

becoming all things

**HOW SMALL CHANGES LEAD TO
LASTING CONNECTIONS
ACROSS CULTURES**

**michelle
ami reyes**

FOREWORD BY THABITI ANYABWILE

Praise for *Becoming All Things*

The challenge of living as a multiethnic community remains as large as ever. Progress toward racially reconciled communities that embody God's justice feels elusive and at times seems unattainable. I am thankful to Dr. Michelle Reyes for her insightful and well-told work that engages Biblical truths, sociological insight, and ecclesial realities. A much-needed text that offers helpful and useful practices that the church would do well to apply.

—**Soong-Chan Rah**, Robert Munger Professor of Evangelism, Fuller Theological Seminary, author of *The Next Evangelicalism* and *Prophetic Lament*

In this powerful and important book, Dr. Michelle Reyes takes on one of the most important issues facing the church: How do we witness to the unity of Christ across social divisions? How do we love well in a multicultural, multiracial body of Christ and share that with a hurting world? With personal, professional, and scholarly wisdom, Dr. Reyes is our expert guide. She helps each reader unpack his or her own cultural identity, consider the social and theological significance of these cultural positions, and then leads us to consider how we can respond in practical, everyday steps informed by Scripture. I look forward to teaching this book to my own students.

—**Dr. Brian Howell**, professor of anthropology, Wheaton College

Dr. Michelle Reyes is a connector of people and a facilitator of hard conversations surrounding race, cultural identity, and justice. Her story and voice matter, and most importantly, her words help Christians truly become all things in challenging conversations. If you are ready to lean in and grow in your understanding of your “neighbor,” then *Becoming All Things* is the book for you.

—**Terence Lester**, founder of Love Beyond Walls, author of *When We Stand: The Power of Seeking Justice Together*

Michelle lives what she writes. In her informative and formative book, you are invited to participate in a thoughtful journey where you are given tools to navigate culture and cultural differences. You will laugh and lament as you learn through all that her words and ideas shed the light of truth upon. You will want to read this in one sitting, but I encourage you to take it chapter by chapter, reflecting on your life as you read the stories and lessons laid out here. Pick up a few copies, one for yourself, and some for your friends, and discuss the things you take away. Both Michelle's intellect and heart shine through this very timely book.

—**Raymond Chang**, president, Asian American Christian Collaborative, campus minister at Wheaton College

Dr. Michelle Reyes is a gifted leader and an excellent teacher. Her book, *Becoming All Things*, is timely and helpful for people from BIPOC communities and for those from majority culture. Filled with practical examples and solidly rooted in Scripture, Michelle guides the reader on how to celebrate and honor people from all walks of life. Unity is not uniformity. As we experience deeper fractures in our society over differences, this book maps a way forward to help the church become part of the answer to the prayer Jesus prayed in John 17 for us to truly be one.

—**Vivian Mabuni**, host of the *Someday Is Here* podcast, author of *Open Hands, Willing Heart*

Becoming All Things is a kingdom of God manual, a path for experiencing God's glory through Christlike sacrifice. With grace and truth, Michelle calls us to check cultural appropriation, inventory our own hearts, and move out of our carefully constructed comfort zones into a lifestyle enriched by the experiences of our diverse neighbors near and far. Michelle invites each of us to examine our unique story and the glory that can be experienced from flourishing together. This book stirs in me, after decades of multiethnic leadership, an even

greater desire to experience God's diverse kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. I pray that Christians who are unwilling to settle for perfunctory diversity will receive this book as a loving challenge to grow in respect, to build more justice-minded communities, and show our children neighborly love that is lived out to the glory of God.

—**Dorena Williamson**, bridge builder and
bestselling author of *ColorFull*

In a world of dizzying diversity, we search for fixed markers upon which to ground our sense of self. And in our searching, we want an identity that accords with dignity. The conundrum is that our society does not accord that dignity in equal measure. In *Becoming All Things*, Dr. Michelle Reyes deftly presses against dignity denying discord by calling us love our diverse neighbors for the sake of the gospel. As she says, “We can be proud of who God made us to be without weaponizing that pride to think less of other people and how they live. We can value our unique cultural stories and expressions without worshipping the products of our culture.” I encourage you to read this book and lean into the challenge of embracing the discomfort, delighting in the difference, and persevering in love.

—**Irwyn Ince Jr.**, author of *The Beautiful Community*

It has been said that we are in the midst of a Great Unlearning with it comes to issues of race, identity, culture, and racial justice. Michelle Reyes is one of the teachers we need at this moment. *Becoming All Things* is a pastoral, well-researched, Christ-centered exploration of the Christian's call to “cultural flexibility.” Her invitation to know our cultural identities and stay curious about the cultural identities of others is a clarion call to reconciliation that is both practical, inspiring, and challenging. Read this book with your friends and make space to learn about each other's cultures. You'll be the better for it.

—**Osheta Moore**, author of *Shalom Sistas*
and *Dear White Peacemakers*

Clearly spoken and transparent, Reyes graciously walks the reader through a necessary but often avoided journey of cultural discovery for the sake of the Gospel. She states, “I am like every Indian, like some Indians, and like no other Indian,” while weaving together Bible study, personal narrative, and practical application to “become all things to all people.” I can see how this book will help small group members, for example, to see and appreciate themselves and each other in order to foster equitable Christ-centered community.

—**Dr. Christina Edmondson**

As a mixed race Christian professor of ethnic studies, I wish that I had read this book twenty years ago. Reyes shows that my lifelong journey of living in the “in between,” in the “Brown,” is actually the calling of every Christian. She offers a road map for cultural understanding that is vital for the rebuilding of the church in America.

