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The Spirit & Race in John's Gospel

Belonging and the People of God

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The use of ethnicity or race to indicate differences between people groups has contributed to a culture of binary categorisation of people, resulting in an us-versus-them mindset. This is true in our contemporary culture and is true at the time of writing the Gospel of John. Although the definition of race has morphed through the centuries, it continues to remain a barrier to building the body of Christ. In his book, *The Spirit & Race in John's Gospel*, Estrada advocates interpreting racial rhetoric through the Holy Spirit's lens to identify ideologies contrary to the Holy Spirit's work of dismantling dualisms and forming unity. Estrada's interpretive model supports a transformative encounter with the Spirit of God, shaped by communal life commissioned for global witness. Estrada's approach proffers a theologically conscientious contribution to Johannine studies.

The Spirit & Race in John's Gospel begins by transporting the reader to when and where John's Gospel was written. The Gospel includes narratives of Jesus interacting with individuals from different races and cultures. Through a careful exegesis of key Johannine passages along with

a contextual discussion of the Greco-Roman world's multiracial environment, the author is able to effectively and convincingly establish the narrative of the cross-cultural community. At the time, race was based on environmental, genealogical and cultural factors, not skin colour. Accordingly, John wrote a message that transcended societal conventions and acrimonious histories. The ideologies of race, which formed one's self-identity, are introduced in chapter two. Chapter three delineates how Spirit birth subverts the privileges that many held onto. These assumptions of privilege are tested again in chapter four. In chapter five, Jesus once again upsets paradigms when he invites "anyone" to drink of the living water. The Holy Spirit's role as the Paraclete is introduced in chapter six. Chapter seven opens with the disciples locked together in a room for fear of the Jews. To move forward, they needed to breathe in the Spirit of God. In his final chapter eight, Estrada ties the previous chapters together to stress the importance of developing a racial consciousness when reading Scripture.

The author's interpretation diverges from other Johannine scholarship, which traditionally focused on the role of the Holy Spirit-Paraclete in community formation, Christology, the understanding of God, and the mission of the church. Instead, Estrada develops what he terms a "racial pneumatology", examining how the Holy Spirit is engrossed with the lived experiences of a racially diverse community. The author avers that being "born again" provides a new lineage where all believers are encompassed. This challenged the Johannine believers to broaden their definition of what it meant to be part of the family of God and make space for the "other". Estrada's hermeneutic helps the reader to recognize ethnic diversity among new believers and then the challenges as to how they try to navigate life with a new identity, that is, the "other," the non-dominant culture in the story. The author's racial lens of interpretation elucidates the formative time of the first-century church, breaking from a culture that considered others less due to their

family lineage, environmental location and culture. The author is able to maintain exegetical rigour while also speaking of healing and unity as he explores the passages of John's Gospel. Not surprisingly, Estrada's analysis speaks to the contemporary church with our divisions due to ethnicity, denominations and other barriers that are used to counteract ushering in the Kingdom.

The question remains: how is "anyone" interpreted as a hermeneutical key for inclusion? The argument against the division of people into "us" and "others" could be extended to include gender, based on the premise that all are equal and one body in Christ. The born-again experience with the Paraclete results in a reconstruction of identity which defies binary classification, including gender. The gender construct has propagated a power imbalance and restricted agency for women.

Historically, hermeneutics that have shaped our understanding of Scripture have presented a euro-androcentric perspective. This perpetuated and reinforced marginalisation of the "other" rather than providing a liberating hermeneutic that incorporates the role of the community and the Spirit. Rodolfo Estrada's hermeneutic identifies oppressive practices and recognizes that interpretation has been heavily influenced by cultural and historical perspectives. He has introduced us to a biblical interpretation that is in alignment with the Holy Spirit's work of uniting believers as we are made in the image of Christ.

This book was thought-provoking and very enjoyable. Estrada's approach to examining the Gospel of John through a racial lens prompted an examination of my own theology and should provoke readers to reflect and discern the narratives and theologies that have been ingrained in their theology, which may have served to alienate others rather than to welcome them into the body of Christ. *The Spirit & Race in John's Gospel* is a timely work that gives discourse on a critical issue in our current climate.