

COLOR

GOD'S INTENTION FOR DIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

“The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-colored robes she is led to the king; behind her the virgins, her companions, follow. With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.”

—*Psalm 45:13b–15, NRSV*

The psalmist paints the picture of a beautiful bride adorned for her bridegroom. One can only begin to imagine the splendor of the robes that are woven through with golden threads gleaming in the sun-drenched chambers. Her bearing is dignified, and she is draped in her many-colored garments before being led to the king. The magnitude of the honor the bride is given is reflected in the way in which she is now dressed and ready to enter the king’s palace.

The vision of the bride was but a foreshadowing of the messianic era when the church would be birthed. The church—the bride of Christ—is to be ushered into the presence of the Bridegroom. Prepared for that day, the church will be adorned

in beautiful many-colored robes, woven together with threads of gold, with design far outshining any human embroidery. The tapestry of these robes will come from the diversity of her people who are not mixed together to become uniform, but who are woven together by golden threads of faith and doctrine, creating a pattern so stunning that the world is left in awe.

Throughout her history the church has not always succeeded at reflecting such diversity. Far too often a desire for uniformity, or conformity, has prevailed. Sadly, this can paint a rather dull picture, one that can hardly compare with what God has intended. The only way the church can reflect the beauty that God planned is for brothers and sisters to come together in fellowship and conversation, allowing the Holy Spirit to weave them together into a divine reflection of the kingdom of God. This is our vision and dream for the church.

We are Dany and Carla, a brother and sister in Christ who have been spending time in conversation and fellowship. We are quite the unlikely pair to be writing a book together: Carla is a white woman who has lived twenty-one years of her life in Europe and speaks German, English, and Russian, while Dany is a black man who has lived most of his life in Senegal and speaks Wolof, French, and English. Through our work in the church, we were both thrust into brand-new positions that made us working partners for two years. During that time we, along with our spouses and other team members, spent a great deal of time traveling the continent of Africa, preaching, teaching, and fellowshiping. We all discovered that we had much to learn about the work we were doing, but also, about how we could work together, even when coming from such different backgrounds.

This book began as conversations around dinner tables where we would reflect upon what we had learned throughout the

day. Honesty and trust opened the door for critical evaluation and continual improvement. Dany would share the things about Carla's messages that he liked and how it may relate to African culture, but he didn't hesitate to let her know when he thought she was off base. He would take the time to teach her deep underlying truths that affect the ways Africans would see and understand God. Carla would share with Dany about the theological truths he was embarking upon, and how they could be expanded when he allowed other voices to speak to him. She would talk to Dany about the ways he used music to communicate and relate to the people, often transforming a tense moment into one filled with the presence of God. This use of culture was a way God could be revealed to the people. They also had conversations about cultural misunderstandings and the realization that perceptions can be wrong.

The point is that we spent time talking and learning from one another, and we thought you might like to join us in these conversations. We discovered that when we allowed God to weave our work together, it was better and more beautiful than when we did it alone. We began to discover the beauty of the coat of many colors. Our brown and white became mixed with the incredible cultures we encountered. This is an invitation for you to join our personal journeys, and then our combined work as disciples who are processing this Christian walk.

We are living in a world that is changing at a rapid pace, and the experiences along the way helped to shape our conversations. When reflecting upon the past we recognize that at times the church has lived with an "us and them" mentality, and as much as we would like to shake that off, it's been a struggle. We might think that this is in regard to our missional enterprise, but it may also be an attitude of one culture viewing itself as dominant, and usually entering other cultures as a host rather than a guest.

Christian hospitality lies at the foundation of a relationship of mutuality and, depending upon the situation, the role of guest and host shifts.

In reality, the church is not much different from the rest of the world, which still believes there is dichotomy: That some are always the hosts, and others are always the guests. Sometimes we have embraced the mindset and language of a “developed” and a “developing world.” For others, it may simply be a dichotomy between your cultural worldview and another person’s.

