



Faith IN Culture

BY TINA TOLBERT

After reading lesson one of this issue, we have been reminded of Christians' responsibility related to the Great Commission. This command is one we are not to neglect, yet Satan will distract us through our differences and misunderstandings of each other and cause us to forget it, ignore it, or move it down our list of priorities. We must not allow that to happen.

In Acts 1:8, Luke records the beginning and early work of the Church. It is both inspiring and convicting that he reminds believers of the last words of Christ, the last challenge, the last command: "go and teach all nations." All nations mean all people—persons who speak a different language, who have lived entirely different lives, who have completely diverse perspectives, and who come from contrasting backgrounds and cultures.

It is also true that all people and all cultures will one day come together as John describes in his vision of Heaven where all nations, kindreds, people, and tongues stand before the throne and before the Lamb and praise God (Revelation 7:9, 10).

As Christians, it is our responsibility to be actively engaged in participating in the building of the kingdom

by being actively engaged in the lives of people and cultures of the world.

Say Cheeeese!

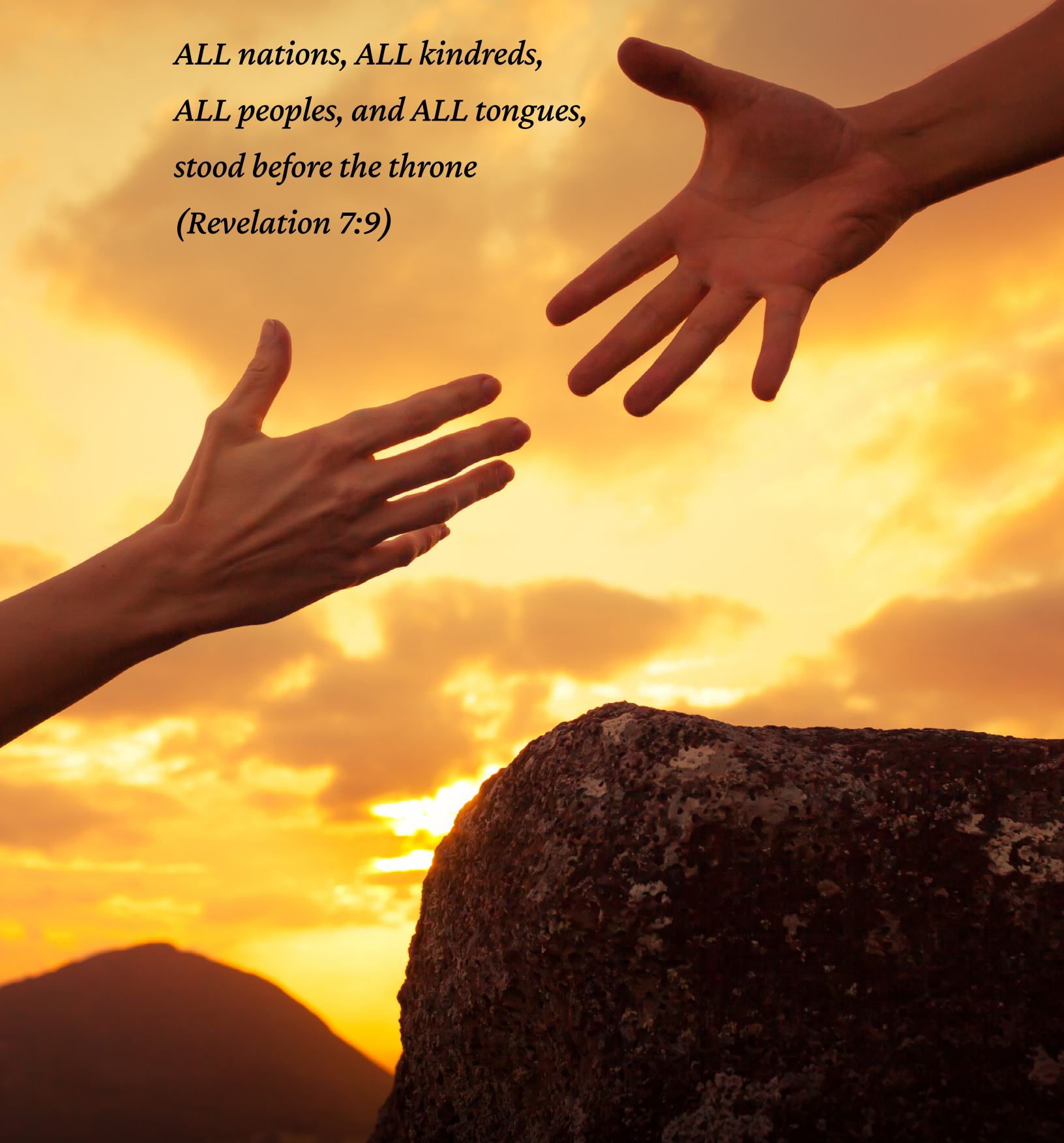
Three things happened at once. One: I was trying to take a picture. Two: a colleague was vigorously shaking her head as she leaped towards me. Three: the subject of my picture pointed her finger at me and began wailing. I was utterly confused.

