

“Welcome one another”: A Christian response to sojourners in Aotearoa New Zealand

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“We are all one in Christ Jesus”, the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:28. And on that we all might agree. Indeed, in faith and as Christians we would want to say that Christ breaks down barriers and reconciles people one to another. But, as with much of our approach to Scripture, it is one thing to assent to a statement, it is quite another to live it out.

We might prefer to define the ‘we’ in our own terms; we might be tempted to paraphrase it as ‘people *just like us* are all one in Christ Jesus’.

I have been asked to reflect on these matters in the context of a Christian response to sojourners in Aotearoa New Zealand. To that end, this paper is in three parts. Momentarily I will address some of the assumptions that often underlay our approach and look at some of the empirical data on migrants and Christians in New Zealand. Then I will briefly look at the theme of ‘departures and arrivals’ as found in Scripture. Finally, and based on what we know of the statistics and read in Scripture, I will draw some observations, implications and conclusions.

¹ I am greatly indebted to George Wieland of Carey Baptist College on his collaboration on material drawn on in this paper and his helpful review of an earlier draft of this paper.

Assumptions, inaccuracies and the empirical picture

In these introductory remarks, it is worth pausing to reflect on some of the assumptions underlining these interlocking issues of Christianity, New Zealand, migration and sojourners' journeys.

We can rather too easily load these assumptions with a "them" and "us" attitude, as if the issue were how "we" should behave towards "them" while "they" happen to be in New Zealand before "they" shoot off back to wherever "they've" come from! Or our thinking might be in terms of diaspora mission – New Zealand is a "Christianized" context where people from "un-Christianized" countries could encounter and embrace Christian faith, creating a new issue of how to support them on their return?

But this "them" and "us" binary are both inaccurate and unhelpful.

First: the inaccuracies. As demographers Richard Bedford and Elsie Ho have noted:

Between March 1986 and March 2006, New Zealand's resident population that had been born in countries in Asia increased almost sevenfold, from 32,685 to 248,364. The Chinese and Indian components of the Asia-born population increased even more – by more than 800 percent during the 20 years. The population that identified with Asian ethnicities

(including the New Zealand-born) increased by 550 percent, a useful point to keep in mind when reflecting on the projected doubling of the Asian population between 2006 and 2026.²

In 2006, according to the New Zealand Census of that year, 67.6 per cent of New Zealanders identified as 'European', 14.6 per cent identified as 'Maori', 9.2 per cent identified as 'Asian' and 6.9 per cent identified as 'Pacific'.³ For the twenty-year period between 2006 and 2026, the European/Other population in New Zealand will increase by 6.7 per cent, the Maori population will increase by 30.9 per cent, the Pacific population will increase by 59.9 per cent and the Asian population will increase by 95 per cent.⁴ Bedford and Ho note that "[t]he increase in the Asian population is significantly higher than the increases projected for the other ethnic components, even though the European or Other population was eight times larger than the Asian one in 2006"⁵ but warn "[m]igration from Asia remains relatively volatile, thus making it very difficult to project the size of a future Asian population in New Zealand."

New Zealand is not, and indeed has never been, a 'static' country consisting of a majority Christian population. Nor, by the same token, is Asia (from where, as noted, New Zealand has received a significant increase in migrants) a homogenous continent, characterised by non-Christian or pagan religions. Depending on where we draw the lines, Asia consists of at least 27 countries and all the variety that entails. Empirical data bears this out.

² Richard Bedford and Elsie Ho, *Asians in New Zealand: Implications of a Changing Demography*, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2008, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity.aspx>, p.11.

³ Statistics New Zealand, *Quick Stats about Culture and Identity*, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/culture-and-identity.aspx>

⁴ Bedford and Ho, p.23

⁵ Bedford and Ho, p.23

Among recent arrivals to New Zealand from Asian countries, thousands are Christians. A disproportionate number of Korean migrants in New Zealand (compared to the population of Korea generally) are Christian,⁶ and around one hundred Korean churches and congregations have taken their place along with a similar number of Chinese churches in Auckland, whose population is markedly more ethnically and culturally diverse than that of New Zealand generally. Significantly, Census data show that whereas the years 2001-2006 saw an overall decline in the number of people in New Zealand describing themselves as Christian, the number of Asians who identified themselves as Christian grew from 66,390 in 2001 to 97,809 in 2006.⁷ This represents a growth from 3.2 per cent of total Christians in 2001 to 4.8 per cent in 2006.⁸ Entire denominations have been transformed and, indeed, sustained, by the inflow of migrant Christian populations.