Dr. Robert Chao Romero, author of *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*

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 **ZONDERVAN
REFLECTIVE**

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To Aaron, my co-trailblazer.

Can you believe this moment is here? You and I began our exploration of cultural identities together. I wouldn't want to cross worlds and create new spaces with anyone else.

To those with bicultural and multicultural identities who have found their way to this book.

The spaces we've created were always meant for you. This is your moment. Rise up and lead us into a glorious future.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

—1 Corinthians 9:19–23

Contents

Foreword by Thabiti Anyabwile | **xi**

Introduction: Commit to Change | **xv**

1. Develop Your Cultural Identity | **1**
2. Move beyond Stereotypes | **23**
3. Embrace Cultural Discomfort | **47**
4. Rethink Code Switching, Privileges, and Rights | **69**
5. Avoid Cultural Appropriation | **87**
6. Don't Expect People to Come to You | **107**
7. Redefine Fluency | **125**
8. Change Your Perspective on Justice | **145**

Conclusion: Don't Give Up | **163**

Acknowledgments | **167**

Notes | **170**



Foreword

Several years ago, my wife and I joined a group traveling to Israel to tour the land of the Bible. We may never forget some of the sights and sites. The Bible became three-dimensional as we stood on the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives, and the ruins of a synagogue in Capernaum. We found ourselves inside a world we had only read about and imagined—imagined, as it turns out, without sufficient inspiration!

But as much as we enjoyed the ruins, landscape, and food, the trip would not have been as life-changing without our tour guide, Yuval. Yuval was a second-generation tour guide, having learned at the foot of his father, who led tours for decades. Born Jewish, he was born again through faith in Christ at some point in his early adulthood. As a lifelong resident of Jerusalem, he also knew Arabic and was familiar with historical and contemporary Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. He brought all of that knowledge to our tour.

But he also brought something else—interest in us and



becoming all things

some familiarity with our cultures. Yuval became a bridge between worlds as he became all things to all of us. Yuval transformed our time from a potential series of “stones and bones” tourist traps into a deep-water immersion filled with complex cultural, religious, political, and historical perspectives. We walked the land with glimpses through his eyes. We toured the land, but we also toured his thought, feeling, and experience, and in that tour, we saw ourselves afresh.

An excellent tour guide does that for you—she or he *narrates* life in a way that draws you in and even redefines you.

We need excellent tour guides to help us navigate our way through the landmarks—and landmines—of our cultural identities and experiences. We need help with the narration of life, someone to help us realize we have stories and we tell them selectively. We need someone to help us examine that selectivity to discover what we’re leaving out and how it shapes our identities and perceptions. We need someone to help us notice the details we would otherwise miss. Someone to tell us the stories that make the “monuments” meaningful. Someone to open our minds, hearts, and eyes to others on the journey so we benefit from their perspective and contribute to their lives in meaningful ways.

Crucially, most white Americans, for most of American history, have never taken a tour of their own cultural and racial identities. They have never had a guide point out details or give meaning to them. Just as crucial, most people of color, for most of American history, have had to negotiate multiple and sometimes competing narratives. They’ve had to define themselves in relationship to one community and to assert



counterdefinitions in relationship to another community. The hopeful assessment of this reality might be something like this: God has been preparing people of color to help white people understand that white is a color and white people have a culture. This is a crucial mission because when white people fail to understand this, they often do alarming damage to people of color. American history is filled with examples.

We desperately need to be led by a skilled interpreter, a guide who knows the terrain and the stories hidden there, someone sensitive to the human heart—to their own heart and the heart of others.

The Lord has graciously gifted my sister Dr. Michelle Reyes with a heritage, upbringing, education, and gifts to serve the church as a much-needed guide. She will tell you her story of being a “tweener”—someone not quite at home in the multiple cultures she navigates. From that perch, she helps us escape the Black-white binary to see more of the kaleidoscope of identities we share and experience. She will bring to bear the Bible, theology, sociology, and history. Those who listen to her guidance will begin to see themselves differently and to interact with the world more effectively.

As I read this book, I became aware of how few guides we really have in the church. Further, I became aware of how rarely we listen to the handful of guides we do have. This two-fold problem makes this book both rare and urgent. It makes reading and applying this book both necessary and an act of repentance.

Michelle writes with a prophetic clarity we need to heed. Those who heed this calling will find hope and help from



becoming all things

someone who has been experiencing and thinking about who we are, our stories, and the possibility of a deeply informed, justice-loving, gospel-motivated, apostle-imitating, multiethnic unity all of her life. It's time we end the centuries-long, country-wide commitment to "whiteness" as the standard for culture, identity, and meaning and begin a lifelong pursuit of discovering what it means to have the *imago Dei* as the standard for culture, identity, and meaning. It is past time to take off the old man and put on the new. It is time to embrace becoming all things to all people. This book helps you do that.

Thabiti Anyabwile

Washington, DC



Introduction

Commit to Change

As an Indian American woman, I've learned to live my life like a chameleon. I'm constantly changing my identity based on who I'm interacting with because, more often than not, I am the sole Indian in a non-Indian space. I grew up in an all-white town and attended an all-white school. I've never been a part of an Indian community, and I've never been a part of the majority. Never. I'm a woman of color with a bicultural identity, and I can't escape my reality. My only recourse has been to learn to blend in seamlessly wherever I go.

Being able to mold myself to the people around me is a unique skill. Even now, I instinctively withdraw when I enter a new space and ask myself, "Who am I? Who do others want me to be?" These questions play on repeat in my head as I silently observe which words and gestures are welcome and which are not. I pay close attention to social cues and cultural



becoming all things

expressions so that I can adjust how loud I am, how many of my emotions I can share, and which personality traits I can express. I play a role, and often quite well—with success being measured by how positively the person I'm with treats me in return. But this process can also leave me tired and discouraged. I wonder what the real me would look like, and whether I could be different, whether I could stick out of the crowd and still be accepted.