After several moments, I comprehended what my colleague was saying: "Don't.Take.Any.Pictures!" As for the subject of my picture, she continued to point at me and she was obviously mad. This scared me and I finally heard myself repeating my apologies: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

This fiasco happened while I was teaching at a boarding school for missionaries' children in Ivory Coast, West Africa. One evening, several of the teachers went to get street food for dinner. I had only been in Africa for a few weeks so I thought this would be a great opportunity to experience some of the culture. In my mind, that also meant a chance to take some potentially captivating photos.

Little did I know that in Africa trying to capture

*ALL nations, ALL kindreds,
ALL peoples, and ALL tongues,
stood before the throne
(Revelation 7:9)*



someone's image via a photograph was an act of trying to 'capture their soul.' No wonder this poor woman was angrily screaming at me. In fact, I was told later she was attempting to place a curse on me!

Fundamentally, our different opinions came from our different surroundings, influences, environments, and our different cultures. That dear lady and I clearly saw the same photograph from very different viewpoints because of what we had learned about life from where we lived it.

I learned some things that day. I learned that what I might consider an insignificant matter may have much more significance to someone else. Where I was and what I wanted were not in keeping with the ways of the people from whom I wanted those things. I learned that my perspective is not everyone else's perspective. I learned that my way of thinking was only that: my way of thinking. It is limited and selfish.

I recently heard that the definition of culture is, in essence, how a group of people live life. This includes things like what they celebrate and don't celebrate; how they engage or not with their peers or the opposite sex or authorities or leaders; how they establish levels of hierarchy; it sometimes includes what they view as good or bad or what's good for you and what's not. Culture influences us in many areas of our lives, from our thinking to our acting. It can be a powerful, often unnoticed pull that has a substantial bearing on our day-to-day activities.

A simple example is this: when does your family celebrate Christmas? Christmas Eve or Christmas day? What do you eat? Ham, turkey, chicken wings, or maybe lasagna? How do you handle gift-giving? By drawing names? By only giving handmade items? Whatever your answers, these things contribute to the culture of your family. Obviously, our family cultures vary, just as all the different nations, kindreds, peoples, and tongues live life in various and different cultures as well. However, these differences are not to be barriers between ourselves and the unfamiliar.

They do not excuse us from fulfilling the Great Commission.

Cultures Abound

"...ALL nations, ALL kindreds, ALL peoples, and ALL tongues, stood before the throne..." (Revelation 7:9).

After the findings of the 2000 United States census, former Director of the United States Census Bureau, Kenneth Prewitt, made this statement: "We (the United States) are creating a country, the first country in world history which literally has to represent all of the world, which is to say it is not just Protestant, Catholic and Jewish; it is now Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim, along with Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. It is not just four or five languages, it is 150 languages. We have the challenge and the opportunity to create the first country in world history which literally is a reflection of the entire world."

"...ALL nations, ALL kindreds, ALL peoples, and ALL tongues, stood before the throne..."

More recently, after the 2020 census, one article headline from the United States Census Bureau read: "2020 Population More Racially and Ethnically Diverse than Measured in 2010."

"...ALL nations, ALL kindreds, ALL peoples, and ALL tongues, stood before the throne..."

The most recently counted population of America is 331,449,281. How many cultures does this number represent? How many opportunities for sharing the gospel do all these people provide?

From the perspective of the economist and the politician, the purpose of conducting a census is twofold: the Electoral College and the distribution of federal funds. What about the perspective of the Church, the Christian, you, me? Both of those things mentioned above affect our lives to some degree; however, should Christians see something else in these numbers? Should this information have any bearing on our lives? Should it affect us knowing the nations, kindreds, peoples, and tongues of the world now live where we live? Honestly, how do you respond to this

information? Does it annoy you? Anger you? Threaten you? Maybe convict you? Or does it challenge you to be more mindful of the spiritual needs of others and excite you with possibilities of opportunities for fulfilling the Great Commission like never before?

“...ALL nations, ALL kindreds, ALL peoples, and ALL tongues stood before the throne...”