Many of us have remained frozen in a 1960s picture of the world, and the church. Dr. Hans Rosling, in his book *Factfulness*, shatters the 1960s notions of the world, encouraging us to see that we have come a long way since then, and along with the changes in the world have come major implications for the church. When we examine the world, we discover there is no longer any economic dichotomy of “us” and “them,” rather Dr. Rosling places the world on four levels of economic development. The number living in level one (the poorest) continues to decrease at a dramatic pace, while those on level four, coming from outside the “Northern Hemisphere and the West” will soon overtake those who had retained single occupancy in that category. In other words, the economic development in the world is happening rapidly, and this has implications for all of God’s people. The one who was assumed to always be the guest, rightfully, plays the role of host.

We can rejoice that these changes have occurred, and the church has been a very active participant in bringing change in many parts of the world. Without the work of missionaries and Christian humanitarian agencies, and the resilience and contribution of national Christian leadership, much of this progress may not have occurred. The exciting news is that many

throughout the world have been lifted economically, socially, and educationally and are now ready to take their rightful place in leadership. This can be a challenge because we must work to intentionally break away from the old ways. This is an exciting time to be a part of the church, for we get to lean into a new future, one that has never before been explored or experienced, but that is only possible when we are willing to intentionally work at change.

This book is an endeavor to bring together radically different cultures, revealing a coat of many colors, which, in its beauty, reflects the kingdom of God. Doctrine is a golden thread that helps in weaving us together. The message of holiness transcends culture and calls us to be united. This work is not easy, but it is a labor of love for the church so that the bride may be resplendent with beauty.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why are you interested in embarking on this conversation about diversity in the church?

2. What are your thoughts on multicultural churches and a focus on monocultural churches of one ethnicity?

3. What changes have you seen in the last ten to twenty years that may have shaped your thinking about the future of the church?

1

BROWN

Dany's Story

Words. Words help us to categorize and classify in order to better identify, study, explore, and understand. Words are used to express an idea, an idea that becomes a picture, a picture that may become a stereotype, and a stereotype turns into an object, a fact, then finally a truth and a story. Words are powerful, indeed, but pictures are often more impactful.

As a child, I grew up with two pictures of Jesus: baby Jesus and the crucified Jesus. In my little mind, Jesus was depending totally upon his mother, Mary, and I had to make my prayer requests to her. I came from a divorced family where my brothers and sisters were separated at a young age and sent to different homes. I lived with my father, and a deep sense of insecurity grew within me. I could not put my trust in a baby Jesus who was depending on his mother. The other picture was of the crucified Jesus, nailed on a cross, half naked, with

eyes closed as if defeated, his head leaning to the right side and looking down. His mother was sitting at the foot of that cross, watching and crying. This also did not speak very much to me in those early years of my life.

As a young child, I did not notice Jesus's skin color because what I saw must have been normal. Jesus could not have been anything other than . . . white. My religious representation of God was white, because our Catholic priest, Father Lebert, who was an old Frenchman, taught us catechism and was assisted by white French nuns. Very few nuns were Senegalese. When I celebrated my Catholic communion, I was so proud to wear my white shirt with my cardigan, blue velvet pants, and a red bowtie, while my friends stood next to me with their white suits or dresses. I still have our Catholic confirmation picture in which my sister Stephanie and I are wearing white albs, with huge wooden crosses around our necks, belts made of wool on our waists. Our hands are joined, and we have smiles on our faces. It was one of my closest experiences of looking like Father Lebert.

I was studying in the French language, learning about the French culture, and the heroes in all of my cartoon books were white. I admired Zembla—one of those heroes—a herculean white man with long black hair who lived in the jungle of Africa. He could speak with the wild animals and was fighting for the local African tribes against cruel tribal chiefs and greedy white traders.

I also loved Antares, a blond, handsome, and powerful superhero who could live both under the sea and on the earth and could speak with all the animals in the ocean. The amazing thing in my young child's imagination was to see him having a dolphin as his horse. Tex Willer was one my favorite heroes. Tex was a U.S. ranger who defended Native Americans from

the exaction and greed of bandits, unscrupulous merchants, and corrupt politicians and tycoons.

