

SOME INTERPERSONAL IMPLICATIONS

FOR ONENESS IN CHRIST

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Efforts at Christian unity have variously stressed one or more bases: organizational union, common experience, or essential doctrine. Roman Catholicism exemplifies the concern for unity through the church as an institution, which is particularly fitting because Catholic theology conceives of grace as flowing through the church by way of duly ordained clergy: “where the bishop is, there is the church.” Because of the emphasis on tongue speaking, pentecostalism can illustrate the common-experience approach. Erasmus among others advocated a minimum set of essential doctrines as foundational for Christian unity.

To some degree all these categories in theory have legitimate places in ideal oneness through Christ. In practice, however, whatever value they have depends on the interpersonal factors that implement them. God purposes in Christ to create “*a new united mankind*” (Ephesians 2:15). Personal characteristics and interpersonal processes figure prominently in accomplishing an interpersonal purpose. Attitude, motives, and spiritual fruit constitute the means of achieving human oneness through Christ.

(a) Proper attitude helps overcome division because division is significantly an interpersonal problem. Division among evangelicals represents a complex issue, not a simple one. The denominated situation has five marks: (1) peculiar doctrines, (2) exclusivistic attitude, (3) restricted fellowship, (4) distinguishing names, and (5) separate organizations. Individually or in combination, these marks create a circumstance less than the ideal Christ wants for his church. Overcoming division needs to address each part of this complex problem because division represents more than, say, a doctrinal problem.

In this cluster, exclusivistic attitude occupies a prominent position. Immaturity in persons (2) takes distinctive doctrines (1) and produces the other three marks (3-4-5): doctrine leads to division by way of attitude. On some occasions, division may need to occur “*to make clear who are approved*” (1 Corinthians 11:19). These instances relate to church discipline for behavioral reasons rather than to peculiar doctrines that result from honest misinterpretation. Doctrinal difference is the most nearly legitimate item among the five. Since no earthly magisterium exists to safeguard against misunderstanding, the right and responsibility to read scripture for oneself produces different viewpoints from time to time. Proper attitude has to replace any role an official magisterium would have. Mutual respect can prevail to keep peculiar doctrines from escalating into crystallized division.

Division leads to peculiar doctrine by way of attitude. Among the five marks of denominationalism, another dynamic operates: over time crystallized division tends to generate new doctrine. There comes into play an unconscious tendency to create additional reasons for maintaining separateness to ensure identity. Among other things, those differences come in the

form of peculiar doctrines. Fellowships that are doctrinally closest can have the most strained relationships because their leaders work harder to make the finer distinctions clear and convincing to their constituencies. Mutual caring can help keep new doctrinal peculiarities from developing as well as any further divisions they might produce.

The importance of interpersonal factors appears in the observation that division can exist without doctrinal differences. If God's people can fragment without having the most nearly legitimate basis for it, we can understand how powerful a tool attitude can be for good or ill in this matter.

Proper attitude corrects as well as prevents divisions. The process that keeps new divisions from arising also overcomes divisions that already exist. Christians today have inherited a situation we did not create. We bear responsibility for making sure no new ones develop. But more than that, we bear responsibility for correcting what we can, because the same interpersonal processes that prevent also correct. As immaturity (2) leads from doctrine (1) to division (3-4-5) so also maturity leads from division to agreement and unity.

(b) A proper attitude prompts us to put other people and their beliefs in the best light. Love for people does not foster love for caricature. When we care about people, we do not misrepresent them in order to gain undue advantage. Any of us who have experienced being misrepresented know how frustrating it feels and how distant it makes our critics appear to us. At some time or other someone may have come to our church building and called our piano a "golden calf," or we have been accused of preaching baptismal regeneration. From such experiences we should learn how destructive it is to Christian unity to make needless statements like "*They teach people to disobey Christ.*" It is a different thing to say, "*You don't have to be baptized to be saved,*" than to say, "*You don't have to be baptized.*" Those believers obey the Lord in baptizing their converts; they see the "moment of salvation" related to baptism in a different way. The differences are real, but we do not have to make them more different than they are.

When we care about people, we try not to misread them. That is easier said than done, of course, because it is harder to understand what we do not believe. I was raised among the restoration churches and finished eight years of full-time college study in that context. During my three years of graduate work at Wheaton College. I came to a changed understanding of what represented at least a large segment of evangelical Christianity. The faculty, staff, and student body came to Wheaton from various denominations, but they did not take the attitude toward each other or me that I had assumed denominations took. In their churches they were not working dividedly but separately. They discouraged the competition mentality and interdenominational "proselyting" because such efforts diverted attention from the common task of evangelism and Christian growth. They worked separately in their denominations because, given the doctrinal differences involved, working together would have created recurring tensions. Separateness is not ideal, but it is better than working against each other. The distinction lies in personal attitude that affects interpersonal relationship. What will not fully be solved in fact can partially be solved in attitude—pastorally.

Distinguishing between divided and separate puts much of denominationalism in a different light. Their working together at the local level would be almost as unlikely as combining

non-instrumentalists and independents in the same congregation. Denominationalism today does not necessarily retain the character it evidently had 175 years ago. We can adjust our perception where appropriate and be glad for any progress in attitude that takes place. Above everything, we can make sure that the present situation does not get reversed from the concern that prompted the restoration movement in the first place. Restoration churches should not regard other religious groups more negatively than those groups view each other—or how they view restoration churches. When we stand too distant from them and their viewpoints, we get distorted perceptions. Interpersonalism encourages us to maintain the contact necessary for reading appropriately what other Christians believe and what they are like, so we do not hinder unity while advocating it.

We dare not allow Christian unity to become a historical vestige of our pursuit of sound doctrine or *vice versa*. Unity and doctrine tend to create a tension that we can manage only by the interpersonal skills that scripture includes in spiritual fruit.

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