Then again, being able to transform is also one of my greatest strengths. I know how to make someone feel seen and understood. My radar for people on the margins is keen, and I'm passionate about making sure people don't get left behind. I understand the pain of feeling unwelcome in monocultural spaces because I've been there. I've walked that path before, and I can extend a hand of friendship to say, "I got you. Let's do this together."

Being able to adapt culturally, to change who I am for the people around me, is not the life I would have chosen for myself, not at first anyway. Growing up, I spent most of my days just trying to fit in. I wanted to be loved and have friends. It's perhaps the most a brown-skinned Christian girl like me could hope for, growing up in a Scandinavian community in Minnesota. I lived in a world of in-betweens, where I wasn't considered Asian, but not white either. I was like no one and was constantly aware of the ways I stuck out. So I spent much of my childhood thinking something was wrong with me and actively trying to make my Indianness invisible. I desperately tried to imitate my white classmates so that I would be more likeable or prettier, or at the very least so that someone would



start sitting by me at the lunch table. I thought that being Christian meant being white and that I needed to alter my cultural identity to be accepted.

I told myself I just needed to make the best of it. If I could figure out how to act like the cool kids, dress like the pretty girls, do my hair the way they did, or talk the way they did, then maybe they wouldn't make fun of me in class anymore, exclude me from parties, or say my culture was weird. Fitting in would somehow be worth no longer wearing Indian clothes outside the home, bringing homemade lunches to school, or distancing myself from familial narratives and values.

But that all changed after college. In the time it took me to leave Minnesota and pursue a doctoral degree in downtown Chicago, Christians of color started becoming more visible, raising their voices, and stepping into leadership roles, both within the church and outside of it. That, along with the immediacy of social media, helped me connect with people more like me. I discovered a world of people with bicultural and multicultural identities, who had all grown up like I had, living in the in-between, constantly renegotiating their identities, and trying to make it one day at a time. I was no longer alone. It didn't matter if we were Black, Brown, or white; we were learning to see the beauty in our cultures and to embrace the plurality of our expressions. We could be like everyone and yet still celebrate our uniqueness.

These were the early days of my cultural identity development. In these last few years, the topic of culture and cross-cultural engagement has risen to the forefront of everyone's consciousness. Cultural identities and cross-cultural



becoming all things

relationships can no longer be ignored, least of all by Christians. Those who have been journeying on this road have stories of pain and joy to share. Others are stepping into this for the very first time.

The more we speak up about, acknowledge, and process what we are learning and experiencing, the more we see that we're all at different places in our journeys. Some people are realizing for the very first time that whiteness and white American culture are real, and they are wrestling with the reality and confusion of racial differences between themselves and people of color. Some people of color carry hurt, anger, and trauma for the ways they've had to accommodate to the dominant culture and hide aspects of their cultural identities. Being asked *yet again* to step into a place of vulnerability and openness feels like an impossible task. Still others have tried to extend a hand of friendship across cultures and have experienced criticism or shame in the attempt. Where do we go from here?

Connecting across cultures might feel a bit daunting, but you are reading this book because you want to keep trying. You know something isn't working and you're willing to try something new. Healthy relationships across cultures are possible. Majority and minority, Black, Brown, and white, can come together and thrive. I've seen it and experienced it. But the road forward begins with a willingness to embrace change. We must be willing to think differently about who we are and the way we're supposed to live. We must learn how to be culturally adaptable and read Scripture through this lens. That is the goal.



Consider the life and identity of the apostle Paul. Paul was both a Jew and a Roman citizen. He had a cultural duality that made him unique, and this enabled him to connect with people of different ethnicities, languages, and socioeconomic statuses. Paul could talk with Jews in the synagogues and discuss philosophy with Greeks in the public square. He regularly crossed borders to meet new people, and though his underlying convictions did not waver, he adopted different approaches toward circumcision and dietary laws depending on who he was with. For Paul, to be a follower of Jesus meant that he lived a life of constant cultural adaptation, and his willingness to embrace change made him particularly well suited to form cross-cultural relationships. Paul embraced his cultural identity, yet he knew how to step outside of it because he saw his ability to be adaptable as a strength. His motivation to connect across cultures wasn't driven by a need for survival, but rather a deep understanding of who God had made him to be and a love for all peoples.

Paul writes about cultural adaptability throughout his epistles, but the verses that best summarize his thinking are found in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under



becoming all things

Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. *I have become all things to all people* so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (emphasis added)

Let's focus on the phrase "I have become all things to all people." Every time I read these words, I think about my own life. The very thing I felt forced to do growing up—becoming different things with different groups of people—is here presented positively, as a fundamental aspect of the Christian life. The challenge to become cultural chameleons isn't just for Indian Americans like me. It's true for all Christians everywhere. We all need to hear Paul's words and think about what they mean for us today. Imagine him saying right now, "To the African American, I became like an African American. To the Mexican American, I became like a Mexican American. To the Native American, the Asian American, the Afro-Latino, the Anglo American, the Chicano, the Cuban, the Nigerian, the Cherokee, the first-generation Guatemalan immigrant and the sixth-generation Chinese American, I became like each and every person for the sake of the gospel." Each of us is called to go on a journey of becoming all things to all people. Becoming is not code for appropriating or stealing other people's cultures. It is a posture that desires to see the world through other people's eyes, values what they value, and both centers and honors their way of life. This will require humility and flexibility. We all need to learn what it means to adapt and transform



ourselves to better love and serve the people around us. This adaption isn't optional. It's not just for the overseas missionary. It's the call for every Christian.

