

CHRISTIAN UNITY

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I. The Importance of Christian Unity

Interpersonalism highlights the importance of Christian unity because (a) unifying mankind is the very purpose of the church. In Christ, God is creating “a new united mankind” (Ephesians 2:14-16). What has come together in him must exemplify the purpose of him. The importance of unity also lies in its (b) apologetic value. Division in Christ belies the call to unity in Christ. The credibility of the Christian calling and claim is weakened or destroyed otherwise (John 17: 21, 23; Luke 11:18). The richness of the (c) Christian experience lies specifically in the “peace” that comes from Christians living together in harmony (1 Corinthians 7:15; cp. Romans 14:19).

II. The Nature of Christian Unity

Interpersonalism characterizes the nature of Christian unity by giving it an interpersonal center. Lostness means alienation; so salvation means reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). The center consists of a person rather than a set of doctrines. Jesus Christ abolished in his flesh the law of commandments contained in ordinances, and created in himself a new united mankind (Ephesians 2:14-15). He did so to give Jews and Gentiles access to the Father in one “spirit” (an interpersonal term) through himself. The unity of the church theologically results from individual unity with the Son. We have unity by identification, an interpersonal process. The unity of the church behaviorally consists of the attitude and conduct that come from love.

Because of the interpersonal nature of unity, there can be unity in diversity. Ontological and conceptual diversity can exist as long as those natural and ideological differences do not contradict social relations or conflict with the purposes of him who calls us into oneness with his purposes. Interpersonalism impacts unity so much because it transcends knowledge. Christ dwells in our hearts by faith (an interpersonal attitude) so we may be grounded in the love that surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:17-19; cp. Philippians 4:7). Love does not set knowledge aside, but love does make complete knowledge and total accuracy unnecessary for relationship.

Christian interpersonalism allows for unity in diversity within its concept of the highest good (*summum bonum*) because the purpose of Christian unity is not to have (a) monolithic oneness as in the Eastern concept of the Ultimate One (in the ontological category). The Christian *summum bonum* is not (b) the uniform sameness of individuals, which appears to be the idea behind the extreme forms of the women’s liberation movement. Instead, the highest good, the ultimate truth, the true reality is (c) harmonious relationship: “How good and how pleasant it

is for brothers to live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1). The other two approaches try to place the *summum bonum* in ontic being or individual ontic being rather than in relationships.

Except in its broadest contours, Christian unity does not consist of (d) complete agreement among those related to the same Person. To know and relate to someone harmoniously does not require exhaustive or exact knowledge about that person or that person’s purposes. Matters that lie beyond what affects relationship and common purposes can be incompletely and even erroneously understood. A wife may suppose that her husband weighs fifteen pounds more than he does, but that does not dissolve their marriage. Similarly, we can err about some doctrines without undoing salvation, which is relationship with God. This ignorance can come from not having received revelation or from misunderstanding revelation received—especially revelation that does not have behavioral correlates.

“Sincerity” means more than the absence of hypocrisy. The critical element is attitude—openness to correction, humility regarding our own ability and correctness, our “teachableness.” Much of the doctrinal division in Christendom comes from misinterpreting the scripture given to us about the truth. The key here is attitude, because in interpersonal matters it is the heart that counts when all else fails. Acts 17:30 shows that God is willing to overlook legitimate ignorance (and presumably some mis-action based on sincere misunderstanding). Honest misinterpretation is a form of legitimate ignorance. Sincere ignorance shows itself in willingness to change when enlightenment comes and by willingness to listen so enlightenment can come. Included is the willingness to listen to be enlightened as well as the willingness to speak to enlighten other people. God overlooks the head in looking on the heart (Acts 17:30 + 1 Samuel 16:7; Luke 16:15). An interpersonal system allows some conceptual and behavioral “slippage,” because the one person can repent and the other can forgive.