As Christians, of course, we are all “sojourners”: we are all on a journey to somewhere else; we all yearn to experience that new world of which Scripture speaks and which the Creator, through his creation, tantalises us. And, inasmuch as we use “sojourner” to be a universal descriptor, then that is fine. But it is less legitimate to think of some people, migrant, as “sojourners” and the rest of us as “residents”: one group who moves; the other who stays; one group who is away, the other at home; one unified; the other diverse; one embraced; the other excluded. There aren’t, then, in real terms, binaries of “us” and “them”, or Asian and European, or Maori and Pakeha. We all inhabit the same territory; many of us worship the same God.

⁶ Ward Friesen, *Diverse Auckland: The Face of New Zealand in the 21st Century?*, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation 2008, <http://www.asianz.org.nz/sites/asianz.org.nz/files/AsiaNZ%20Outlook%206.pdf>, p.6

⁷ Tables on culture and identity from the 2006 Census, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/F1A5AEF5-198F-4F42-8B86-51419FBA82E3/18595/2006CensusQSCI.xls>> (1 November, 2009)

⁸ Tables on culture and identity from the 2001 Census, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/226BAFE2-4B1C-4A84-A2E9-B6D2E3FDB4AA/0/CulturalTable16.xls>> (1 November, 2009)

So that, briefly, deals with the assumptions and presents some of the empirical data. But what might we say about these matters theologically? How might our reading of Scripture inform our reading of statistics?

Departures and arrivals⁹

Departures and arrivals are a feature of the story of Scripture: the movement of people runs like a thread through the Bible. A call to emigrate features early in the story of the people of God: *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."*¹⁰ Jacob and his family migrate to Egypt because of economic pressures and experience life as "aliens in the land";¹¹ the people of Israel are rescued by God after suffering oppression and an attempted ethnic cleansing;¹² for a generation they are a people in transit,¹³ then, having been established in their own land for centuries, they suffer the upheaval of military conquest and forced relocation to a new existence as vulnerable outsiders in other countries.¹⁴ For some there is, later, the mixed experience of a return to the land of their or their parents' memories (e.g. Ezra, Nehemiah).

⁹ This section draws heavily from Andrew Butcher and George Wieland, "Go from your country: Missiological reflections on Asian Christians in New Zealand", *Stimulus* 18(1): 2-8, 2010.

¹⁰ Gen.12:1

¹¹ Gen.47:1-6

¹² Exod.1:8-22

¹³ Deut 29:1-6

¹⁴ 2 Kings 17:5-6; 25:1-21

A recurring theme in the Old Testament's instructions for the life of the people of God is just and generous treatment of immigrants who have come to live among them. Their own experience of having once been aliens should give them empathy for others in that situation.¹⁵ They must not misuse their power to oppress a vulnerable immigrant.¹⁶ On the contrary they should show generosity towards them, recognizing their needs.¹⁷ Immigrants are to have the same rights to justice as native residents.¹⁸ They are to enjoy a break from work on the Sabbath¹⁹ and share in times of celebration and feasting with the rest of the community.²⁰ Should they wish to participate in the worship of God immigrants may do so on the same basis as Israelites.²¹ The obverse is that those behaviours that are forbidden to members of the community of Israel are also to be refrained from by immigrants who have come to share in the life of that community.²² Ultimately the attitude of Israel to immigrants is to be a reflection of the character of the God whom they worship: *The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*²³

To the people of God in their own experience as aliens, through the forced migration of the exile, there comes a remarkable set of instructions through the prophet Jeremiah.²⁴ They are to recognize the purpose of God in their being where they now are, enter into normal economic and social life there, and seek the good of their new location and its people. Nehemiah and Daniel are prominent examples of migrants making significant contributions to their host communities.

