Nations Will Bring Their Glory
by Kevin Park
Associate Dean and Assistant Professor of Theology
Columbia Theological Seminary

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. (Rev. 21:22-26)

Being of Korean descent, I did a double take recently while shopping in Costco when I found jars of kimchi in the refrigerated section side by side with pickles, cheese, and prepared pasta.¹ When I was growing up in Toronto, kimchi was eaten only by Koreans and hidden well away from our white Canadian friends. Now, Costco in Louisville, Kentucky, is selling kimchi and giving out free samples!

Several months ago my teenage daughter, who is into Korean popular culture, was tickled to tell me that one of her white school friends texted her asking about a “cool” Korean boy band she had seen on YouTube, called “Super Junior.”

Costco is selling kimchi and American teenagers are listening to Korean boy bands. This is a bizarre reality shift for me since the only source of Korean culture available to North Americans when I was growing up was the 70s TV show M.A.S.H. I am happy to acknowledge that America has come a long way in accepting Korean and other minority cultures. I am also happy that my children are growing up in a more welcoming environment than the one I grew up in.

Or are they?

Something else happened that put a wrinkle to all of this. My wife and daughter were walking our dog in a nearby park when a group of teenagers walked by loudly chanting, “Ching, chong,

ching, chong . . .” My wife didn’t fully understand what was going on until after they had passed. When she realized that the gibberish was an intentional racial slur directed at her and our daughter, she became so angry that she wanted to tell them off, follow them to their houses, and have a talk with their parents . . . but she didn’t.

I asked my daughter if anything like this had ever happened to her before. She replied that sometimes she would hear similar taunts on the way home from school from kids passing by in a school bus. She said that it bothered her at first. But then she figured that those comments had nothing to do with her and that those kids were only embarrassing themselves. I was proud of how well she was able to process these negative and potentially traumatic experiences. I had thought there was a good chance that my children would grow up unscathed from the kind of discrimination I had experienced as a young person, but I was wrong. Sure, Costco sells kimchi and white teenagers may be listening to Korean boy bands, but . . .

I have to fight the cynicism this experience makes me feel. How much has America really changed? We have a black president, for heaven’s sake. Do we not live in a post-racial era? Recent racial traumas experienced by many African American communities force us to answer a definite “no” to this question. America accepts aspects of other cultures like ornaments on a Christmas tree. Minority cultures and their advances are accepted, even celebrated, as long as they contribute to the American entertainment-music-technological-cultural-economic machine. But has there been any real structural change in the power system in order to open that system to minority communities, not as mere ornaments to the American culture, but as an essential part of America proper? Does “ornamental multiculturalism” actually make genuine reform more difficult?

This “ornamental multiculturalism” that treats other cultures as decorations to enhance the status of the dominant culture is at work in our churches and denomination as well. This is not the vision of biblical multiculturalism, of the fullness that God has in store. Allow me to share a story that may point to a vision that’s more faithful to the biblical vision of many cultures.

My family immigrated to Toronto, Canada, from Seoul, Korea, when I was nine years old. I remember the plane ride well. It was Japan Airlines. I remember because my father spoke Japanese to the flight attendants. I didn’t know he could speak Japanese. When we arrived at the Toronto airport, my father asked for directions in English. I didn’t know he could speak English. I thought he was pretty cool. Hey, this was my dad! But soon I learned English and began to realize how broken my father’s English really was. In fact, as I became more “Canadianized” I realized how painfully Korean my father really was. He didn’t seem so cool anymore.

He got a job as a commercial artist at some company and every day when he came home from work he was in a bad mood and brought the whole family down. I began to resent him. Then one day he called home and asked me to bring his wallet to work because he forgot it. So I went there and walked into this large room with a maze of cubicles. I had trouble finding him. He was tucked away, way in the corner, in what seemed like the smallest space there. I gave him the

wallet and he said, “Let’s go out. I’ll buy you lunch.” So I followed him out, but on the way he stopped at an office. The door was open and as we approached it, I heard a couple of people talking and laughing aloud in there, just having a good time. My father stopped at the doorway. He didn’t go in. I stood beside him. We stood there waiting for some time. This manager guy finally noticed us, immediately stopped laughing, turned to my father and said, “What do you want?” as though it was a bother. My father, in his painfully broken English said, “I go for lunch now. This is my number one son.” He said it with anticipation. I was embarrassed.

The man didn’t even glance at me.

He blurted out, “Well, you better be back in thirty minutes!” My father’s eyes dropped. He didn’t look at me. He couldn’t look at me. We stood there together, silent, awkward. It seemed like a long time. The men turned and continued their conversation and laughter. At that moment I felt rage and shame at the same time. Part of me wanted to go over there and punch this guy out. How dare he treat us like that! How dare he speak to my father like that! But I didn’t do anything. I didn’t say anything. I just stood there feeling really small and helpless and invisible. My father walked out and I followed. I don’t remember what we had for lunch that day, but I do remember not saying anything as we ate. I understood him after that, why he was in a bad mood when he came home. I understood what he was enduring every day but couldn’t share it with us. I had new respect for my father. I understood. I thought he was cool once again. He was my dad!

Revelation 21 belongs to the last part of John’s vision in Revelation and describes the new Jerusalem. The city will be filled with God’s glory and the nations will walk by the light of God. People will bring into this city the glory and honor of the nations.

The word for “nations” there is the Greek word ethnai, where we get the word ethnicity. So God’s kingdom is not some melting pot where our distinctions are blended into some bland, colorless unity. No. The nations and the ethnic peoples are not abolished; they are preserved and redeemed in the kingdom of God and they will bring their glory into it. The nations are set free from their prejudices and hatreds and fears of one another, but in their differences they will come together, praising and glorifying God in dynamic, exciting unity.

And as long as we pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” this isn’t some distant eschatological hope that has nothing to do with us here and now. This vision claims us, as God’s people, to strive and to struggle to participate in this coming of God’s kingdom.

So in God’s kingdom my father is not going to speak broken English.

He’s going to speak perfect Korean.

And people will listen and rejoice and he will be bringing glory into the kingdom of God.

Amen.

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1. Kevin Park speaks of “ornamental multiculturalism.” What is “ornamental” multiculturalism?

2. How can Revelation 21:22-26, together with Park’s exploration of those verses, help you and your congregation overcome ornamental multiculturalism?

3. “This is not the vision of biblical multiculturalism, of the fullness that God has in store.” What does Revelation 21:22-26 add to a vision of biblical multiculturalism?

4. What passages of Scripture (in addition to Revelation 21:22-26) help you build a vision of biblical multiculturalism?

5. What does Park’s story of his father add to a vision of biblical multiculturalism?

6. Why is language a key element of multiculturalism and its absence?

7. How can baptism and the Lord’s Supper help us understand and work toward faithful multiculturalism?

8. How does “Nations Will Bring Their Glory” help all Christians see the part each can play, in all parts of their lives, in building faithful multiculturalism? How can it help congregations see part they can play?