Ethnicity, not 'race'[1]

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In studies of differences between groups, some anthropologists use the term "race" to indicate difference. This way of differentiating between groups is modern in the sense that the term "race" has only been in use since the eighteenth century. During the Middle Ages there was a notion of three distinct races descended from the sons of Noah: Shem (from whom the Semites, or Asians, descended), Ham (from whom the Hamites, or Africans, descended) and Japeth (from whom the Japhethites, or Europeans, descended). During the sixteenth century the term "race" came to include factors such as physical characteristics, culture and even nationality. The eighteenth century saw the development of the theory of biological evolution, based on the assumption that different species of *homo sapiens* could be distinguished by paying attention to differences in people's physical appearance (e.g. the shape of their skulls, their skin colour and their hair texture), and that such species developed in different geographic regions. The outcome of this theory was a three-fold racial typology, viz. Mongoloids, Negroids and Caucasians. In the Euro-American and Euro-African contexts these distinctions implied the superiority of Caucasians, and in many instances was the origin of racism. Based on their physical appearance, people experience discrimination, as is the case with discrimination based on sexual orientation.

This theory of race was relatively recently rejected by biologists and anthropologists as pseudoscience, due to its lack of scientific credibility. In cities, for example, immigrants often comprise groups defined in terms of language, land of birth, customs, religion and diet, and not based purely on differences in physical appearance, as has happened in certain areas. Moreover, this was the way that group differentiation took place in ancient times. In antiquity, group identity was based on cultural ethnicity. Groups used ethnicity to define and delineate themselves as unique. Ethnicity was determined by characteristics

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such as family (kinship), name, language, land of birth, shared myths regarding ancestry, customs, shared historical memories, phenotypical features and religion.

Comparing the different theories of ethnicity with the concept of ethnicity reflected in available ancient texts, the following nine features (supported by examples from the Old and New Testament) can be used as a template in terms of which cultural identity in the ancient times can be understood:

- Family (kinship): in the Mediterranean world the family to which one belonged was probably the most important factor determining cultural identity. The New Testament therefore often refers to a person with the expression "A, son of B (son of C)".
- The name for an ethnic group: in Matthew 15: 22 Jesus meets a woman who is described as a Canaanite; the title of Jesus written on the cross read "the king of the Jews" (Mt 27: 37, NIV); and the Sanhedrin is described in Mark 15: 1 as "the Council of the Jews".
- Native country (homeland or land of birth): the Greeks, Romans and Israelites often identified groups in terms of their country of origin; Simon is said to be from Cyrene (Mk 15: 21), and the woman whom Jesus meets at the well is from Samaria (Jn 4: 7).
- Shared ancestry (and/or myths about it): genealogies in Matthew 1: 1-17 and Luke 3: 23-38 are examples of this ethnic marker, as well as the expression "children of Abraham" (e.g. Jn 8: 39).
- Cultural customs or traditions: the Jews, for example, had particular customs and traditions which distinguished them from other ethnic groups, including endogamy, beards, the tradition of the elders (e.g. Mk 7: 5) and clothing (Mk 12: 38).
- Language: Acts 2: 6-11 refers to several native languages (those of the Persians, Medes, Cretans, Arabians and Elamites) which point to different ethnic groups. The Jews spoke Aramaic and their Scriptures (the Tanakh) were mainly written in Hebrew. Paul, for example, points in Philippians 3: 5 to the fact that he is a Hebrew (he was thus competent in the Hebrew language) from the tribe of Benjamin, and is, therefore, also an Israelite (Jew).
- A shared history (shared memories): the Jews often reminded themselves

of their liberation from slavery and of the exodus from Egypt (Ex 13: 3; 16; 20: 2), the covenant God made with them, the land promised to them (Gn 12: 1-3), and God's providence during their wanderings in the desert (e.g. Jn 6: 49). These memories served to strengthen and uphold their ethnic identity.

- Phenotypical features: perceivable physical differences served as just one of the markers of ethnicity in the ancient world. The apparently noticeably darker skin colour and darker hair of the Ethiopian who went to Jerusalem to worship (Ac 8: 27) made Philip realise that the man had a different ethnicity.
- Religion: in the ancient world religion was imbedded in familial and political institutions. Religion as a sphere apart, separate from other cultural, social, and ethnic discourses, was inconceivable in antiquity. The Jews had several religious practices which distinguished them from other ethnic groups, such as circumcision (e.g. Lk 2: 21; Ex 13: 1); clean (kosher) foods and purity laws (e.g. Mk 7: 1, 15); Sabbath laws (e.g. Mk 2: 24; Jn 5: 10; 9: 16) and the law of Moses (Jos 8: 32; Mt 1: 19; Lk 2: 22); fasting (e.g. Mk 2: 18); feasts (e.g. the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles) and religious dress (phylacteries around the head and tassels on their garments, e.g. Mt 23: 5).

Since differences between groups in the ancient world were differentiated in this way, most conflict between groups was driven by ethnic markers. Paul's letters to the Philippians and Galatians, for example, contain references to conflict between two groups. The conflict in Philippians is about the demand of the law-abiding Jewish believers ("those men who do evil"; Phlp 3: 2) that the non-Jews (proselytes) should be circumcised (Phlp 3: 2). The law-abiding Jewish believers argued that people (believers) could only be children of God if they were circumcised ("put ... confidence in the flesh", Phlp 3: 3). In short, one had to become a "Jew" before one could be a child of God. The conflict in Galatians was first and foremost about circumcision and purity laws pertaining to consumption of food. Some of the Jews did not want to eat with non-Jews (Gl 2: 12-13).

How does Paul react to these conflicts? In Philippians, Paul makes use of his own ethnicity (things of the flesh) to resolve the conflict by first stating: "Though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the

people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phlp 3: 4-6). Paul follows this by stating that these external things, this life in the flesh – things which he previously regarded as advantageous – he now regards as a "loss" (Phlp 3: 7) and "rejectable" (Phlp 3: 8). These things should not create conflict between people, or make one group discriminate against another because one group thinks it is superior.

Today, this kind of discrimination is still rife. Albeit with one difference. Of the many features that indicate cultural identity, one has become pronounced: phenotypical differences, defined as "race", and more specifically, defined in terms of the colour of one's skin. This focus has not only led to unwanted discrimination, but also resulted in undervaluation of the richness of ethnic difference. Discrimination has taken the place of celebration and embracing of ethnic and cultural differences because of a modern and reductionist understanding of identity in terms of race and race alone.

Let us celebrate our differences, rather than discriminate on the basis of our differences – differences that Paul argued are things of the flesh, and utterly unimportant.