¹⁵ Exod.23:9; Lev.19:34

¹⁶ Exod 22:21; Lev. 19:33

¹⁷ Lev 19:10, 23:22

¹⁸ Deut 1:16; 24:17; 27:19

¹⁹ Exod 23:12; Deut 5:14

²⁰ Deut 26:11

²¹ Num 15:14-16

²² Lev 18:26

²³ Lev 19:34

²⁴ Jer 29:4-9

In the Gospels, Jesus is born after a journey demanded by an occupying power,²⁵ and his early life is that of a refugee fleeing political violence, seeking asylum in a foreign country.²⁶ Those who come to believe in him respond to a call to follow²⁷ and a command to go.²⁸ As the Good News of salvation through the risen Christ is unleashed on the world the miracle of Pentecost ensures that it is heard by migrants, people of the Jewish diaspora who have made their homes all over the Mediterranean world.²⁹ Issues arise out of the coming together of people from different social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, and are dealt with by receiving members of the “outsider” community into the leadership group.³⁰

When the Gospel reaches beyond the Jewish world, the church resolves not to make ethnicity an obstacle to membership of the community of faith, but, like Israel in the Old Testament, requests some accommodation on the part of the incomers to enable shared life to be realised within one community.³¹ Soon, the believers in Jesus are themselves a diaspora, scattered by religious persecution,³² living as “aliens and exiles”.³³ But in their scattering they are sustained by the vision of the gathering in of people from every ethnicity, tribe, people group and language, worshipping God and sharing together in the gift of salvation through Christ.³⁴ The reality of life on the move is

²⁵ Luke 2:1-7

²⁶ Matt 2:13-15

²⁷ Matt 4:18-22

²⁸ Matt 28:19-20

²⁹ Acts 2:5-11

³⁰ Acts 6:1-6

³¹ Acts 15:19-20, 28-29.

³² Acts 8:1-3; 11:19-20

³³ 1 Pet 1:1-2; 2:11

³⁴ Rev 7:9-12; Rom 15:6

reflected in the New Testament requirement to show hospitality, including to strangers.³⁵ Christians are to *Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*³⁶

In the first Christian generation Paul the apostle wrote to Christian believers in the multi-ethnic city of Rome. From the greetings that accompany his letter it seems that he envisaged not one large congregation but several groups of believers, probably meeting in homes.³⁷ It is clear from Romans ch. 14 that this mixed set of people did not experience unity. They were divided over diet and aspects of their religious practice, matters that had at least as much to do with assumptions brought from their cultural backgrounds as with theological conviction derived from their understanding of Christian faith. Difference, mutual suspicion and criticism impeded the realisation of genuine community.

Paul's approach to this situation is missiological. Most of the letter to the Romans is an exposition of the gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."³⁸ This salvation is from God, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit, and is for Jew and Gentile alike on the same basis, that of faith. The culmination of Paul's argument might at first sight seem unremarkable, but in the context of a diverse and even divided Christian community it is both profound and urgent: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."³⁹ Attainment of the goal, "that the nations should glorify God for his mercy"⁴⁰, is understood by Paul to be the fulfilment of God's purpose, expressed in the ancient promises to the

³⁵ E.g. Rom 12:13; Heb 13:21 1 Pet 4:9

³⁶ Rom 15:7

³⁷ The church in the home of Prisca and Aquila is mentioned (Rom 16:5a). Other house-churches may be in view in the lists of named individuals in 16:14 and 15, along with general greetings to "the brothers and sisters with them" (v. 14) and "all the saints with them" (v. 15). Possibly other groups may be detected in connection with Aristobulus (v. 10) and Narcissus (v. 11).

