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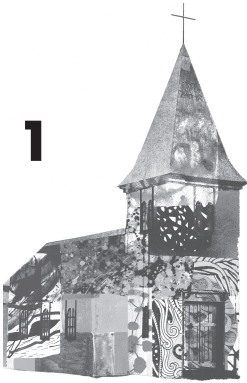
PART 1

CALL TO WORSHIP

Learning to Love Multiethnic Kingdom Culture

The problem is not that we don't know what's right. The problem is that we don't love what's best.

	What's the problem?	What's the liturgy?	What's the result?
Call to Worship	We don't love God's vision for kingdom diversity.	We practice a liturgy of love that prays for ethnicities and classes of people who aren't present in our church.	We develop a multiethnic kingdom culture that forms us into worshipers who praise our Creator God for the beauty of kingdom diversity.



THE EVIDENCE THAT OUR WORLD HAS YET TO SEE

“Ma’am, are you okay? Are you being held against your will?”

Wait. What did that police officer just ask my wife?

I (Jamaal) didn’t hear my wife’s answer. That’s because I was standing behind our Chevrolet Malibu in the January cold. I’d been ordered to be silent and to face the trunk while another officer frowned with suspicion as he examined my driver’s license.

Moments before, my wife and I had been cruising across South Carolina with joyous hearts. She was pregnant with our first child, and we were heading east to celebrate a friend’s wedding.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a patrol car swerved around and pulled alongside us, siren screaming. For a moment, it looked as if the cruiser was preparing to ram us from the left side. I glanced down at the speedometer, heart palpitating.

The police vehicle forced our car onto the shoulder and screeched to a halt behind us. Two White officers stepped out. I had no idea what was going on. Maybe I had slipped a few miles over the speed limit at some point—but why was this happening so aggressively?

Just get over it. Calm down, I told myself. Maybe you were tired and you swerved without knowing it.

I lowered my window, palms sweating, rehearsing to myself the instructions I’d heard from my parents since I was nine years old: *Be respectful no matter the circumstance. Keep your hands on the steering wheel, obey, and move calmly.*

The first police officer barked orders through my window. “Grab your license and step out of the car.” Then he told me to go to the back and to stand facing the trunk.

“Sir,” I asked, “is there anything I did wrong?”

He raised a hand, signaling me to be quiet. He looked up from my Kentucky driver’s license. “Why are you even in South Carolina?” he asked. “Where are you headed anyway?”

That was when the second officer asked my wife if she was being held against her will. A few tense moments later, the first officer shoved my wallet into my hand and told me we were free to go. The men returned to their vehicle and reentered the highway with tires squealing.

They never told me why I’d been stopped.

I slid back into my car and sat still for several moments, trying to process what had taken place. As an African American man, it was virtually impossible not to recognize that my ethnicity had played a part in this encounter. This wasn’t the first time I’d faced situations with law enforcement that were unexplainable apart from the presence of some form of racism. Study after study has demonstrated that African Americans are pulled over at rates disproportionate both to their numbers on the road and to any propensity to violate traffic laws.¹ And yet, I was too shocked to be enraged, and I had neither time nor space to react. I had a wife and an unborn child to protect and a destination to reach.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I TOLD MY STORY

Six years later, I was preaching my second sermon as a new lead pastor at Sojourn Church Midtown in Louisville. A little more than fifteen hundred people gathered each week in buildings strung along the edge of a neighborhood known as Shelby Park. The neighborhood is about half African American and 44 percent White, with a handful of Asian immigrants and Latino families mingled among their White and Black neighbors.

The church was working through the book of Proverbs, and the focus of that week’s message was what Proverbs has to say about justice. One of the points I wanted to make was that the pursuit of justice requires compassion and humility toward persons with different life experiences.² Specifically, I wanted our majority-White congregation to become sensitive to

the challenges faced by their African American sisters and brothers. Understanding these challenges is crucial because every person is created in God's image and we are called to bear one another's burdens.

This awareness was, however, particularly critical in our context at the time. The congregation was still overwhelmingly White, not only in its demographics but also in its culture. I was concerned that if I didn't help our people to cultivate compassion and understanding toward their Black neighbors, we might end up building a church "on top of" the Shelby Park neighborhood instead of growing a church family that reflected and rejoiced in the diversity of its community.

And so when I preached that second sermon at Sojourn Church Midtown, I told the story of my unexpected encounter with the police in South Carolina. Before and after telling what happened, I repeatedly emphasized my gratitude for the vast numbers of honorable law-enforcement officers who work daily for justice, risking their lives to protect others. I assumed the story had landed exactly how I intended; I quickly discovered I was wrong.