The more you believe this truth, the more you will see it play out in Scripture. Moses, the Hebrew, grows up in the Egyptian court, and God raises him up as a spokesperson for his people with unique access to Pharaoh. Ruth, a Moabite, marries into a different culture and comes to play a crucial role in the story of Israel as the great-grandmother of King David. Esther, a Jewish woman in Babylon, knows how to address a king and utilizes the art of storytelling to save her people. In the book of Numbers we read about the biracial priest Phinehas. Professor of Old Testament J. Daniel Hays explains that the name Phinehas "translates as 'the Negro,' the 'Nubian,' or 'the Cushite': that is, one of the Black people who inhabit the land of Cush."¹ Phinehas is a dark-skinned African. He also happens to be the great-nephew of Moses (Aaron's son Eleazar marries a daughter of the Egyptian Putiel; Exod. 6:25). What makes Phinehas unique is that he embodies the message of God not by hiding his cultural identity but by embracing it to speak a message to God's people that an ethnic Jew wouldn't have been able to convey. He is an outsider speaking to God's people, and that makes him good at his job.

Many of the men and women in the Bible learn to change and adapt their words, personalities, and lifestyles to connect with the people around them. And Jesus is no exception to this pattern. In fact, the incarnation is a perfect model of cultural embodiment. Jesus came to this earth as a



becoming all things

brown-skinned, first-century Jewish man. The eternal Son of God transformed himself, despite pain and hardship, to meet us on our terms. He embraced another nature to become like those he loved and navigated different languages (Aramaic and Greek) as well as different sociopolitical contexts (Jewish and Roman). He adapted to human culture, acquired our customs, languages, and pains in order to care for, heal, save, and unite us. Salvation was his goal, but the first step in saving us was crossing into our world and meeting us where we lived.

When talking about Jesus's cultural identity, it's important to understand that Jesus was not white. He didn't have fair skin or look like a white American man. Not only is Jesus Jewish, but he has a complex, multicultural heritage according to the Gospel of Matthew. New Testament scholar Andrew Rillera writes, "Only Matthew mentions women in Jesus's lineage, and he significantly includes great-grandmothers who were foreigners (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba; Matt 1:5–6). Some come from nations that are Israel's paradigmatic archenemies: the Canaanites (Tamar, Rahab) and Moabites (Ruth)."² This diverse heritage informs not only Jesus's identity but also how he engages with the world. Jesus's multicultural roots allow him to seamlessly cross cultural divides and show love equally to Jews, Romans, Samaritans, Canaanites, and others in ways that are fundamentally non-Western and non-Eurocentric.

Christ is our example. But following him will not be simple. If cultural adaptability came with a high degree of pain for Jesus, you can be assured your journey will not be easy either. Some of us will struggle more than others. In fact,



adapting to other cultures might be easier for me as a bicultural woman than someone who has never stepped outside of their monocultural space before. And that's okay. In the book of Acts, Paul easily and fluidly adapts to different people groups in a way that the apostle Peter does not. Peter has far more bumps along the road. He picks fights, and Paul has to help put out a few of his fires. But God uses those bumps to stretch and grow us; that's part of the learning process too.

Learning to adapt to different cultures in our heads, hearts, and bodies won't be easy, but it will get *easier* over time. Each of us has to commit to a process of change and commit to persevering because the work is hard and the road is long. We have to believe, truly believe, that living out the gospel means continually changing ourselves within different cultural contexts to better love and serve the people around us. At the heart of the Christian life is a commitment to a messy web of cross-cultural relationships that seeks the flourishing of all people, whether that be within our own families, our neighborhoods, our churches, or our society as a whole.

So be encouraged. You can do this. We can do this. And we can do it together.



Develop Your Cultural Identity

“Why do you talk about culture so much? I mean, shouldn’t you be talking more about our unity in Christ than our cultural differences?”

I was in mid-bite of a delicious salami and Gouda sandwich, picnicking with some old college friends. Our kids were playing nearby in the grass, and we had just finished talking about diapers and sleep cycles when one of my friends dropped this question on me. I immediately had a sinking feeling in my stomach. It’s not that I didn’t have an answer to the question. I just didn’t know if I wanted to answer.

Conversations about faith and culture require a good deal of mental and emotional energy. I have to gauge how much the person posing questions knows about the topic and how much information I should supply. I’ve been navigating this issue for a long time. I’ve dedicated my career to writing and speaking on the topic. Yet many people, including the husband and wife asking me the question at that moment, haven’t



becoming all things

thought much about it. I know they love Jesus and mean well, but I'm also aware they know almost nothing about the topic. The churches they attend don't talk about faith, ethnicity, and culture. They don't listen to, follow, or read anything by Christians of color. My husband and I are the only friends of color they have. But even more than that, I'm trying to discern whether their question comes from a desire to listen and learn or if they just want to debate or put down my ideas.

I'm not picking on them simply because they're white. But I've been having more and more of these same conversations with white Christians since 2017 when one of the most visible and influential minority evangelicals in the United States, the artist Lecrae, left conservative evangelicalism over cultural differences.¹ Some Christians today still don't understand why a person of color would no longer want to identify as evangelical. Some white Christians feel like African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino/a (among many other) believers are making too much of their cultural identities. Yet these same white Christians also can't understand why, after years of dialogue, the chasm between minority Christians like myself and my white brothers and sisters is still growing.

Many white Christians don't realize that Lecrae's divorce from white evangelicalism was a watershed moment for many minorities. Many of us had spent years feeling like the outsider, like something was wrong with us, and that we should remain silent if we disagreed with our white friends on an issue. I knew I didn't fit the image or the lifestyle of many white Christians, but there was no space for that in our conversations. However, when Lecrae made his personal frustrations



public about the historic disconnect between evangelical faith and culture, I thought, “Oh, we get to talk about this now?” For many of us, the floodgates suddenly burst wide open.