It is fortunate that Christian unity does not require complete agreement, because the narrower the platform the fewer that can stand on it. If unity consists in personal relationship, the base for it is broader because people do not have to be right about as many things. The interpersonal character of Christian unity legitimizes not thinking about it in all-or-nothing terms, but following a central-less central format. The issue changes to one of degrees—from whether something is revealed or not, opinion or not, to whether it is central, less central, or peripheral. Personal matters pre-empt conceptual ones, even as love builds up where knowledge puffs up or as service unites and doctrine divides. Stressing love tends toward unity; stressing doctrine tends toward division. The flexibility of persons is greater than that of ideas (or nature, or law). Consequently, associations built on caring are more stable than those based on being “right.”

Most arguments against “sincerity will save you” come from inappropriate comparisons. Sincerity might injure somebody if the mechanic does not fix the car right. But social

relationships do not work the same way brakes do. Pleading ignorance to a police officer cannot be honored because people will lie about how whether they knew the speed limit, and the officer cannot know it is a lie. Sincerity does not make us right, but it makes us forgivable. Sincerity does not make us right, but it lets us become right. It does not make us right, but it allows other people to overlook our mistakes without compromising their convictions or break friendship with us (“lostness”). Sincerity does not change the truth, but it does change us and the other people we try to relate to. Sincerity does not make us right, but it can save us.

Salvation and the Christian message about it have to do with fellowship with God (see “Revelation” in IP). That is the reason revelation can be progressive. What was not as critically necessary before could come later, because God can deal in other ways with those not fully informed (see “Salvation” in IP).

This claim turns on the idea that friendship transcends propositional knowledge through revelation (conscience, heart, attitude), and that same idea applies to Christian unity. God stands above his law; otherwise, he could not judge those outside it (1 Corinthians 5:13).

The interpersonal character of Christian truth implies that Christian unity centers on interpersonal items. The nature of unity implies then that (1) doctrines without practical correlates are not as central as those involving moral behavior. Some examples might include traducian vs. creationist origin of the soul, bipartite vs. tripartite view of mankind, distinctions between pre-, mid-, and post-tribulation rapture; and distinctions between pre-, post-, and a-millennial eschatological systems. We prepare the same way for all the eschatological formats.

The interpersonal character of Christian unity implies that (2) formal matters are not so central as interpersonal ones.

“I desire mercy more than sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7).

“The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Jesus continually healed on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-18; cp. Matthew 12:1-14; Luke 14:1-6; John 9:1-14-41).

“Today you will be with me in paradise,” said to a criminal who could not offer any sacrifice for his cleansing under the Law (Luke 23:39-43). In fact, it is doubtful that the Law provided any sacrifice for the forgiveness of murder since it was a capital crime under Mosaism.

The treatment of the unevangelized in Romans 2.

Abraham related to God by faith and promise before circumcision and the Law of Moses ever existed (Romans 4:9-12).

2 Chronicles 30:17-20 illustrates setting aside the regulations for Passover observance under what were deemed appropriate circumstances (2 Chronicles 30:13-22).

David and his soldiers ate the showbread reserved by law for only priests to eat (1 Samuel 21:1-6; Mark 2:23-28).

As regards relationship to God, Paul not only entertained the possibility that God could be consistent while saving someone who had not performed the rite of circumcision; he directly affirms that God would overlook it: *“If the uncircumcised keep the ordinance of the Law, won’t their uncircumcision be reckoned for circumcision?”* (Romans 2:26).

There is a tendency in Christian unity to (a) confuse truthfulness with the relative importance of each truth. There is not just opinion (from insufficient evidence) and faith (from sufficient evidence); there is also fact—things true that are less central like formal matters and matters without behavioral correlates. When Christ’s followers are not in denial of the facts or they are not sure how to understand, behavioral Christian unity need not be affected.

The legal mentality does not distinguish between objective truth and subjective awareness of truth. People’s attitude and intent to know receive no practical attention; so they are treated the same way as someone who does not care. Such people are treated like a statement; the only question is whether they are right. So the subjective-objective variable in personhood is not accounted to have any value even though that is the only variable that causes the difference. There needs to be a distinction made between a wrongdoer and an evildoer. The difference lies in intentionality. The fragmentation of the body of Christ does not stem from objective truths, but from subjective failure to properly appropriate them. It is foreign to the nature of the situation not to allow the subjective element in personhood to impact the solution to Christian unity insofar as it stems from honest failure.