³⁸ Rom 1:16

³⁹ Rom 15:7

⁴⁰ Rom 15:8, and in the chain of OT citations in vv.9-12

patriarchs of Israel, and the outcome of Christ's work.⁴¹ He appeals to the various groups of Christian believers in Rome to refocus on this grand vision and participate eagerly in its realisation. They will do so as they receive one another as members together of Christ's family,⁴² and as out of their shared life in Christ flow united worship.⁴³ This will require clarity about the central convictions of their faith⁴⁴ and a determination not to allow cultural and behavioural differences to impede genuine relating.⁴⁵ It will take effort and intentionality to "pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding".⁴⁶

Paul does not stop there. Not only does he envisage the realising of Christian community among the ethnically and culturally diverse peoples of Rome but he looks beyond to the regions and peoples yet to be included in "the offering of the nations . . . sanctified by the Holy Spirit".⁴⁷ His hope is that the united worshipping community in the city of Rome will share his desire for the good news to be proclaimed across the world.⁴⁸

Observations, implications and conclusions

From this brief survey of the place of migration in the Biblical story a number of observations may be made that have implications for the New Zealand Christian community. We cannot assume that instructions given by God to Israel for their life as his people should translate directly into law for

⁴¹ Rom 15:8

⁴² Rom 14:1, 15:7

⁴³ Rom 15:5-6

⁴⁴ Rom 14:7

⁴⁵ Rom 14:1; 15:4

⁴⁶ Rom 14:19

⁴⁷ Rom 15:16

⁴⁸ Rom 15:22-29

Aotearoa New Zealand. We do, however, find in those instructions indications of attitudes and behaviours that express God's values and should therefore be characteristic of the Christian community that seeks to live authentically as God's people in our context. By extension, as salt and light in our wider communities, Christians will want to work for conditions shaped by those values that we have learned from God.

There is an obligation of care for those who undergo migration, whether drawn by hope or aspiration or driven by need or oppression. How may this care be expressed so that through the actions of New Zealand's Christian community people arriving in New Zealand might experience the love and generosity of God? Immigrants, without the knowledge, facility with language, and the networks of support that many in the host community enjoy, are particularly vulnerable to injustice. How may Christians, as agents of God's justice, work at national, local and personal levels to ensure justice for migrants?

God directed his people to give opportunities for immigrants to participate fully as members of the community. How may Christians facilitate the inclusion of immigrants into New Zealand communities? Both exiled Israel in the Old Testament and the persecuted church in the New Testament were told to live responsibly in the communities among whom they went to live and to seek their good. How may New Zealand Christians assist Christian immigrants to enter into the life of and contribute to the good of their adopted home? In particular, believers in Christ are one family with all other believers, and are instructed to welcome each other on that basis. Here, surely, New Zealand's Christian community should be a model of inclusion. For some, now as in New Testament times, migration has been forced by religious persecution. How may their Christian family receive them with hospitality, encouragement and help?

Migrations of people and peoples play a significant part in the Biblical story of salvation. In what ways may we see the saving purpose of God in the mobility of people today? On the Day of Pentecost the presence in Jerusalem of diaspora Jews “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) proved strategic for mission to the world, as those who had heard the gospel in Jerusalem carried it with them to their places of origin. A similar phenomenon is taking place today as immigrants come to faith in Christ in their adopted countries and, whether through their continuing contact with their places of origin or as circular migration takes them back, they become carriers of the gospel to the communities from which they migrated. How may the New Zealand Christian community partner more intentionally and effectively with God in this contemporary mission movement?⁴⁹

New Zealand Christians also stand to receive much through immigration. The centre of global Christianity has shifted from the North and the West to the South and the East. Many immigrants bring fresh experiences and expressions of Christian faith that have the potential to reinvigorate New Zealand churches demoralised by long years of decline. Some immigrants come with a specific sense of missionary call to New Zealand. How might established New Zealand churches and mission agencies recognize and build fruitful partnership with those who bring mission and ministry gifts to the Body of Christ here?

⁴⁹ OMF has a significant Diasporas ministry.

http://www.omf.org/omf/us/get_involved_1/welcoming_ministry_diaspora. See also Paul Woods, “God Does Not Play Dice, but Does He Play Mahjong?” *Encounters Mission Ezine* 20 (2007), at http://www.redcliffe.org/uploads/documents/God_Does_Not_Play_Dice_20.pdf