Since then, I’ve grown bolder in talking about my identity and my past, about the ways my faith and culture intertwine, and how my experiences are different from those of white evangelicals. But so often, I am misunderstood. When I bring up topics like cultural differences or ethnic identity, I’m told that I’m being divisive, emphasizing things that shouldn’t be an issue for Christians, and going against the grain of Christian unity, albeit a unity that aligns with the status quo of white evangelicalism.

So when my friends questioned why I was always talking about our differences instead of our unity, I knew this was a layered question. They were suggesting that my faith—and even my way of life as a Christian—should be acultural. In their minds, different cultural expressions of faith breed disunity and division among Christians. They were hinting that it was time to set aside my “dangerous elevation” of the culture card and instead embrace a “noncultural” expression of the faith, one that could unify all Christians.

“Isn’t that what Galatians 3:28 says?” they asked. “‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ If that’s true, then our only distinctive as believers should be Christ.”

Many of my fellow friends of color no longer engage in these discussions because for too long we’ve had to defend the legitimacy of our experiences. In addition, we’ve been unduly burdened with the task of teaching white people terms and



becoming all things

histories, answering their questions, and speaking on behalf of all people of color everywhere. It's physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausting. I wish it didn't have to be this way. At the very least, I wish my white friends had more friends of color so that other people could lovingly challenge them and open up space for these conversations. But I haven't given up yet. I'm still hoping and praying that God will use conversations like this one to change people's hearts and open eyes to new perspectives. So I dove in.

"You know what I hear when you say that? I hear you telling me that I need to hide my Indianness if I want to call myself a Christian."

A look of confusion washed over their faces. "No, you can be Indian," they replied, "We're not saying that."

So I elaborated: "Sure, it's okay if I wear a trendy Indian shirt or if we check out a vegan Indian restaurant for dinner. But what if I told you that my Indianness makes me see the world differently than you? I value things that you don't. I feel uncomfortable in places that are normal to you. Even our definitions of friendship are different."

Memories and experiences immediately flooded my thoughts. And I wanted to share it all. I wanted to somehow roll out my life like a movie reel so I could point out every difference, every pain, every moment of isolation. But I also knew that would be like a tidal wave, and I didn't want to overwhelm them. So I began trying to explain what it's like to be a minority in a majority culture.

"Do you know that almost every white friend I've ever had assumes we live our lives the same way? But we don't.



The truth is I've learned to hide certain aspects of myself, certain parts of my Indianness, around people with white skin because I'm tired of being misunderstood. My life revolves around talking and acting one way in a white context and another way in a brown context. Honestly, I'd like for you to know more of me, but I'm weary from continually having to explain and defend myself."

My friends grew defensive. They interjected and told me that I had it all backward. "Michelle, do you honestly believe there's more than one way to be a Christian? Everyone who follows Jesus is required to live their lives a certain way, no matter our cultural background."

At this point, we were talking past each other. I told them that when I hear "there's only one way to be Christian," I hear them saying that everyone should be like *white* Christians. But this idea didn't go over so well. It was met with a quick defense. Of course they weren't saying that. But now they're annoyed because to them it feels like I'm demonizing white people. They make sure I know they attend a diverse church, which for them is a clear sign they value more than just white culture.

But as most people of color know, there's a big difference between a true embrace of diversity and tokenism. I affirmed what I could, while also pointing out the problem: "You say diversity is important, but when does diversity go beyond valuing faces with different skin colors? When do people actually embrace different opinions, behaviors, and expressions? Things like how I read the Bible, my views on justice, the poor, and immigration, and what I think is okay and not



becoming all things

okay to say about other people. I think what you really want is for people of different ethnicities to think like you do and to prioritize the same things as you. I can be Indian as long as my life doesn't challenge yours in any way."

I wanted to say more. I could've said more. But my friends were not convinced. We had come to an impasse, and they asked if we could just agree to disagree. I nodded my head, mostly because I was tired and discouraged. What level of intimacy can our friendship have if we don't agree on something so basic—that our cultural differences inherently shape how we follow Jesus?

Redefining Terms

Part of the reason for the confusion we experience in these conversations on culture stems from our yearning for unity. Countless times I've heard people try to downplay cultural differences by saying things like, "We don't have a culture," in an effort to make their churches, homes, or communities feel *more* welcoming. But this approach inevitably fails, and worse, it isn't informed by a biblical understanding of culture. Yes, Christians all believe in "one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6). These are the truths of Scripture. But these truths aren't read, believed, and practiced in a vacuum. They are *always* culturally expressed. The message of salvation is for every people group. What God has done in Jesus crosses ethnic groups and generational



differences and is for everyone for all time, but it is *always* contextualized from one culture to the next.

This is difficult for many people to accept, largely because we fear the dangers of subjectivity. We don't want the message of salvation or our theology or what it means to belong to Christ to be just *a* truth and not *the* truth. We are nervous about going down a path that implies any particular belief is right or any action is good because it's part of a particular culture. So we reduce the cultural aspect of a belief or a message to the outward clothing that covers the unchanging essence of the gospel. It's the wrapping that delivers the message.

But what exactly is culture? Is it really just an external addition, like the clothing we wear?