There is also a tendency to (b) confuse the place with the nature of an item of truth. In regard to Christian baptism, many have felt compelled to make believers’ immersion a test of fellowship because baptism relates to initial salvation (the place of baptism). It would be more appropriate not to make it a test of fellowship, because it is a formal act (the nature of it).

Someone might object that baptism is not a test of fellowship, but a test of church membership. But Christian fellowship exists only between Christians. Whether inside or outside the confines of local church membership is irrelevant. Members of one local church have fellowship with those of another local church. It is obvious that anyone who is a member of the universal church has a right to become a member of any local expression of it. Fellowship with Christian people is the same as considering them Christians. Considering people as Christians is the same thing as considering them saved. Considering them as Christians is the same thing as considering them qualified for local church membership. Refusing them membership amounts to considering them unsaved. Refusing them membership because of not agreeing that they have been baptized amounts to considering a formal act determinative for presence in an interpersonal system. Even more basic is the idea of local church membership itself; that practice is what sets up the conflict between fellowship and membership in a practical sense. There does not seem to

be any New Testament basis for local church membership. If we are going to do it, then we ought to do it in a way that does not contradict what is more basic.

Below is a compilation of issues Paul found worth disfellowshipping for. The reason for bringing them up in connection with Christian unity is that fellowship is coterminous with Christian brotherhood, salvation, and the absence of church discipline. With its view to reinstatement, church discipline involves practical correction, which might make some difference in our application of observations. Church disfellowshipping might not be tantamount to loss of salvation; yet John 20:21-23 has been read in such a way as to make them coextensive.

- (1) incest (1 Corinthians 5)
- (2) schismatics (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10)
- (3) Judaizers (Galatians 1:8-9), a matter, however, coupled with attitude and trying to take charge (leadership vs. fellowship)
- (4) disorderliness (2 Thessalonians 3:6)
- (5) insubordination to apostolic epistles (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)
- (6) someone not teaching love (2 John 10)
- (7) those unresponsive to the preliminary steps of church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17)
- (8) those who deny the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-34; 2 Timothy 2:18)

The observation appears to be that fellowship and salvation were tied to morality and misrepresentations of Christ himself most often. Even the concern about resurrection is linked to moral behavior in 1 Corinthians 15:29-34.

III. The Method of Unification

The interpersonal character of Christian truth implies that the method of Christian unity centers on interpersonal items and is achieved through interpersonal means. The nature of unity establishes the method for achieving it.

Denominationalism tends to follow the creases in society. Note in this connection Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. Since Christianity intends to unite mankind, it attempts to achieve a classless society. Interpersonalism wages war against binary distinctions like bond-free, married-unmarried, male-female, circumcision-uncircumcision, rich-poor, Jew-Gentile, literate-illiterate, black-white as regards salvation and fellowship. To whatever extent Niebuhr's observations are true, Christianity's interpersonal character works against division and denominationalism; hence, Robert Lee's *The Social Sources of Church Unity*.

Past approaches to Christian unity include (a) organizational oneness. Roman Catholicism represents this classification. Another method centers on (b) common experience.

An example would be the use of tongue speaking as a criterion for brotherhood. (c) Doctrinal agreement furnishes a third approach. Erasmus based Christian unity on a central body of doctrine.

The marks of division within the church are five in number: (1) peculiar doctrines (cp. 1 Corinthians 1:10; 15:12); (2) exclusivistic attitude (1 Corinthians 4:1); (3) distinguishing names (1 Corinthians 1:12 vs. 3:23); (4) restrictive fellowship; (5) separate organizations. Doctrinal peculiarities ostensibly lead to the last three; but as a practical matter, exclusivistic attitude reinforcing that doctrinal peculiarity is most responsible for developing the distinguishing names, restrictive fellowship, and separate organizations. (a) *Exclusivistic attitude develops the other three* to keep one group distinct from another. Not only is this the case, but (b) *exclusivistic attitude closes the mind to the possibility of correction* on doctrinal matters, and the other three follow as a matter of course. In addition to whatever doctrinal dissimilarity exists, there is a significant amount of psychological distance felt toward other Christian people and groups, and that reinforces the tendency to stay separate.