Faith Versus Culture

The culture of the United States is no longer the culture it once was and it will, in not too many years, no longer look the same as it does today. Not too long

ities of mankind do not change its definition. It is the substance by which the Christian proceeds and navigates through life. God created *faith*.

We were not there when Jesus gave us our personal mission statement to teach and reach the world, and none of us have already been in the midst of every nation, kindred, peoples, and tongues praising God in Heaven. We are living somewhere between those two events.

Both proclamations, however, are to significantly impact the life of the Christian. We cannot separate the directive of the Great Commission from the claim



ago, people went to the grocery store or took their children to school or walked through their neighborhoods, and everyone they saw seemed very similar to themselves. For many of us, that is not what surrounds us today.

Culture moves, changes, and fluctuates. It does not function or operate according to a universal standard of conduct or rules of order. It is fluid like water and shifts like sand. Man creates culture.

Faith, on the other hand, is steadfast. It is consistent. It does not waver. The movements of life, the activ-

of God that Heaven will include all nations, kindreds, peoples, and tongues. These truths align with each other. They are connected by the activity of the Christian through the practice of faith: living a godly and faith-driven life in our time and in this diverse culture.

Our faith and our claim as a child of God will affect our daily activities: decision making; our response to the good, bad, happy, sad; our treatment of others; our view of the world; our money; our future; our time; our agendas and priorities; our energy and attention. In a faith-driven life, we see culture as people, as souls.

Faith helps us see that God's Truth is a need for all.

Living Faith in Culture

To me, the quote from Kenneth Prewitt means people from many of the world's nations live in the same nation I live in. They live in the same state I live in. They live in the same city I live in. They are my neighbors.

Remember the powerful lesson in Luke 10 when Jesus responded to the question, "who is my neighbor?" He describes a scenario much like the one we live in today: differing cultures crossing paths. One lesson from the story is clear: when we notice nationality over need, we are not allowing compassion and mercy to guide us in our task of fulfilling the Great Commission. When we allow our differences to drive us away from instead of toward, we are moving in the wrong direction. When we think avoiding and ignoring gives us a pass, we are mistaken. When Jesus said that we are to go and do the same (Luke 10:37), He is telling us to follow the example of the one who noticed a need, responded rightly to the need, and became involved in finding a solution.

It is important to note that more than race and ethnicity divide us sometimes. Be mindful of all the potential demographics that Satan may use to keep us from being a good neighbor: age, gender, profession, educational level, sociocultural backgrounds, and lifestyle. Could it be that Jesus is teaching us today that we all have 331,449,281 neighbors?

We are all commanded to "go." Get up off the couch and do something for the building of the Kingdom of God. "Go" means involvement, connection, engagement—those opportunities are endless. "Go" means look for places where people are and be there. For example, going with your child on a school field trip; giving your time to your local library to teach what you know (computer skills, knitting, gardening, reading children's books, etc.); finding volunteer opportunities in your area. Or, it may simply mean bringing in your neighbor's trash can or asking if they need something from the grocery store when you go. And at the very least, it means committing to praying for them. All of these responses to "go" share one common compo-

nent: people. "Go" means people.

"...ALL nations, ALL kindreds, ALL peoples, and ALL tongues stood before the throne..."

Faith Forward

One of my spiritual mentors is Mrs. Lorene Miley, former missionary to the Ivory Coast, West Africa. Her heart, her thoughts, her words always express Christ—she does not live separate from her relationship with Him.

I marvel at her desire to "go." Recently I learned she has a neighbor who was born in a different country. These two ladies do not look anything alike. They do not dress alike, eat alike, live alike, or worship alike. In fact, they do not speak the same language. However, Mrs. Miley noticed she and her neighbor had one common interest—they both enjoyed taking walks in their neighborhood. Now they walk together. Mrs. Miley has proven language does not have to be a barrier, nor an excuse. If your heart is set to "go," then nothing gets in your way.

One day, when Mrs. Miley's neighbor comes to understand about the love of Jesus, she will remember Mrs. Miley and that love of Jesus her neighbor showed her.

To move faith forward, to perpetuate the gospel, to be an active part of reaching others, to look forward to singing with all nations in Heaven, we are to answer the call to "go." I encourage you to seek out exactly what or who your "go" is and get to work!

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To hear Revelation 7:9-10 in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Japanese, and Bulgarian, listen here:
https://youtu.be/ANxYXoE_vfE

Tina Tolbert and Phyllis York discuss "Faith in Culture" according to Revelation 7:9-10. Listen to their discussion at <https://youtu.be/u1RZOnjRYJc>

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