

Central to Less Central: An Interpersonal Format for Prioritizing Issues in Christian Unity

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This presentation proposes a way to help fulfill two responsibilities that we tend to put in tension with one another: our responsibility for representing Christian truth and our responsibility for facilitating Christian unity. The proposal stems from believing that *interpersonalism prioritizes what naturally occupies central place in Christianity*. We can draw on that observation to help us in the quest for unity in Christ.

In scripture, all things equally true are not equally central. Even during the Old Covenant, the worth of persons took precedence over the forms of religion. Interpersonal behaviors like justice, mercy, and faith were weightier matters than strict tithing requirements (Matthew 23:23-24). Fulfilling the personal needs of David's men could take precedence over tabernacle regulations (Matthew 12:1-8). Mercy had priority over animal sacrifice (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; Hosea 6:6). The desire to worship could preempt the ceremonial purifications required for Passover observance (2 Chronicles 30:13-22).

Jesus prioritized welfare over Sabbath regulations (Mark 2:27). Circumcision stood second to obeying God's ordinances from the heart (1 Corinthians 7:19; Romans 2:26-27). Worship in spirit and truth meant more than the *place of worship* did even though salvation was through the Jews (John 4:22-24). God's central concern lay in rational activity like doing justly, loving kindness, walking humbly, and obeying and loving God (Micah 6:8; Deuteronomy 10:12-13). Love fulfilled the Law (Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; Matthew 7:12).

If interpersonal concerns occupied a more central place under the Old Covenant, where formal and ceremonial laws abounded, how much more do they predominate under the New Covenant, where formal elements are minimal. God de-emphasized form and ceremony by removing dietary laws (1 Corinthians 8:8), national identity (Galatians 3:28), the festival cycle (Colossians 2:16-17), and the like. The practical point evident in this Old Testament list of priorities is that secondary truths can vary while primary ones do not; otherwise, Old Covenant elements could not be superseded by the New Covenants ones. That is one reason for considering them primary or secondary. Without dismissing formal matters altogether, we can legitimately pursue Christian unity by centralizing the interpersonal category.

Several sets of contrasting terms have been popular in the restoration movement: faith and opinion, essential and non-essential, doctrine and method, where the Bible speaks and is silent. These do not represent parallel sets; otherwise, wherever the Bible speaks, it would define an essential matter of faith and fellowship, and method would automatically fall back to non-essential status.

Opinion normally means something that lacks sufficient evidence to lead to a necessary conclusion; yet many points that are opinion in that sense surely do not destroy fellowship. Christian unity does not depend on knowing and understanding "facts" like Paul's unrecorded visit

to Corinth between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians (2 Corinthians 13:1). The magi did not come to the stable as Christmas cards often picture them (Matthew 2:11). Perhaps adding *fact* to *faith* and *opinion* would help because people often do not agree what evidence is sufficient and what constitutes a “necessary inference.” Facts would provide a category for matters clear to most people but admitted by all not to be “essential” for faith and practice.

The crucial issue remains, however, as to how we can distinguish among apparently true matters (“facts” and “essentials”) to determine which are essentials. We do well then to adopt yet another concept at this point: a central-to-less-central format rather than a strict categorical, either-or distinction. That arrangement not only retains the previous point that all true things are not equally important; it also keeps all true things in the picture: secondary and tertiary matters do not simply drop out. Essential vs. non-essential can imply that for all practical purposes “non-essential” truths may be set aside permanently, which constitutes one weakness in making interdenominationalism the highest goal for Christian unity.

Finally, for present considerations we can adopt two principles among others for arranging specifics along a continuum from central to less central. Both principles derive from interpersonalism as the central reality in Christianity.

Formal matters less important—The first principle states that (1) *formal matters are less central than interpersonal ones*. Honest misunderstanding on formal matters does not in theory destroy the basic concerns God had in instituting them, because the meaning of forms takes precedence over the forms themselves. Such meanings can in principle be embodied in alternate forms or meant in the hearts and deeds of persons without any form at all. Forms are made for meanings, not meanings for forms.

God commands religious forms for *our benefit, not his*. They help us focalize and make tangible what in many ways are intangible elements of process. God commands religious forms to *help us, not to effect results*. He gives any results involved. Our formal obediences serve as positive conditions, not inherent causes.

The point here is not that we can eliminate formal matters or replace a divine form with one of our own. Circumcision of the heart, for example, is what made a true Israelite (Romans 2:29); yet Yahveh sought to kill Moses because he had not circumcised his son (Exodus 4:24-26; Genesis 17:14). Differences among evangelicals on formal matters like baptism, worship, Communion, and church structure occur because of their very attempt to obey God, not because of neglect or disinterest; hence, the character of such misactions is not *disobedience*, but *misobedience*.

Honest misunderstanding about *formal matters* should not be categorized with *intentional disobedience* in *interpersonal matters*. In respect to honest misunderstanding, we take it that God looks on the heart and knows people’s intentions. Since we, being evil, honor sincerity in our own children, we probably refrain from punishing them when through honest misunderstanding they do not do what we *mean*. Their disappointment at not pleasing us is “punishment” enough. God, being more gracious and merciful, evidently does as much or more.