The term *culture* is one of the most difficult words in the English language. We all have different definitions for this term, and scholars and thought leaders debate its meaning. So I want to be clear about what I mean when I use it. When I refer to *culture*, I'm referring to the narratives born from our individual ethnicities.² This is, to some extent, a new way of understanding culture. The term *culture* traditionally has been used to group whole communities and nations together. However, as new research suggests, that simple conceptualization is no longer applicable within our hybridized global landscape. Dr. Georgia T. Chao and Dr. Henry Moon effectively argue that culture should be used as a construct to distinguish individuals.³ Each of us carry different layers of culture within ourselves. In other words, each of us have a unique cultural narrative, which, as professor of anthropology Brian Howell explains, is a composite of the complex stories



becoming all things

we pick and choose from our communities, including our families and our friends, that helps us determine what it means to live a good life and to be a good person. These stories tell us what is normal and right, what is human and what is not. At my core, I've collected, organized, and created a unique story that guides the choices I make and the interests I have. My story is similar to those of other Indian Americans, but it is also uniquely my own. The same is true for you. If you were to write down what you think is good, beautiful, and important in this world, you'd be formulating your own cultural narrative that is both similar to and distinct from that of your cultural community.

Culture as a narrative system is the definition I recommend you begin to use in your day-to-day life. It's particularly helpful if you want to have healthy cross-cultural relationships. Seeing culture as a narrative leads us to appreciate each person for who they are instead of valuing them based on where they're from or what they do. Our approach to culture should never be merely about nationality, ethnicity, geographical location, language, or material items like food and clothing. All of these markers are fluid and can change. They are also less applicable when people of a certain cultural group live across the world and have blended multiple cultural elements into their lives. Culture is also not about the systems humans can build. Though the English word *culture* stems from the Latin word *cultura*, meaning to cultivate, develop, or grow, the assumption that humans are defined by what they create immediately turns the conversation toward biological theories of evolution and who is able to progress the most—an



approach that, throughout history, has threatened human dignity and has flattened diversity and creativity among people groups, especially subdominant cultures.

Cultural narratives, on the other hand, are stories formed and maintained by individuals about ourselves and the world around us. They are stories imbued with ideals and principles regarding family, honor, assertiveness, hard work, and communal living, and they become the glue that holds our way of life together. My cultural identity also inevitably leads to certain cultural expressions. To put it simply, the story of who I am informs the way I live my life. And we begin to understand the spiritual significance of our stories when we look at how culture develops and functions in Scripture.

Seeing Culture in Scripture

When we turn to Genesis and the first accounts of recorded Scripture, we see that you cannot separate culture from creation. In the creation account we read, “So God created mankind [*adam*] in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Here the first humans are simply called *adam*, or human-kind. God doesn’t create a specific race of people. There is no mention of Adam and Eve being Hebrews or Egyptians or Canaanites.⁴ We can’t even infer a particular skin color, such as whether they are white, Black, or Brown. This is a racially generic human who represents all of humanity—all peoples of all ethnicities and cultures—and we can infer from this that God created all peoples to reflect the image of God. We



becoming all things

are all cultural image bearers. Every culture—with its unique bodies, voices, thoughts, actions, and values—in some way reflects God himself. As difficult as our cultural distinctives can be in relating to one another, we must always remember that one of the greatest ways in which we see the rich and vibrant beauty of our God on display is in the people he created. Moreover, each of our cultural expressions should be equally cherished. There is no particular culture that is superior or inferior. No matter your ethnicity, skin color, or cultural values, you have been made as a bearer of God's image with dignity and worth equal to every other person. If you don't value your cultural identity, you are not valuing a vital aspect of the image of God within you. If you don't value the cultural identity of another person, you are not valuing the image of God within him or her.

This picture of human beings as cultural image bearers is further illustrated in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 10. Both of these texts describe the lineage of human beings in ethnic-linguistic terms. In Genesis 10 the "Table of Nations" maps out the descendants of Noah from the line of Seth, and here we see how God's image bearers spread into the world and develop distinct cultural identities. Going throughout the world and developing unique ethnic narratives is, yet again, a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human.⁵

The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is connected to the cultural commentary of Genesis 10. Too often God's dispersal of peoples at Babel is read as a curse. Some have even argued that the diversity of people groups and languages is the direct result of human sin. However, if we



properly understand the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 and 9:1 to increase and fill the earth, we see that God's plan from the beginning of human history is to promote the spread of different people groups with different languages and ethnicities. The problem in Genesis 11 is that human beings have stopped spreading and diversifying, preferring to congregate in one place and unify around something other than God. Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Dr. Bruce Waltke explains that, when read together, Genesis 10 and 11 hold a tension of two opposing aspects: "the unity of the tribes and nations as of one blood under God's blessing and their diversity into many languages under God's wrath"⁶ The dispersing of peoples at Babel in Genesis 11 is simply God's intervention to continue his plan in creation—his push to further spread, multiply, and develop diverse ethnic identities.

In Genesis 1–11 we uncover a theological statement about God's vision for humanity, his intent to create us with cultural embodiment, and his desire for us to thrive and flourish together. This does not mean that every cultural identity is free of sin. Because we live in a broken, corrupt world, we must recognize that brokenness extends to our cultures too. Our cultural stories and narratives—and the values, beliefs, and meaning we associate with them—are also imbued with human sin. That's what makes all of this very complicated. If our cultural identities are a product of our humanity, rooted in both the *imago Dei* and the fall, then part of learning to embrace our cultural identities and value them means also learning to differentiate what is good and right from what is an idol. We can be proud of who God made us to be without



becoming all things

weaponizing that pride to think less of other people and how they live. We can value our unique cultural stories and expressions without worshiping the products of our culture. In all our cultural stories we must address the problem of sin while never losing sight of the vision of cultural harmony in Genesis 1–3. Adam and Eve had cultural identities that were created to be good, holy, and in right relationship with God, and the same is true for you.

