



By Evangelist Thaddeus Bruno

# THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Because the church of Christ is a divinely designed institution, its worldview must correspond with the vision of God for ethnic equality, inclusivity and unity laid out in the Scripture. But given the frailty of the earthen vessels in which the treasure of God's vision is placed, this glorious picture has at times been darkened by those who have been commissioned to uphold it. When this unfortunate situation exists, God often generates movements to rescue and restore His vision for His people and the world. I believe that we are in such a time.

God's vision for the church was announced to the patriarch Abraham as a covenant in which He promised to bless all the families of the earth through his seed (Genesis 12:3). The word translated "families" in this text is rendered kindreds and nations in subsequent iterations of the Abrahamic covenant. These terms convey the idea of relatedness and include all who by virtue of their common descent from Adam, possess the essence of humanity. Isaiah too unveiled a vision of God's house under the image of a mountain. In the following quote, he clearly sets forth the inclusivity of God's house. "The Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills and all nations shall flow unto it" (Isaiah 2:2, KJV). Notice the comprehensive nature of God's vision communicated in the inclusive term "all" in the preceding passages. Isaiah further depicts transformation, peace, and cooperation among these nations in God's house when he wrote, "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation nor will they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4, KJV).

God not only presented His vision for a multi-colored family in the Old Testament but also authorized its actualization in the New Testament. Following Jesus's resurrection, He commanded His apostles to teach all nations and preach the Gospel to every creature (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15). Those creatures and nations included persons from Europe, Africa, and Asia, who were to be taught and baptized into Christ and have access to the Abrahamic blessings, unfettered by differences in ethnicity, social status, or gender (Galatians 3:28). In Paul's letter to the Ephesian church, he described Christ's work on the cross as breaking down the dividing wall that under Judaism separated Jew from

Gentile, thus redesigning the religious landscape so ethnic equality and unity could flourish in His new house (Ephesians 2:14-16). These elements of God's vision in the following verse are hard to miss. "Now therefore you are no more strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19, KJV).

But though Peter, on Pentecost, affirmed the availability of the promise to all that were afar off, Gentiles were for many years excluded from God's house, not having the Gospel invitation extended to them. The Jews adhered to the separationist policies that had been part of Judaism, thinking of Gentiles as common and unclean. Even when divine action was taken to send Peter to the house of Cornelius to teach and baptize this non-Jew, it was not without resistance. However, Peter's words at the home of Cornelius showed growth in his understanding of the all-inclusive nature of God's house. "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28, NIV). Later, under pressure from his conservative



# AS GOD ENVISIONED IT

Jewish brethren, Peter separated himself from Gentile believers, contradicting truths he claimed to have earlier understood. But Paul openly called out Peter's hypocrisy and restored God's vision of trans-ethnic fellowship as consistent with the Gospel of Christ (Galatians 2:11-15).

With the advent of the transatlantic slave trade and the doctrine of African inferiority that undergirded it, the glorious dream of God's people as an ethnically undivided house descended into a nightmare. Religious men, while holding the Bible, denied its truth of the brotherhood of humanity and sacrificed the unity of Christianity on the altar of white supremacy and privilege. Alexander H. Stephens, Vice President of the Union of Confederate States, did not mince words in his Cornerstone Address, articulating this doctrine on which the Confederate government rested. "Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition" ([iowaculture.gov](http://iowaculture.gov)). Though Stephens and his Confederate Government lost the Civil War, this damnable doctrine did not die in the conflict

but merely morphed into segregationist policies embodied in Jim Crow laws instituted in American States after the era of Reconstruction. Stephens was not a member of the church of Christ, but his distorted view of Africans, widely held in Southern States, were shared by some prominent members within its fellowship. In an article entitled "Negro Meetings for White People" published in the *Bible Banner*, Foy E. Wallace Jr., prolific author, evangelist, and editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, commends N. B. Hardman for refusing to extend the courtesies of a hand shake to black ministers of the church who had visited his meeting. Wallace clearly advocated for black and white churches of Christ, contrary to the spirit of the Restoration Movement's objective in reproducing the pattern of the church set forth in the New Testament. Wallace's characterization of inter-racial mixing, taken from the same article in the following quote, is shocking for one so profound in the exposition of Christian doctrine. "Aside from being an infringement on the Jim Crow law, it is a violation of Christianity itself, and of all common decency. Such conduct forfeits the respect of right-thinking people, and would be calculated to stir up demonstrations in most any community."

With racial tensions high from recent episodes of police killings of people of color in the United States, members of the church have an opportunity to be courageous and hold up Jesus as the answer. Our mandate is to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:14-16). This is the time to be strong like Paul who admonished Peter, and tenacious like regular members in brother Wallace's day who defied Jim Crow laws and dared to mix. Black, brown, and white brothers and sisters must refuse to dance to the discordant tunes of white supremacy or black revenge and show a glorious vision of ethnic equality, inclusivity, and unity. This is God's vision! If we embrace it in the time-bound experience of earth's little day, the scene of Christ's triumphant church in eternity contained in the following verse, will be one that is neither shocking nor disappointing. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands" (Revelation 7:9, NIV). ▲