There is yet another dynamic that can operate here. The (c) *exclusivistic attitude can itself originate peculiar doctrines*. It shows itself in the desire to be different, to say something new. The unconscious concern to distinguish oneself from other people and their ideas sets a person up to read scripture with overkill in a direction opposite to an opponent's belief. Reading "the perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as the completed New Testament canon may be prompted by the impulse to avoid pentecostalism, even though canonicity seems far removed from Paul's flow of thought. Reading "husband of one wife" in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 as requiring married elders is another example Alexander Campbell hit on in his debate with Purcell to make Roman Catholicism look all the more unscriptural. Sometimes the attitude creates a separate group that spawns new doctrines. At other times the attitude creates peculiar doctrines that spawn separate groups.

Finally, legalistic people tend to create a legalistic god in their own image. They assume that God's will expressed in the Bible matches their own mentality in issuing commands and establishing conditions. Consequently, they automatically read the statements about such matters as having the same rigidity as they would mean them if they themselves were issuing them. Hermeneutically they tend to take statements restrictively instead of non-restrictively.

Creating and perpetuating division in the ways cited here ultimately stem from the failure to operate interpersonally. As a result, bringing about unification appeals largely to successful interpersonal operation.

Much of Christian unity will probably come at the grassroots level—as it does with much renewal efforts. Grassroots operation capitalizes more on interpersonal process because that is what individual Christians have to capitalize on. A people's movement has no political clout,

military force, authoritative intimidation, or economic duress at its disposal. That ends up being an advantage because it limits people to the thing that matters most.

The only way through some problems is by attitude. Attitude refers to personal and interpersonal matters. An interpersonal method (attitude) fits with, yea grows out of, an interpersonal system like Christianity. Any program for Christian unification must draw heavily on proper attitude. Proper attitude allows people time to change by degrees into more correct understandings of doctrine. Proper attitude does not replace correct doctrine, but it allows and encourages self-correction. Proper attitude removes the tendency to create new, reinforcing roadblocks to unity.

A person can stand for the truth with a proper attitude of personal respect. When Jesus talked to the woman of Samaria at the well of Sychar, he went ahead and said that salvation was of the Jews, but he did it in a way that did not drive her away.

Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and striving for truth and grace (John 1:17) create a tension held together by interpersonal factors. In Christian unity we are not always sure how to relate to people (love) without compromising truth. Content (correctness) and incorrectness (which is what grace is for) can co-exist because repentance plus forgiveness can exist in persons to make up for both sins of ignorance and deliberate sins. Attitude and intention can be right while productive results and action are wrong, and persons can understand, and adjust to, that. Dealing with division attitudinally relates to dealing with problems in the church pastorally. Ministers may not be able to convince people with a different viewpoint that they need to change (exegetically), but they may be able to convince them to hold their viewpoints in a way that minimizes difficulties (personally). This procedure appeals to interpersonal considerations. Respectful approach may disarm sufficiently that later the issue can be solved exegetically.

Working for unity through interpersonal processes in effect appeals to Kenneth Burke's dictum, "Identification is compensatory to division" (*A Rhetoric of Motives*, 1969, p. 22). Identification represents a mechanism that can provide the strategy for unifying divided people. We overcome the division by providing a focal point for diverging tendencies. In Christian unity, people unite by identifying with Jesus Christ as savior and Lord.

Church unity reflects the interpersonal character of the kingdom, because Christians are to involve themselves in purposeful unity. "Purposeful" retains the eschatological idea, and the unity keeps the existential element. Purposeful unity captures longitude and latitude in one expression.

In summation, interpersonalism (1) sets the atmosphere for discussing doctrinal considerations, (2) establishes a principle for sorting through issues as to how relatively important they are, and (3) qualifies the character of doctrinal and formal aspects of Christianity.

- Interpersonalism (a) prioritizes items of Christian unity,
- (b) puts formal and non-behavioral matters in proper perspective by interpersonalizing them,
 - (c) creates the proper atmosphere for discussing doctrines related to non-behavioral matters,
 - (d) establishes an appropriate frame of mind for broadening the common ground for Christian unity,
 - (e) places the center of the process for Christian unification at the grass-roots level between individual Christians instead of attempting to do it through political fiat or organizational unification.

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