With that in mind, let's return to the argument that some Christians make based on Galatians 3:28 that our cultural identities don't matter if we are "in Christ." They point to the phrase "There is neither Jew nor Gentile" as the basis for this view. However, this logic isn't applied to the other concepts in this verse. For example, it also says that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Should this be taken to mean that everyone in Christ should now be asexual? Of course not. Our sexuality is fundamental to our creation in the image of God, and it courses through every part of our biblical worldview from Christology to marriage. Claiming that we should embrace a sexual neutrality would deny our distinctive diversity as men and women, including our biological differences, among other things. So if Paul isn't intending to negate sex in Galatians 3:28, we should not assume that he is seeking to negate diverse cultural identities either.

In fact, in this passage and throughout his epistles, the apostle Paul continually emphasizes cultural identities as part of the Christian faith and encourages Christians to respect cultural differences. God created us to have cultural identities—they are how we were made to see and engage the



world in unique ways. And contrary to a surface-level reading of this verse, Paul is stressing in Galatians 3:28 and throughout his letters that we need to lean into these identities while learning how to enjoy and connect with those who are different from us.

This is why it's important to read a verse like Galatians 3:28 in dialogue with Paul's other texts on faith and culture, such as 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. This latter passage more fully explains what Paul believes, serving as a linchpin to his entire discourse on the subject. It's one of the reasons we will be studying the passage throughout the rest of this book. Here Paul writes, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. . . . I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (vv. 20, 22). Once again, Jews and Gentiles are brought up (the Gentiles are those "not having the law"). But what does he mean? Paul is advocating for followers of Jesus to embrace cultural flexibility with the people they meet instead of trying to flatten cultural diversity. Rather than negating cultural identity, Paul is asking that we be willing to adapt how we express our cultural uniqueness as we interact with the world around us. You can't read 1 Corinthians 9 and still think Christians are supposed to be acultural. The missiological impulse in this passage argues the opposite—that you can't strip culture from people. If you could, you wouldn't need to do the hard work of becoming like them.

When we hold Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 9:19–23



becoming all things

side by side, we see that our cultural identities still matter when we become followers of Jesus. We remain a Jew or a Gentile, just as we remain a man or a woman. These passages also imply that we must go to great lengths to *become a servant to every other culture*. Though Paul is a Jew, no single cultural identity or narrative defines him. Rather, he fluidly adopts different customs to serve the people he works with. Being “in Christ” doesn’t mean that we detach ourselves from our cultural identity. It also doesn’t require a commitment to being colorblind. Instead, it means embracing cultural narratives that are different from ours. The emphasis in 1 Corinthians 9 is not on flattening our narratives into one single generic story, but on hybridity, on living as an embodied cultural being while also seeking to adapt culturally to different places with different peoples. Our gospel presentation hinges upon our ability to become all things to all people. Cultural intelligence is the measure of how well we, as Christians, are able to effectively present the gospel to others.

These ideas are brought home in the book of Revelation. There we see that cultural flourishing is paramount to our ability to be together in Christ not only in the present age as the church but also throughout eternity. The writer of Revelation, John, presents a picture of believers as multiethnic and multicultural, coming from all the nations of the earth to worship God together. This picture envisions the full conversion of the nations to obedience to Jesus, all while returning to Genesis 1 and the original intentions God had for creation. In Revelation 7:9, we see “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the



throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” Around the throne of God one will find Ugandans, Mongolians, Arapaho, Vietnamese, Russians, Argentinians, Polynesians, South Africans, Koreans, Iranians, Bulgarians, Hmong, Mexicans, and a host of other peoples from thousands of different tribes and nations.⁷ This is a picture of the ideal humanity with each person retaining their ethnicity, story, and voice as they unite in worshiping God for eternity. This vision of the future should impact how we see things today.

Revelation gives us a clear indication that the cultural identities we have now will continue in the new heavens and the new earth. And it affirms that from the very beginning of creation God intended a multicultural body of Christ. God created us, as people, to be diverse. This was his plan from the very start.⁸

Developing Cultural Identities

The rest of this book focuses on how to appreciate and adapt to other peoples and cultures. But we can’t get there unless we first learn to see and embrace our cultural identities. Each of us needs to understand *what* our culture is and *how* it shapes our life, including what we believe and how we live out our faith. We will struggle to connect with someone else’s cultural story if we don’t understand our own.

Start Seeing Culture

This is the first hurdle for all of us. I’ll put it bluntly—too often *whiteness is seen as an absence of culture*. I’ve had several



becoming all things

white friends who don't think they have a cultural identity. Just recently, an Anglo American friend called me up on the phone to talk about this. She shared that she doesn't think about her cultural identity as she goes about her day. I remember her saying, "I don't think about my culture every time I talk to my neighbors or go to the store. I can't really imagine you do either."

That's the conclusion I hear almost every single time I talk about this with a white friend.

To be clear, I don't have anything against my white friends. I really don't. But let me tell you why I see statements like this as a problem. *Not having to think about your own culture is an ignorance born of privilege.* If you're part of the dominant culture, you don't have to constantly think about your culture because you are figuratively swimming in it. It's all around you, and it just feels normal. More than that, many white Americans assume their reality is the same for everyone else. This sense that the culture of white Anglo Americans is the norm, the accepted reality for everyone, is part of the problem. It's one reason most white people do not know their own cultural narrative, and it also leads to colorblindness. Colorblindness, as author Sarah Shin explains, "assumes that we are similar enough and that we all only have good intentions, so we can avoid our differences." However, given the viral explosion of racial unrest and ethnic tension in our country over these past few years, we're seeing that "our stories are different, and those differences cannot be avoided."⁹

Many minorities living (and often isolated) within the dominant culture also try to transcend cultural differences.



