

CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

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This article encourages using interpersonal principles in the quest for Christian unity.¹ We are reflecting on the role of attitude in creating an atmosphere for conflict resolution in the body of Christ today.

The first observation is simply that (a) *proper attitude increases other people's willingness to listen to our viewpoint*. The Golden Rule works because we tend to respond *in kind*. The pattern operates negatively and positively: disrespect usually evokes disrespect, and respect evokes respect.

We also tend to respond *in greater kind*. The competitive attitude behind hateful words and acts typically produces even greater hostility in the responding person, and the interaction enters a downward spiral of deterioration. Not only does the interaction deteriorate or grow from *neutral*; proper attitude can *reverse* a downward spiral.

The interpersonal dynamic in the Golden Rule provides the key for unlocking resources to reverse division and increase unity. The spiritual fruit Christ intends to produce in us serves to give us a real oneness in him at the same time. Experience teaches us that people *do not* listen to smart people with bad attitudes. The Golden Rule implies that we *will not* change in response to knowledgeable people that do not care about us. The very purpose of Christ warns that we *should not* follow leaders whose personalities lack the weightier matters of the faith.

We should not expect other evangelicals to listen to our viewpoints about certain formal matters associated with the gospel if we are not characterized by the weightier matters of the gospel itself. A high percentage of differences among believers concerned about restoration and evangelicalism as a whole as well as with within the segments of the restoration movement itself has in fact been over formal, ceremonial, “civil” matters. To get a feel for the prominence of formal differences among Christians generally and among members of the restoration communities, we have taken the space to present a representative list.

Differences—In regard to *baptism*, believers disagree on whether its action must be immersion, whether its administrator must be ordained, whether its candidate must be an adult, whether the action is single or triune, whether to use the trinitarian or “Jesus-only” formula, where it lies in the cluster of responses during initial salvation. Is baptism by members of other fellowships valid?

In regard to the *Lord's Supper*, do the emblems need to be unfermented? Must we use one loaf and one cup? Does an ordained administrator need to preside at the table? Is the Supper weekly or less frequent? May we observe it only on Sunday? May unimmersed believers participate? Do we conceive of Communion as worship so as to make children’s participation appropriate? Is Communion a function of the membership of the local fellowship alone? Is feetwashing part of fourfold Communion?

In regard to *worship*, do believers meet on Saturday or Sunday? May mechanical instruments accompany gathered worship? May we use them in worship at home? Are choirs and special music permissible? May we use “songs of human composure”? What kinds of music are acceptable? Must women wear a head covering during gathered worship? Is there a biblical order of worship? Are church-owned buildings for worship proper?

In regard to the *church*, does the New Testament intend to specify a structure for it? Does it have a divine name? Is local autonomy the norm? Must there be a plurality of elders in the local church? Is their term of office for life? Do elders and deacons have to be married with a plurality of grown children who believe? May congregations have paid ministers? Is there an office of deaconess? Is Sunday school scriptural? What is the function of ordination? May parachurch agencies exist? Can congregations come together to form such agencies, or must they be incorporated under a board of individuals as trustees, or must they be incorporated under the eldership of a local church? Can one church assist another in a common task?

Like other movements, the restoration movement has not avoided the disorienting stress on formal matters. In fact, the entire movement historically defined has probably become more absorbed in them than many other evangelical groups have, particularly as time has gone on. Succeeding generations have tended to suppose in these matters that being more exact is being more correct.

This rather formidable list includes items of varying importance, but none of them are the essence of Christian concern. Giving that verdict does not imply that we can dismiss any of them if the New Testament scriptures address them. Whatever God’s Word teaches we cannot intentionally set aside, neglect, or make negotiable. But to gain a hearing on such lesser matters, we have to demonstrate maturity in practicing the weightier ones. The biblical principle of education requires that only the personally mature can teach the way of the Lord more perfectly. Acknowledging that principle by act and attitude increases the likelihood of being heard on formal as well as doctrinal and interpersonal matters.

Changes—On the other side of the relationship, (b) *proper attitude puts us in a frame of mind to accept correction*. A unity movement that has contributed twenty to thirty new divisions evidently needs something more in understanding, personnel, or practice. Many of us can come to see ourselves more objectively and realize how out of place it would be for divisive spirits to call for unity among Christians more mature than themselves. Perhaps some of us need to be corrected about the relative importance we attach to our distinctives by considering how things equally true can be unequally important.

We may need to learn more accurately what other Christians believe, and especially why they believe that way. Most doctrinal issues are more complex than people typically imagine. The case even for something like infant baptism can be put more cogently than adult baptizers normally represent. Perseverance of the saints is meant as a more dynamic concept than it is usually described by those who believe apostasy can happen.² Superficial objections to such viewpoints may work because we frequently deal with laymen or with misters who do not do the best job of defending their own positions; so we can develop a false sense of competence at refuting them.

Furthermore, we may need to correct our thinking about why people do not readily change to our perspective on issues. The restoration movement originated under significant influence from Enlightenment philosophy. One of its idealist premises still commonly misapplied to that movement—and elsewhere—states that, presented with the same evidence, reasonable people of goodwill will come to the same conclusion. Other people then appear to be unreasonable or unwilling when they continue to disagree after hearing the evidence; apparently they are refusing to submit to the authority of scripture, do not believe the Bible, do not care what it says, or are too weak-willed to break with their present religious associations.

Other explanations are probably more accurate in most cases. They may not feel competent to reason through seemingly complex issues, so they “trust” their way through them by depending on people they most respect. Their not being able to answer an argument does not mean for them that it cannot be answered, and wise people do not leave what they have until they are confident they have a better option to go to even if their present view has difficulties.

More importantly, we may not see the fallacy of our own reasoning or conceivably the questionableness of our own goodwill. Our scholarship does not always have the quality we think it does, and the scholars we have trusted may be less competent than we realize. Like most people, our impulse is to feel that error lies elsewhere and that others should do the changing, but being *certain* and being *right* are not the same thing. Other people do not want to change any more than we do, and they feel as certain about their beliefs as we feel. Obviously, mutually exclusive views cannot both be correct, but we have no more reason up front to think we are right than they have. A proper attitude on everyone’s part provides the only way to break through these doctrinal impasses in current Christendom, because attitude allows “us” and “them” to be corrected through mutual communication and edification.

¹Our comments here continue the ideas begun in “Interpersonal Implications for Oneness in Christ” in this website.

²To help clarify my understanding of perseverance and eternal security, see the last three chapters of *What the Bible Says About Salvation* (College Press, 1982). Likewise, on the connection between believer’s baptism and remission of sins and related issues, see the same volume, pp. 225-409.