

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

Welcome to week six of our series, INVITED. This week our title is 'What's on the menu?'. I'm privileged to be joined by Owen Hylton, who's pastor of the Beacon Church in Southeast London, and he's also author of 'Crossing the Divide'. I've really been enjoying reading this. I hope you have as well. We're going to be looking at today at what it really looks like to build a diverse church. Owen, great to have you with me. We're going to jump straight in. You'll know this, but in Acts 15, after the Council of Jerusalem, the disciples get together and they try and work out guidelines for how to build a diverse church for both Jews and Gentiles. For us today, then, what principles can we adopt to help us build a diverse church?

## OWEN HYLTON

It's a very good question, and I'll just try and give you a couple of principles and see where we go. The first one, I think, is the idea that Christ is central. I know we all think that in the church, but what it really means is you've got to picture Christ in the middle and everybody focusses on Christ. They're not focussing on themselves, they're not focussing on their own culture, their own background, they're focussing on Christ, and whatever you can do as a church to keep Christ central, you should do. The second thing, I think, would be – there becomes a really important relationship between the leaders and the congregation, because the leadership will want to – and I know they do here – will want to ensure the church is a place where everybody feels they're welcome. That will mean compromise, that will mean there will be things that the leaders will allow to happen that might not be their thing but it helps some people find their way in. There'll be other things that they want to embrace that they might have to learn about that's not entire the thing that they would think, and I know that the leadership here are very good at wanting to do that, to listen to people. It also means that when there are misunderstandings, you get to it quickly. And when you get to those misunderstandings, you're always listening. You're not making any assumptions about what people are thinking or what they're not thinking. You get to it, you try and understand the situation, and you read about that in Acts 6, don't you, with the widows and the overlooking of the widows.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

You mention also in your book different models that churches can adopt with this. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

## OWEN HYLTON

Yes. That idea is not my idea. I think you observe that just in the way nations set themselves up for integrating people. So I do talk about three kinds of models that you can have, and I'll just explain them really briefly. First of all there is a model of assimilation, which means the new people that are coming in, in the end they have to compromise to become like the people who are already coming. So the church may not make any changes, and people will come in and will just fit in with what's going on. So that's one way of doing it. Another would be, if you like, a more pluralistic approach, which is where, as people come in, their approach is kind of accepted as just another approach. So you might have the way the church does it broadly, then you might have other, little approaches that people have that represent their culture or their background. And then the third approach, which is probably the one that I would push for, is what I would call the integrated approach, which is where people come in and actually everyone has to compromise on their culture, and there is this central idea that Jesus is at the centre of it all. It's not my culture, it's not your culture, and we all basically compromise in order to build this new culture called the Kingdom culture. That's what we're trying to do.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

With the issue of compromise, I'm sure that with that there can arise conflict with church members as well as church leaders. How do members and leaders deal with conflicts as they arise in the church?

## OWEN HYLTON

That's a very good question. I think just a couple of things, and I've said this before in one of these conversations. Fundamental acceptance, so every conflict comes out of a place of acceptance. So, if I'm going to discipline my child, it's out of a place where my child knows she's loved. So there's fundamental acceptance when you deal with conflict. Secondly, don't make it personal. What I mean by that is if somebody raises an issue, don't make the issue about the person. Try and deal with the issue. And the third thing is, don't allow the process to become the issue. Sometimes somebody might

raise something and then you go through a process of trying to sort it out, and sometimes the process isn't very good. The process takes too long; the process seems to devalue a person, or whatever it is. Don't allow that process to be an issue. Always try and focus on the issue and don't let the process get involved in it. And I think if you can accept people, and I think if you can work through the process and not make it personal, then it's easier. The final thing I would say is, we're Christians who are saved by grace, so when we deal with people, let's deal with them with grace.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

Some really helpful points to reflect upon, I think. My next question then is, what are some of the challenges that could arise from trying to build a diverse church in a multi-cultural society?

## OWEN HYLTON

That's a really good question and it's one of the things that I've been reflecting on quiet a lot, around culture. First of all, culture is in some ways like second nature. We don't even think about it. But culture isn't necessarily Christian. So we can sometimes adopt things and ways of behaving that are not necessarily Christian, they're just cultural, and when people join us we expect them to adopt those same things. One of the things that I've been grappling with and thinking about is that actually we shouldn't be doing that. Where the cross and culture meet, culture must die, every time. No matter how important we think it is, if the culture becomes a barrier to the work of the cross, to the work of Christ in someone's life or the group's life, it must die. We must do away with it. And so I think that's quite an important thing for us to reflect on, because that can be a barrier to growth and to churches moving on.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

That's a really great phrase that you used but try and give us some practical examples of how, when the cross meets culture, culture must die. Give us some practical examples of that.

## OWEN HYLTON

I think one of the things that I've been working with over the last few years in my church, and we've got some young guys that have started coming to the church, some teenage guys, and some of them have come from, if you like,

Christian backgrounds – quite religious, and I would say quite cultural in their expression. Sometimes when they go to church they're not even speaking English, they're speaking a different language. And what happens is, those young boys have sometimes found that approach to God difficult for them to embrace, and sometimes, as a result, they've gone away from the church, because they don't see it as relevant to the world in which they live. They live in a very different world to the one that they're expressing on a Sunday. I think in situations like that, churches need to almost look at themselves and make sure they're not simply preservations of a culture, but that they are genuine reflections of the kingdom culture where Christ is central, and they're not a preservation of a different kind of culture. Maybe because they're in a different country they feel like, we've got to preserve some things, because that doesn't speak the gospel; particularly to young people, it doesn't speak the gospel, because they're growing up in a very different kind of culture. Whilst you don't want to embrace everything about the culture you're in, you must, at least to some degree, accept the culture you're in, because that's the culture that you're growing up in and that's the culture you're living in. I think I've seen with young people the need for the cross to be put forward over and above the cultural expression of faith in order that they can also embrace God.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

When we look at this title, 'What's on the menu?', so what's on the menu for every single person watching this or hearing this is putting the cross above their culture. Is that what we're saying?

## OWEN HYLTON

Yeah. I think as Christians, you can be saved, and Jesus saves you, but also Jesus becomes your Lord, which means that you surrender your way to his way. I've used this phrase before, and I don't mean it in a disparaging way, but sometimes we have to get over ourselves and what we think, in order to embrace what God actually says and what God actually thinks. And that's very personal. For me, I know I've had to do that quite a lot in the last few years, or all my life, but certainly in the last few years, and I think that's something that people need to come to that place.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

That's really challenging. What would be great now is if you could pray for us, that we would submit our ways to the ways of Christ. Can you do that?

## OWEN HYLTON

Yes, very happy to do that. Father, I want to pray for all those that might be listening or watching this, and I want to pray, Father, that your grace would be upon them now. I want to thank you for the truth about the gospel and about the cross – that it's powerful. The cross is a powerful agent for salvation, and I pray, Father, where we hold something very dear to us, that we would know in our heart of hearts that what we hold in you is even more dear. And I pray, Father, that many people would be able to give up those things that might appear very dear to them, in order that they can embrace what is very dear to you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

What's on the menu? Well, clearly, when the cross meets culture, culture must die. Challenging words, and something that we all need to think about and reflect on and discuss. I hope you have fruitful discussions now, and I look forward to seeing you again next week.

INVITED