Throughout my entire childhood, most of my heroes were white males, who had a strong sense of justice, could live in any cultural or social context, all the while bringing about change and hope. My heroes were Father Lebert, Zemblia, or Tex Willer. My world as an African boy, living on African soil, was populated with a white world. Both my religious and fantasy worlds were white, and in those days, I didn't question any of it. All of this had become normal, because as Frantz Fanon ironically said, "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white."¹

I was not aware that I lived with a particular narrative that had been with me from my childhood until I started to listen to reggae music in my teenage years. I also began to read new authors while in high school and added even more while attending public university. In reality, the turning point came when my father died. I was only nineteen, but my father had suffered through a long illness. My world collapsed, and my hope for a bright future became very dim. I found myself in a profound crisis of identity. My father had been Roman Catholic, but I realized that I had never really fit into the religion. I did not sense any connection with the two pictures of Jesus from my childhood: baby Jesus and Jesus on the cross. Suddenly I became aware that both of these versions of Jesus, his mother, all the angels, and even God, were white. I did not feel comfortable in their company because I did not belong. I needed spirituality more in line with my African culture, more in tune with my day-to-day experience, and I was desperately in search of a spiritual mentor with whom I could identify.

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

From my teens to my mid-twenties, I surrounded myself with mentors who shaped my thinking. I found these mentors in books and music, people like Bob Marley, Steve Biko, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and many others.

I consciously decided to reject anything related to European Christianity and the cultural values that were part of my inherited identity. I became more and more interested in African languages, history, and culture, and as I could not separate Christianity from its Eurocentric approach, I decided to convert into Islam. Not just any kind of Islam, but an African version of Islam.

I needed a spiritual mentor, and I could not find one in the totally white Christianity of my childhood. I turned to Islam but was not interested in Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, because he also was a white Arab. However, my spiritual thirst was for a personal relationship with a spiritual guide. This was not a religious, formal, or legalistic type of guide, but I sought a mystical, simple, deep, and authentic relationship that would be in sync with my African identity. I became interested in the Muridiyya Sufi movement in Islam and the teachings of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, its Senegalese religious founder. I discovered a sense of community, of belonging, and a way to develop a mystical relationship. However, as I was on that journey, a major defining spiritual experience would completely change the trajectory of my life.

One day, while reading the Quran, a verse² on Jesus the Messiah triggered questions³ in my mind, and I started a quest

2. Surah 3:55: "When Allah said, 'O Jesus, indeed *I will take you and raise you to Myself and purify you from those who disbelieve and make those who follow you superior to those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me is your return, and I will judge between you concerning that in which you used to differ*'" (emphases added).

3. As I was reading the Quran in order to find arguments so that I could refute the divinity of Jesus, the concept of the Trinity, and the crucifixion of Jesus, this verse stood

to know more about him. I was in my mid-twenties when I started reading the Gospels for the first time with a new desire, to understand more about Jesus. I met Jesus as a real person who invited me to walk alongside him on a pilgrimage of self-discovery. It was an invitation into a very intimate and open relationship that would include candid and honest conversations about my fears, my internal struggles, my insecurities, and my African identity. Eventually I could join Job in saying, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5).

From my childhood to my mid-twenties, I had been like Zacchaeus, watching Jesus from afar, hearing about his story from well-intentioned people but who had dressed him in their own cultural biases, and taught me through the eyes of his mother with an emphasis on a spirituality of poverty, submission, dependence, and resignation. Now, my eyes had seen him, and as a proverb in my language says: “You cannot deny what you see with your own eyes.”

I plunged into the stories in all four of the Gospels. The next thing I knew, I was imagining myself walking next to Jesus, listening to his teachings, and taking note of his gestures and responses to the people from every walk of life who had come to see him. No longer was I seeing a picture on the wall of a baby Jesus or a crucifix of Jesus in a house, but I was meeting a person, a real man, who lived and walked on earth and spoke simply, and in everyday language about the deepest spiritual and timeless truths I had ever heard. I did not see the white Jesus represented in my childhood pictures, but I saw a Jewish

out as it stated that those who follow Jesus (not those who believed in him, because Muslims claim to believe in Jesus but they follow Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam) will be above those who don't believe in Jesus. I also discovered that the Quran was quoting Jesus more than the Prophet of Islam himself—in his own book—and the only chapter in the Quran with the name of a woman was named after Mary the mother of Jesus.

man who lived in the Middle East, who was born under colonial rule, who spent the early formative years of his life as a refugee in Africa (Matthew 2:13), who ate while sitting on the floor using his hands, and who was always in community.

