

Book Reviews

Todd M. Johnson and Cindy M. Wu, *Our Global Families: Christians Embracing Common Identity in a Changing World*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015. 220 pp. \$22.99. ISBN: 9780801049576.

I recently heard a sermon in which the preacher showed the congregation a pie on a plate, saying he used to see his experience of Christianity like a whole pie. But he now understood that his experience was really like his second pie plate—with only one small slice on it. “I want the whole pie,” he told us.

Well, I want the whole pie too, and because of that I often find myself with Christians from different parts of the world. I have had some God-filled moments in my experience with the diversity of Christianity, where the Spirit enables us to celebrate our differences. But I have also had moments of hopelessness, when rifts in the global church seem to block the way forward. Johnson and Wu’s insistence on unity within Christianity can seem naïve. But it can also sound like the Holy Spirit calling the church to imagine what is possible only with God.

Johnson and Wu write from an evangelical perspective, exploring our identity and relationships in the local and global church. The book aims to address unity and diversity within our global families through the lens of identity. What does it look like to be many as one? How are Christians different from or similar to our local cultures? What is the texture of interaction between diverse Christians and between Christians and others in the world? These are some of the questions the authors explore.

This book uses statistics to describe Christianity today, to give a snapshot of other world religions, and to discuss some sociological trends of globalization. The reader is offered a portrait of the vastness of the world and of the problems facing humanity today. But don’t get discouraged; the second section of the book focuses on the common identity of Christians, framed with words from Scripture. The book’s visionary and positive tone is remarkable considering the topic’s tendency to overwhelm.

Some of this exploration of identities rings hollow, however. The privileging of white, Western Christian voices over others is glossed over as the authors paint their vision of mutual sharing. “The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices,” claims Jimmy Carter in the beginning of chapter 4 (55). In a time of gun violence, racism, terrorism, and Muslim profiling, I see much evidence among Christians to the contrary, that fear and prejudice are forces to be reckoned with. This book only gives Western domination a meager treatment and mentions the challenge of individualism ever so briefly.

But Johnson and Wu do look carefully at the concept of allegiance, a topic that all Christians today must engage. They consider tribalism, nationalism, and an allegiance to Christ that conflicts with other allegiances. They ask critical questions about culture and faith: Who gets to decide what level of enculturation is “acceptable”? Do Christ-followers have to call themselves Christian or leave their other cultural/religious communities? What effect do denominational or cultural identities have on the global body of Christ, and how can all of us become more Christlike? What do we do when claiming our common identity—globally or as Christians—alienates others? The authors dare to ask questions without easy answers and make them come alive with real life examples from around the world.

Then they share inspiring stories of the innovative ways Christians have negotiated varied identities. They are clear that any kind of Christian unity requires outside-the-box thinking and brazen reliance on the Spirit. While the authors also give profiles of ecumenical organizations and overviews of Christian perspectives on diversity, the stories are what keep the conversation real. This book did not leave me with a clear picture of where we are and where we are going; Johnson and Wu would rather help the reader experience our global families in all their unquantifiable color than boil them down into a few take-aways.

Our Global Families is, finally, mission focused, which fits the authors’ visionary, experiential attitude. They entertain the necessary intersections between evangelism, justice, and righteousness to consider what it means to “make the world a better place,” returning again and again to Scripture throughout the book. They communicate that we are united by a common mission. Still resisting the impulse to simplify, the authors explore mercy and justice, care for the poor, and creation care. They quote Scripture and give lists of concrete actions to take. There’s also a chapter called “What We Can’t Do.” In the end, the mission is God’s, and the authors’ ability to maintain that point is really what makes their confidence believable—and contagious.

The whole pie, like John’s scroll in Rev 10, is sweet to the mouth but bitter to the stomach. This book encourages us to eat it anyway and live into it with the confidence that God goes with us. That kind of confidence can often be mistaken for naïveté. Whether it is grounded in wishful thinking or in God’s possibilities makes all the difference.

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