In the days that followed, angry emails flooded the church's inbox. Some came from current and retired police officers. A few of them suggested that my disrespect for the police had caused them to reevaluate whether they could stay at Sojourn, sentiments that still haunt me today because of the deep appreciation and respect I have for law-enforcement officers. It wasn't as if I hadn't faced criticism as a pastor before. I had led a historic African American congregation in our city for eight years before I became a lead pastor at Sojourn. At the same time, it was shocking to see members of our church rise in anger simply because I told this story from my own experience. But that was only the beginning.

The next few years turned into a painful crash course for me, my family, and Sojourn Church Midtown. Over and over, issues of race and multi-ethnic ministry stood at the forefront in these conflicts. Sure, I expected challenges when I became the lead pastor of an overwhelmingly White church in such a diverse neighborhood. But I never anticipated the full depth of these tensions.

On top of everything else, recent years have been marked by political and racial unrest of a sort that our nation hasn't seen since the 1990s.³

Some of the most painful unrest took place in our own city in the aftermath of the killing of Breonna Taylor. And yet, working through this difficult time with godly pastors at Sojourn Church Midtown has been an unimaginable blessing. Through these hardships, we've seen over and over that God has placed us in this place at this time for a purpose, just like he's placed you where you are for a purpose too.

Even in these hardships, here's what I see happening right now in churches across the United States where members have refused to be taken captive by the radicalized political rhetoric that has infected our nation: through the power of the gospel, God is opening doors for his people to live lives that are rich in diversity—here in Louisville, on the streets of Chicago and Tulsa and Oakland, from the rural countrysides of Missouri to the coal mines of eastern Kentucky, and thousands of places in between. If this sort of redemptive kingdom culture truly begins to take shape “on earth as it is in heaven,” the structures where we gather will begin to look far more like God's eternal vision, teeming with a diversity of generations, colors, cultures, and economic backgrounds. And that's why our prayer is that you will learn to love God's design for a multiethnic and multi-socioeconomic church wherever you are.

HOW MULTIETHNIC KINGDOM CULTURE PROVIDES A DEFENSE OF THE FAITH

This journey matters deeply to us because of what we believe about the church's witness to the watching world—and that's the primary focus of this book. This is a book about diversity, but it's more than that. It's a work of Christian apologetics, the field of study that focuses on defending the truthfulness of the historic Christian faith.

But this is likely to be unlike any other apologetics book you've read. Most apologetics books harvest data from science or history or logic and then build a case for the rationality of Christian faith. Those types of texts are helpful—but that's not the approach we're taking here. The purpose of this book is to present a defense of God's truth built on the capacity of the gospel to create and cultivate diverse churches.

Our contention is that a diverse church provides a strong apologetic argument for the power of the gospel and the truthfulness of God's Word.

What you'll come to see throughout this book is that secular ideologies struggle to provide any satisfying reason why people from different ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds would choose to link their lives together in a community.

“The more mixed the congregation is, especially in ‘class’ and ‘color,’” John R. W. Stott pointed out decades ago, “the greater its opportunity to demonstrate the power of Christ.”⁴ We think Stott was right. Multiethnic and multi-socioeconomic churches present the world with unique evidence for the truth of the gospel—and that’s what makes this message different from so many others that you’re likely to hear about diversity in the church. There is a glory glimpsed when God’s people gather in all their diversity that’s hidden when we remain apart.

HOW THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH PROVIDES A DEFENSE OF THE FAITH

For Christians today, the idea of the church itself serving as an apologetic for God’s truth may seem strange and new—but this is one of the earliest and the most venerable approaches to apologetics in the history of Christianity.⁵ Less than a century after the last book of the New Testament was written, a Christian philosopher named Aristides of Athens identified the life of the church as one of the primary evidences for the truth of the gospel. His focus wasn’t on the church’s diversity; it was on the church’s care for the parentless and the poor, but it’s clear that Aristides believed the church’s way of life functioned as a living apologetic for the gospel.

“Christians,” Aristides wrote, “deliver the orphan from anyone who treats the orphan harshly. The Christian who possesses resources gives without boasting to the one who has none.”⁶ Such countercultural patterns of life couldn’t be satisfactorily explained, according to Aristides, unless some divine reality was at work among the Christians: “This is a new type of people, and surely there is something divine mingled among them.”⁷

Another second-century Christian named Justin explicitly highlighted how the breaking of barriers between ethnicities provided evidence for the truths that the church proclaimed. “We who once despised and destroyed each other and who refused to hold anything in common with

people who were not of the same tribe, due to their differing customs, now live in common with them.”⁸

And so, seeing the life of the church as a defense of the faith isn’t anything new.⁹ It’s a return to a practice that’s very old. That’s one of the reasons why you’ll see names from the early centuries of Christianity scattered throughout the pages of this book. We’re convinced that the words of ancient Christians are far more relevant to our lives today than the proclamations of the latest political pundits. The practices of the church, both past and present, provide a living witness to the truth of the gospel. “Christian witness requires a community—a church in particular—in which truthful speech is made evident by the quality and character of their practices and life together.”¹⁰

One of the ways that truthful speech can be made most evident in our churches today is by cultivating what we refer to as “multiethnic kingdom culture.” What we mean when we talk about such a culture is a context where people develop a gospel-formed identity that simultaneously includes and transcends their ethnic identities. Knowing that whatever is true and beautiful and good in every culture will persist into eternity, multiethnic kingdom culture is able to celebrate a diversity of ethnicities in the same community while simultaneously seeing Christ himself as our supreme and central identity.¹¹ This pattern of forming a new identity that retains and redeems an individual’s ethnic and cultural identity was characteristic of churches in the earliest decades of Christianity.¹² Multiethnic kingdom culture is one way of calling churches back to this pattern today.