Beyond the common cultural connections that I saw in him because of his Jewish culture and habits, I also connected with his universal message of hope, reconciliation, and love. I later realized that even during the wildest years of my university studies, while I was proudly displaying the Rastafarian philosophy outwardly, and inwardly adopting an African type of Islam, I had written the three answers Jesus gave to the devil when he was tempted in the wilderness, on the door of the closet in my dorm room.⁴ It was as if something in me knew that Jesus Christ was to become the answer to my quest.

And yes, it is a quest, a discovery, and a relationship with Jesus who discloses himself to us as our relationship goes deeper and deeper. Didn't he say in John 8:32: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"? He did not say that the truth has set me free, or sets me free but rather it "will." The freedom or liberation process has happened indeed, is currently happening, and will continue to happen. The Lord Jesus knew that I still had a few more struggles to deal with in my inner life. Remember, I had grown up with a picture of Jesus as a baby who depended on his mother and a defeated man on a cross. These images were a major obstacle in my search for a spiritual mentor, for I was a young man who had lost his father and needed a real man in his life. I must confess that, in my eyes, Jesus was not manly enough.

A key discovery for me came when I saw the manhood of Jesus masterfully described by J. Oswald Sanders in *The*

4. Matthew 4:4: "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:7: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Matthew 4:10: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

Incomparable Christ.⁵ I was desperately seeking a spiritual mentor, and the chapter on “the manliness of Christ” spoke to my need. Sanders opens with these words, “Jesus was not only a man, He was a manly man—the crown and glory of humanity.”⁶ Sanders described his resolute courage, his intrepid utterances, his physical endurance, his courageous silence, his unbending sternness, his remarkable self-control, his blistering denunciations, and his uncompromising frankness. Just like Sanders, I find much inspiration in Rex Boundy’s poem:

Give us a virile Christ for these rough days!
You painters, sculptors, show the warrior bold;
And you who turn mere words to gleaming gold,
Too long your lips have sounded in the praise
Of patience and humility. Our ways have parted
From the quietude of old;
We need a man of strength with us to hold
The very breach of death without amaze.
Did He not scourge from temple courts the thieves?
And make the archfiend’s self again to fall?
And blast the fig tree that was only leaves?
And still the raging tumult of the seas?
Did He not bear the greatest pain of all,
Silent upon the Cross on Calvary?⁷

I began my spiritual journey with Jesus as guide, and he transformed my distorted vision of God, my disturbed and deranged vision of myself, and my biased vision of the other. This journey is usually called discipleship or the process of sanctification. I see it as a rehearsal for a better and everlasting

5. J. Oswald Sanders, *The Incomparable Christ* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1952), 69.

6. Sanders, *Incomparable*, 69.

7. Sanders, *Incomparable*, 117–18.

life, but a life lived in the current reality. I believe that God was reaching out to me from a young age and even through my culture. I began to have a vision of God through the everyday experiences of life. When I was a little boy, I loved the rain, and every time there was lightning, I used to say that God was taking a picture of us! God had always been part of our worldview, and we never questioned nor doubted his existence. We called him *Maam Yallà*, which meant “Grandfather God,” and at each rainy season we sang a song: *Grandfather God give me water and if I live, I will pay you your water back.*” We would sing it and sing it again until it rained. And when it rained, we would run out into the raindrops, jump in the muddy streets, and shout for joy with gratitude. In our innocent minds, we were convinced that *Maam Yallà* heard our prayers and was sending us the lightning to have a picture of us that he would keep in his home. *Maam Yallà* was far in the sky but he was near. Every day we would mention him in all that we did, and we expected him to be part of our lives because he was our Grandfather God. *Maam Yallà* and *Jamm* (peace) were mentioned in our greetings, before and after our meals, before traveling, and in our blessings. *Maam Yallà* was an extension of our family, an integral part of our daily activities, and he was shared with my childhood friend Paap and many others who were Muslims. It did not make any difference; when we were jumping and shouting and singing under the rain, we were all speaking to the same Grandfather, *Maam Yallà*.