In the interests of truth, we have sometimes said that sincerity does not save. Sincerity does not make us *right*, but hopefully it does make us *forgivable*. Misaction based on honest misunderstanding is still misaction, but something can be *erroneous* without being *reckoned* against us. Errors are not reckoned till knowledge comes (Romans 7:9-10; cp. 3:25; 4:15; 5:13; Acts 17:30-31), at which time the repentance-forgiveness process comes into play (Acts 9:9; 1 Timothy 1:13). Meantime, sincerity protects from wrath. But sincerity, to be considered sincerity, must be seeking self-correction by studying the Word, listening to other sincere people, and by acting on our new understandings—items that apply to all of us. In Christian unity, highlighting (1) *honest* misunderstanding of (2) *formal* commandments seems doubly appropriate when we view such commandments as less central than interpersonal ones.

Keeping interpersonalism central not only *decentralizes* formal matters, it *interpersonalizes* them. Being put second to interpersonal things means that formal matters are contextualized by that interpersonal framework. The interpersonal context changes them from legal acts that effect results and transforms them into personal acts that meet conditions for gifts from God. However, if formal commands are made equal and parallel to interpersonal behavior, because of their concreteness they tend to “take over” psychologically and to transform Christianity from an interpersonal system into a legal one. Legalism not only ruins Christianity and frustrates its reconciling purpose among persons; it creates a mindset that fosters division and works against Christian unity.

Behavioral correlates significant—The second principle states that (2) *doctrines without behavioral correlates are less central than those correlated with interpersonal activity*. Morality deals with behavior between persons vertically and horizontally. Doctrines that do not affect relationships are regarded as secondary in a program for reconciling persons estranged by sinful behavior. Personal behavior toward God and other people is not particularly affected by a person’s view on the precise nature of the Father-Son-Spirit relationship, the relationship of the divine and human in Christ, the relationship of body-soul-spirit in humans, the view of predestination as of the “plan” or of the “man”; the view of the millennium and other eschatological matters like the rapture, the tribulation, the future role of Israel, the nature of the intermediate states and of hell, the view of mankind as inherently *vs.* conditionally immortal, the view of scripture as infallible *vs.* inerrant, several Pentecostal-charismatic issues, the specific view of origins.

Many of these doctrines are complicated, some seem not to receive precise treatment in scripture, and most do not need to impact relational behavior even indirectly. We may prefer not to give *leadership* positions to people with extreme views on some of these subjects, but we do not put them out of the *fellowship* or start a new denomination because of them. With notable exceptions, even the evangelical wing of the restoration movement has exercised more tolerance on several of these “theological” issues than many other groups have.

We do not mean to suggest here that only commandments *about* relational behavior have relevance to unity; we mean to include doctrines that *impact* relational behavior. An illustration may help convey our point. When early Christianity encountered the Gentile world, it conflicted with common philosophical assumptions in pagan thought. Especially troublesome was the notion

that spirit is good and matter is evil. Gentiles that came in contact with the Christian community tried to introduce that belief into the churches—with disastrous results.

If matter is evil, the incarnation would not have occurred because good spirit would not have deliberately mixed itself with evil flesh. Likewise, Christ's resurrection would not have occurred, and our resurrection would not be desirable since our goal would be to *escape* our situation of being “mixed with” material flesh. “Salvation” did not mean restoring personal relationship but escaping material existence. Salvation did not come from moral change but from secret knowledge. One approach to the body was to satiate it because matter and spirit could not affect or change each other; so the acts of the material body could not taint the spirit, and immorality could run rampant. Another approach was to deprecate the flesh, which led to asceticism and to denying the natural satisfaction of bodily drives as much as possible.

The gospels and the epistles are replete with teachings obviously designed to counter this cluster of heresies. In fact, most denunciations of false teachers in the New Testament appear to address either the Judaizing teachers, who wanted to make Gentile converts into national Jews, or this spirit-matter dualism and its implications. The doctrine of spirit-matter dualism did have very serious behavioral correlates even though it did not address moral matters directly.

Not all doctrinal matters have interpersonal implications, however, nor do they strike at other obvious doctrinal points like the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ. The differences we face among evangelicals are of a different kind and order of magnitude, and they stem from an different motivation. The severe strictures that the apostles leveled at their opponents do not belong to the kind of situation evangelicals deal with in seeking Christian unity today.

Orrin Root, editor of *The Christian Standard*, spoke at one of my college baccalaureate services in the late 1960s. The gist of his message was this: “*know who your friends are, know who your enemies are, and know how to tell the difference.*” That is good advice for Christian unity too. Evangelicals devoted to Christ and committed to scripture do not qualify as “*enemies of the cross of Christ*” except perhaps because of attitude, which is a fault not restricted to them.

Their errors and ours come from *misinterpreting* apostolic writings, not from *denying* them, *neglecting* them, or *competing* with their authority. That circumstance justifies hope for unity in the restoration movement and in the larger believing community, because we have a high proportion of common ground on central truth, and because so many of the differences exist in less central areas like formal commandments and doctrines without behavioral correlates.

Among other things, persons are characterized by a difference between intent and truth, that is, by the subjective-objective variable. Therefore, interpersonal relationships take that variable into account to avoid operating contrary to the nature of the situation. Since Christianity centers on interpersonal concerns, Christians must apply that variable deliberately in gaining and retaining their oneness in Christ. In seeking unity, Christians must work from the center out.