When Spirit-empowered love cultivates multiethnic kingdom culture in a church today, the world around us glimpses evidence of God’s truth it may never have seen before. Just as the church’s care for the marginalized demonstrated the truth of the gospel in centuries past, churches marked by multiethnic kingdom culture today provide rich and renewed evidence of God’s power to do what no human power can accomplish. When people outside the faith see a faithful multiethnic, multigenerational, and multi-socioeconomic church, they may still reject the gospel we profess, but they cannot reasonably deny the power of what we practice.

When a North African pastor named Augustine of Hippo considered the impact of the Christian way of life in the fourth century AD, he marveled,

“By their virtues and words, Christians have kindled the fires of divine love in the world.”¹³

Through the power of the Spirit and the gospel, we still can.

WHY MULTIETHNIC KINGDOM CULTURE ISN'T OPTIONAL

When we pursue multiethnic kingdom culture, we are persisting in a work that Jesus himself began. Think about how God’s work unfolds throughout the New Testament. When Jesus called his first followers, our Savior brought together a band of Jewish males, but he refused to allow this initial community of disciples to remain homogeneous. He led them into the presence of Syrophoenician and Samaritan women, and he expanded his circle to include both women and men (Matthew 27:55; Mark 7:24-26; 15:41; Luke 23:49; John 4:9, 27). Moments before he left the planet, Jesus commissioned his followers to teach every ethnicity to obey his words (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). This mission produced leadership and local gatherings that practiced diverse fellowship (Acts 13:1; 20:4).¹⁴

Even in the first century, these patterns weren’t perceived as optional. Once, when Peter and Barnabas backpedaled from their earlier embrace of multiethnic table fellowship, Paul declared that they were “deviating from the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14; see also Acts 10:34).¹⁵ God’s Word makes it clear that believers are called to live here and now as a “fellowship of differents”—as a family in which barriers between us are broken because of what God the Father has accomplished through the broken body of his Son.¹⁶ This will look different in every context, but any habits that prevent faithful kingdom diversity in a church signify a divergence from the implications of the gospel.¹⁷

STILL THE MOST SEGREGATED HOUR

Despite God’s plan and our passion for kingdom diversity, the reality is that American churches have fallen far short when it comes to multiplying multiethnic congregations. With few exceptions, American Protestants view multiethnic churches as a desirable ideal, but their actual fellowships remain steadfastly monoethnic.¹⁸

Consider this: More than eight in ten pastors are convinced that churches should work toward greater ethnic diversity, and nearly

80 percent of church members agree. Well over half of these members claim they would feel comfortable worshiping alongside a multiplicity of ethnicities. And yet, people's actual practices reveal different priorities. Eighty-six percent of these same churchgoers attend churches that consist primarily of a single ethnicity.¹⁹ Even though American Christians say they desire diversity, they consistently choose churches filled with members that look like themselves.²⁰ American churches are not merely segregated; they are—in the words of one sociologist—“hypersegregated.”²¹

What's worse is that this gap can't be blamed on a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in neighborhoods and communities. Although American neighborhoods do tend to be separated along ethnic lines, churches in these communities are about ten times more segregated than the neighborhoods themselves.²² In other words, even when communities are multi-ethnic, churches in those communities typically aren't.

The dream of diversity is alive and well. The reality is elusive at best.

Of course, not every neighborhood in North America includes sufficient ethnic diversity for every congregation in that community to be comprehensively multiethnic. If that's the type of context where God has placed you and your family, don't give up! In later chapters, we'll examine how congregations in contexts like yours can still pursue a diverse and redemptive kingdom culture. And yet, there are tens of thousands of churches throughout North America that—despite being in areas that are rich in ethnic and cultural diversity—look less like multiethnic outposts of God's kingdom and more like homogeneous country clubs.

In 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. appeared on *Meet the Press* and popularized a statement that civil rights activists had already been repeating for years: “Eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour, in Christian America.”²³ Decades later, these words still ring true. In fact, they may even be truer now due to political divisions that have worsened racial relations. And yet, if our proclamation of Jesus never forms communities of faith where racial and ethnic barriers are broken down, something is missing in the ways that we're teaching people to live out their faith in Jesus.

But the real problem isn't a gap in our knowledge. It's a gap in our love.

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