Jamm, or peace, binds every aspect or area of our worldview, our cosmic view, and our social interactions. Everything must be done to preserve peace for the sake of harmony between the visible and invisible worlds, which were interacting and never viewed as separate or distinct. Just as *Maam Yallà* was everywhere

and in everything we did, we also believed good and bad spirits mingled in our earthly lives and in the cosmic world.

Songs, music, and dancing were natural parts of our growing up, and this all began when a baby was tied on the back of her mother, who sang while doing chores. It was an integrated world in which superstitions and taboos were used to forbid the young from doing dangerous things but also to awaken their curiosity and creativity.

One day, I started to attend catechism classes at our local, small, Roman Catholic chapel and was introduced to “Le Bon Dieu” (“The Good God” in French). He spoke another language, and I learned about him in a classroom taught by French priests who were the intermediaries between him and us. The *Bon Dieu* was organized, structured, untouchable, and unreachable, and was to be addressed in French or, even better, in Latin. He was to be studied in a picture book. *Maam Yallà* was everywhere, and I could speak to him in my own language about all my little troubles and issues; he was in the cosmic world, but he was also with me on the playground with my friends.

I lived in tension between the *Bon Dieu* and *Maam Yallà* even after I became a follower of Jesus Christ. The songs, the prayers, and the teachings in the *Bon Dieu* perspective were very heavenly, focused on highly spiritual issues and expressed in systematic and descriptive ways. For example, when Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” it was explained as an encouragement to live in physical poverty in order to have spiritual richness. Without our realizing it, a mentality of poverty was being developed in many of our minds, and simplicity in dress and appearance was seen as one of the most important aspects of this poverty. When Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” it was seen more as living in piety, in submission, and obedience than a desire to

seek social justice in a context where many are oppressed and living with injustices.

The lyrics of the worship songs were foreign to me. Songs like: “You can hate me, reject me, curse me here on earth. It does not matter; my homeland is in heaven. I will go there,” or “White as snow; washed in the blood of Jesus, I will be as white as snow.” These two songs are examples of a theology made of escapism and of contextual irrelevance. I came to realize the last song was not comprehensible when I was singing one day in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in the heart of the Sahel, where the temperature can go up to 45 degrees Celsius (120F) and where no one singing that day had ever seen snow! The *Bon Dieu* was getting further and further away from our daily routine, our experiences, and life.

In several instances, I felt like the Syrophenician woman who was willing to take the crumbs falling from the master’s table (Matthew 15:21-28). I realized that I had the wrong approach; in fact, the *Bon Dieu* was a cultural construct developed for a specific mindset, and I had to look at it as one of the seats at the table rather than consider that this was the table itself. For years, I behaved like young David when he met King Saul and told him he would defeat Goliath. At that moment the king gave him, in fact he lent him, his armor: “Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them” (1 Samuel 17:38–39a).

David receiving borrowed armor and trying to move without success is a picture of my struggle in wearing a vision of God that could not fit me, because it was not made for me. Unlike David—who was authentic and courageous enough to say to the king: “I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I

am not used to them.’ So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, and put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:39b-40)—I tried for years to wear someone else’s armor until I came to realize, just as the Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela said, “Nothing was obliging me to stand before God wearing a *borrowed humanity*.”⁸

From my teenage years to the day Jesus encountered me sitting alone in my university dorm room, I was longing for freedom. For me, this meant that I had to come to God as I am, in my own uniqueness, my own cultural background, and my own self. I had to put aside any borrowed humanity or interpretation of God. I had been looking for that freedom through different prisms and lenses, but then I came to know the Truth, and that Truth has set me free. In Jesus, and through faith in Jesus, I can now approach God *with freedom and confidence* (Ephesians 3:12) and sit at the table in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:29, ESV).

8. Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are your first impressions of Jesus?

2. Who was influential in your spiritual development?

3. What do you think about the possibility of God using the Quran to lead someone to Christ? What does this teach us about grace?

4. Thinking about your own culture, what is it that has taught you about God?
