Before we talk about how to be inclusive of diversity, we must look at how we exclude. This is a necessary inward journey requiring courage as we explore parts of ourselves we might not want to acknowledge. Exclusion may not be something that we intend. Because of the disparity between what we want to happen and what actually does, this internal exploration needs to be taken seriously.

When we examine the ways we exclude on both conscious and unconscious levels, we are more able to recognize them and take constructive actions to change them. Responding to Jesus’ call to remove the log from our own eyes means learning to recognize our ethnocentrism with which we judge and exclude. It means knowing what the act of exclusion feels and sounds like. More important, it means knowing why we maintain our ethnocentrism that separates us from others.

A way to diagnose our ethnocentrism is to consider how we respond to a person or group that is different. The following seven ethnocentric responses to difference by no means cover all possibilities, but they provide some clues to our level of ethnocentrism. The paragraphs in italics explore the cause or reason behind the responses. The paragraphs in boldface type suggest ways we may work to move beyond these ethnocentric responses.

STAGE ONE: DENIAL

A. Difference does not exist.

People who respond to difference in this way often deny that there is diversity among people even in the face of the most obvious observable differences. For example, a person went to Japan on vacation and described the experience: “Japan is wonderful. It’s just like America. It has McDonald’s and Coca-Cola, and everybody speaks English.”

B. Difference is confined to broad categories.

People who respond to differences in this way recognize diversity only in very broad categories and are often unable to tell the difference among people within a category. For example, someone sees an Asian person walking down the street and immediately assumes that this person is Chinese. When told that the Asian person might be Japanese or Korean, the observer responds, “What is the difference? They are all Asians.”

Possible causes of these two responses are isolation and separation, sometimes intentional, from people who are different. Persons at this stage often have little or no knowledge of people who are different from them. In this stage, knowledge about diversity among people may be limited to what the media provides rather than actual contacts.

For people in this stage some kind of cross-cultural contact is necessary. Such
contact needs to occur with openness and a commitment to learn from the groups and individuals involved and with great care from the leadership. Nonthreatening events such as cultural celebrations and the sharing of ethnic food are appropriate, but they must not end at the level of entertainment. Such events must show participants that there are differences not only between groups but also within groups. For example, a Latino/a cultural celebration could spotlight various groups of Hispanics such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Salvadoran, Cuban, Costa Rican, Guatemalan, and other cultures. A “European descent” cultural celebration could focus on various groups such as French, English, German, Italian, Irish, Norwegian, Czech, Russian, and other cultures. When celebrating Native Americans, different tribes and traditions could be recognized.

STAGE TWO: DEFENSE

C. You are different; therefore you are bad.
This kind of reaction is judgmental and exclusive. Persons recognize diversity and react to those who are different in an extremely negative way. This negative reaction may be expressed in verbal and physical abuse.

D. It’s okay for you to be different, but I am better.
Reacting in this way, a person will never put down someone who is different. However, this person might say things like: “We are more civilized, cleaner, or more intelligent.” By emphasizing one’s own superiority, such statements imply that the other is inferior.

E. I am different; therefore I am bad and you are good.
This reverses response D in that people critically judge themselves when they recognize that they are different. People may also judge the group to which they belong. Immigrants to the United States often go through this stage when they try so hard to gain acceptance in a new country that they reject their own culture. Peace Corp workers and missionaries sometimes express this response upon returning to their home country when they say things like: “Americans are so rude. I wish I were back in Zambia where everyone is so nice.”

F. If you don’t include like I do, you are bad.
Some people were raised to believe that we should not have any prejudices. In their formative years, teachers or parents may have reprimanded them for using certain words or actions that were considered inappropriate and offensive. As a result, they learned not to be prejudiced by behaving in very specific ways that were not unlike a set of rules of conduct. When these people encounter others who do not behave the same way, they judge them as bad people. In doing so, they are defending their culture, which consists of dos and don’ts regarding what it means to be free of prejudice.

People make these kinds of responses not because they are uninformed but because they lack cultural knowledge about themselves and thus lack true self-esteem. Our need to put down others who are different, thereby making ourselves superior, comes from the lack of in-depth knowledge of our cultural identity. The need to belittle one’s own culture in order to be accepted by the dominant culture is even a stronger indication of the lack of cultural self-esteem. If we are sure of our own cultural values and makeup, we are less threatened by people who act differently and who have different values and beliefs. We are also more likely to express an interest in learning about these differences.

The most effective strategy to deal with the lack of cultural self-esteem is intragroup dialogue. Intragroup dialogue brings together people with similar backgrounds or identities to share and explore what it means to be a member of that group. Many racial
ethnic groups in the church and in society have benefited from intragroup dialogue by finding mutual support and understanding while gaining a stronger group identity. The growing edge of this kind of work involves historically dominant groups engaging in dialogues about what it means to be part of such a group.

Another strategy is intergroup dialogue, which brings together people from two or more groups to explore in a constructive manner how they are different. With the help of skilled facilitators, participants learn more about their own cultures as well as those of others.

STAGE THREE: MINIMIZATION

G. I know there are differences, but they are not important.

This may be the most difficult response to address. It emphasizes commonalities and downplays differences among groups. People at this stage are genuine in their desire to get along with others by finding similarities between themselves and others. Nevertheless they are still attempting to preserve the centrality of their own worldview. If I want to accept only the part of you that is like me, I am ignoring the rest of you that is different, and I am not treating you as a whole person. I want to see only the part of you that affirms my identity. Many meetings where a fruitful discussion on diversity was taking place have been brought to a halt by statements like: “Why are we all wasting time talking about what divides us? We should be doing things that are common to all of us. We are all God’s children. We are all equal before God and we should be doing God’s work as one family.” Whether intended to do so or not, such statements derail opportunities to explore and appreciate diversity.

God does make and love us all. Jesus came to save all peoples and nations. However, God also makes us diverse. Such statements thus trivialize differences that exist among the diverse groups in the church. When people feel that their experience is being trivialized, they feel excluded. This minimizing response to differences may be the biggest hurdle for the church if we are to become a truly inclusive church.

This attitude may stem from negative experiences in dealing with difference. Perhaps we have experienced too many destructive behaviors resulting from efforts to deal with differences. We may have learned to avoid differences because we have come to believe that efforts to address them may result in more conflict.

To address the implicit belief that dealing with differences will be destructive we need to learn that knowing differences can and will be constructive and beneficial. Intergroup dialogue will continue to be an effective strategy for enabling people to see the positive effects of knowing and understanding differences. Another effective strategy is to provide experiential learning that supports why it is beneficial to know these differences. Examples would be roleplaying, experiential exercises, and presentations that point out the challenges we face if we do not know about differences. These kinds of programs should provide solutions and skills that help us grow in faith and ministry.

Continue to Action Steps