I've heard minorities say things like, "I'm a Christian who happens to be Black," or "I'm a Christian first and a Latina second." Often what fuels these ideas is a belief in and pursuit of conformity. In our country, some minorities want to prove that they are no different from their white brothers and sisters. They want to conform to the culture of white evangelicalism, either because they've been in majority spaces for so long that they're no longer aware of their own cultural heritage or because they live under the ideological weight that white is right and fear not fitting in. Whatever the reason might be, this mindset fails to elevate and affirm the goodness and holy intent of people of color being exactly who God made them to be and expressing their faith accordingly.

Living in a colorblind world is not the goal. Our cultural identities make up the unique and wonderful parts of who we are. To not see color is to not truly see or understand a person. Malcolm X once said that "Black is beautiful."¹⁰ I agree! There is beauty in every skin color, story, and cultural value. Each of us must grow in our awareness of and appreciation for our own cultural identity and the cultural identities of others. Think about it, learn to see it, and then embrace it. This is who God has made you in his image, and being that person is how we become fully alive as children of God.

Think about What You Need to Learn or Unlearn

With this first point in mind—that every unique cultural identity is good and valuable—I want to clarify a second point for those who are white. Whiteness isn't a culture. It's a racial



becoming all things

construct and a belief that people with white skin have greater value than people who are Black and Brown. “Being white” should never be seen as something to attain or a goal to be valued. Instead, learning to value your cultural identity means delving into your family’s specific history. You are more than just an abstract, generic individual in the American melting pot. We all came from somewhere. Learn about your ethnic heritage and the specific people in your ancestry. Consider your roots. How has your family migrated around the world? What languages do they speak? What are some of the attitudes, mindsets, and values embedded within your ethnic heritage? What are the stories your family and community have passed on to you? What cultural knowledge do you value?

Part of your cultural identity development will involve a journey of first and second knowledge. By “first knowledge” I mean where you are right now, the things you’ve passively accepted to be true. These could be statements that downplay your cultural identity like “I don’t have a culture,” or “I don’t see color.” These are the ideas you need to unlearn and replace with a theologically richer “second knowledge” about the uniqueness of your family’s (and community’s) story and the narrative that informs your specific cultural identity. People with lighter skin tones, or as my friend Dorena Williamson writes in her book *ColorFull*, “vanilla-colored skin,” have God-given cultural identities just like everyone else,¹¹ and there is an equal capacity for beauty in these cultural identities too. Lean into your ethnicity and your story. Learn to believe that it’s only by embodying who God has made you—including your cultural identity—that you will fully and authentically be you.



For people of color reading this, I know that some of you might feel more white than Brown. Many of us have been taught that it's better, or at least easier, to embrace a white American cultural narrative. Maybe your skin tone is lighter, or your family's names were anglicized at some point in your past. You may even enjoy feeling like you can blend in with the majority culture. But what is *your* story? Who has God made *you* to be? As people of color, we need to start by admitting and acknowledging that we are not white. If we are one of the few minorities in a predominantly white space, we need to figure out how to have a healthy relationship with our own cultural identity.

This starts by learning how to unassimilate and become more comfortable talking about, centering on, and advocating on behalf of our culture. We need to go on a journey of tracing our ethnic roots and both learning and valuing the stories our community, our family, and our friends express. Who are the heroes of our community? What do people who share our ethnic and cultural heritage celebrate? What values can we take pride in? There is strength and uniqueness in your cultural identity, and God is inviting you to retell your story through this lens.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the pain in this process. Many of us are displaced. Our identities are disconnected from a specific place, and we may not be able to trace our family's physical heritage beyond the last generation or two. Some families have shed their stories and values as they sought to assimilate and fit into white American society. You may have to go digging, and the more you uncover in



becoming all things

your cultural narrative, the more wounds and scars you may uncover as well. The traumas and losses of one generation are often passed on to the next, and the pains of our ancestors, even our own parents, can become our pains too.¹² Healing and resilience will be necessary milestones on this journey.¹³ It will take time. The process will be slow. Be gentle and patient with yourself.

No matter who you are or where you are in this journey, recognize that your narrative will also capture inchoate and sometimes contradictory elements. Because we live in a globalized society and have gleaned knowledge from a wide variety of places, many of us will think and embody things that don't really fit together. There will be some chaos in your story that can shape how you act and react, speak, and think. You might even think to yourself at some point, "Who I am doesn't make any sense." You're not alone. In all of our narratives there is both beauty and uncertainty, order and chaos, and that's part of the journey too.

Accept That Your Cultural Identity Shapes Your Faith

Finally, we need to consider how our cultural narratives shape our faith. I can tell you right now—you and I probably don't share the same views on what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We likely differ on how to do church and what it means to fellowship as the body of Christ. When you and I pray, we likely emphasize different characteristics of God and interpret the experience of suffering differently. We probably have different opinions on evangelism, missions, justice, what it



means to be a good neighbor, and how to read and interpret the Bible. The variance in our points of view is not just the product of different theological training and personalities. It is evidence of different cultural narratives at work and how our cultural identity shapes our faith.

So let me ask you this: What does it mean for you to be a Christian? What have you been taught about the way you're supposed to think and live your life as a follower of Jesus? What do you consider appropriate and inappropriate? And what would you say are the most important aspects of your faith? Sit down and write out the answers. As you do, consider how your faith is informed by and expressed through your own cultural identity.

We will each express our faith differently *because of* our cultural narratives. These differences are not bad. As director of the Global Diaspora Institute at Wheaton College Sam George argues, we must embrace a concept of “Christianities”¹⁴ so that we can acknowledge the real and good diversity of the Christian faith. The image of believers fellowshiping together in Christ throughout all eternity is a mosaic of cultural diversity, values, and stories. There's nothing uniform about it. It's time for each of us to see the many colors within the body of Christ and to celebrate the distinct role that each of us plays in crafting this masterpiece.