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Can There Really Be Such a Thing as Christian Unity in Our Modern World?

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Over the course of many years I have heard people lament the segregation which exists in our churches. The most common observation I hear is that 11:00 am Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. Now I believe this is absolutely true – but perhaps not quite in the way most think. Let me see if I can put this segregation issue in a little different light.

When most people express this lament, they are thinking in racial terms. And I personally believe it is a shame that there is not more racial interaction among Christians. But the segregation which exists in churches is much more widespread than mere race. The racial issue is the one everyone tends to pick up on because we can see it visibly. But most of the actual segregation which exists lies beyond that single surface expression.

When we look at the real segregation in the Christian community, the basis is not related to race, but to subcultures. These subcultures are based on many different factors. The truth is, worship involves the very deepest longings of the human soul. When we engage life at this level, there is a profound desire to do it with a group of people who think, respond, and act in similar ways to ourselves – in other words, with people who are like us.

There are many ways these desires are outwardly expressed. So rather than mere racial differences, the true scope of the segregation which exists among Christians is more comprehensively expressed as we look at the many denominations, worship styles, personalities of pastors, pastoral

leadership styles, preaching styles, church program emphases, language differences, economic circumstances, church organizational structures, social status, generational preferences, theological differences (on non-essentials), cultural differences, and the list could go on. So what we actually have is a situation where every church represents a particular subculture. When it comes to gathering together for worship, people tend to gravitate to a church which provides the most comfort for them over a wide range of matters. Race is one factor, but the reason for the segregation which exists in churches is so much broader than that. Look, for instance, at the wide variety of churches even within a single racial group.

So exactly how do we break through the segregation which exists in the Christian community in order to develop more unity? I believe that the beginning point is to take a new look at the very notion of Christian unity. Often when people speak of this topic, they don't recognize the full significance of the concept. So let's begin by trying to understand what Christian unity really means.

What Christian Unity Is Not

When dealing with the topic of unity in the Christian community, there tends to be a lot of lament, and certainly a lot of confusion. The reason for the lament is obvious. The Bible admonishes Christians to be united and even goes so far as to state that unity is a sign of authentic Christian faith. The reason for the confusion, though, is probably not as obvious. Certainly one of the main reasons is that different people have conflicting thoughts concerning what Christian unity is all about.

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We have already noted above the significant segregation of Christians based on numerous factors. So is that really a bad thing? Perhaps it is not as bad as it might seem at first glance. The reason this is so is because Christian unity is not the same thing as organizational unification. Entry into, and life within, the Christian faith is not based on organizational membership or participation. It is based on a personal connection with God by faith in Jesus Christ. Unity in Christ is relational, not organizational. So, it is perfectly okay for Christians to have different preferences about what particular earthly organization they connect with as long as respect for the family relationship within the body of Christ is respected. Unity in Christ, in its essence, is a personal and spiritual connection.

What Christian Unity Is

So, let's drill down a little deeper in order to identify the true nature of Christian unity. To do that, let's take a look at Ephesians 4:11-13. It reads:

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (NIV)

In verse 11, we are told God gave certain leaders as gifts to the church. Then, in the first part of verse 12, Paul shares the purpose of these leaders – to be equippers of the other believers. Following that, the rest of the passage lists four results that should occur when believers are equipped.

1. The body of Christ is built up.

2. The body of Christ reaches unity in the faith.

3. The body of Christ reaches unity in the knowledge of the Son of God.

4. The members of the body become increasingly mature as they attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

As we look at this, there are two places where unity is specifically addressed – points two and three. So, let's look at what this unity consists of.

1. Unity in the Faith

The first is unity in the faith. This is unity based on the fact that believers share a common relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ. So, exactly what does that faith consist of? Essentially, it is a common belief in the bottom-line fundamentals of the Christian faith. In worldview terms, we refer to these bottom-line fundamentals as "the essentials." These essentials define the line around the Christian faith which cannot be violated and one still be a Christian. These fundamentals answer three questions: 1) Who is God? 2) What is a human being? 3) What is salvation and how is it achieved?

Individuals who answer these three questions based on what is revealed in the Bible are inside the circle of the Christian faith. Those who answer any one of them in a different way are in an entirely different faith system. Without going into great detail, the Christian faith answers these three questions in very specific ways.

1) The true God is the God who has revealed himself in the Bible. Belief in any other concept of God puts one outside of the Christian faith.

2) Man is created in the image of God, but is fallen. This means human beings have ultimate value to God but are separated from him because of sin and are in need of redemption.

3) Salvation is entry into a personal relationship with God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is achieved based on God's grace

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through an act of faith as individuals acknowledge their sin before God and personally ask his forgiveness.

2. Unity in the Knowledge of the Son of God

The other area of unity revolves around the relationship itself. Knowledge, in the context of this verse, is not specifically intellectual knowledge. Rather, it is experiential. Of course, there is a basic level of intellectual knowledge that is necessary (that which we identified above). However, once we have intellectually identified the essentials, we must then act on them by actually inviting Christ into our lives.

When we do that, God, literally, adopts us into his family and we become his child. When that happens, we automatically become spiritual siblings with every other person who has done the same. The personal "knowledge of the son of God" is the relationship with Christ which was established when we invited him into our lives and were adopted into God's family. Unity in the body of Christ, then, is based on the relationships which were established when individuals became spiritual brothers and sisters by having been adopted into the same family.

So, What about All of the Segregation in Churches?

The segregation we experience in the Christian community is based exclusively on non-essentials – things which don't affect our personal relationship with God. In cases where essentials are actually involved, we are not dealing with Christian unity. People who answer the essential questions in a different way than what the Bible teaches are not actually Christians – even if they self-identify as Christians. In those cases the need is not for unity, but for evangelism.

All of the non-essentials, without exception, relate to matters which do not effect salvation. This does not mean those other issues are unimportant. It is just that they don't rise to the level of being essential to the faith. It is quite possible for there to be diversity in the non-essentials. This would include matters of doctrine and practice which deal with things other than the essentials.

One of the things that makes this such a difficult matter to arbitrate is that there are various degrees of importance related to non-essentials. Some non-essentials truly are matters of personal preference, such as music style, architectural style of the church building, church leadership style, church organizational structure and the like. There are other non-essentials, though, which are more important. These actually relate to biblical doctrine. There are biblical teachings which are truly important and which affect how people worship and live life, but are not part of the essentials. These might include such issues as a group's belief about end times, predestination, baptism, the Lord's supper, tongues, proper dress and grooming, the use of beverage alcohol, and the like. While all of these are very important matters, it is actually possible to be completely wrong on any of these non-essentials and still be a member of the body of Christ. In spite of the fact that these issues may affect how one deals with life and faith, it does not determine salvation status, nor does it affect our essential sibling relationship with other believers.

But that is not all. While the segregation of Christians based on matters related to church practice and theology are prominent, there is another source which also comes into play. This other source has its ultimate root in the theological arena, but the outward expression is political. The most dramatic place this is seen in

America is in the divide between the different policies which are promoted by various political parties. Because the political arena pretty much requires active promotion of particular policies, Christians on opposite sides of those policies may find it difficult to desire fellowship with believers on the other side. This is compounded when individuals truly believe their particular point of view is based on biblical principles. In that case, we have believers on one side who see believers on the other side as advocating for a non-biblical point of view. And, as difficult as it makes things, in many cases that perception reflects actual reality.

What Is Necessary for the Various Christian Groups to Actually Experience Unity?

One of the first things we need to do to promote unity is become consciously aware of the specific matters which create disunity in the body of Christ. When we do this, we put ourselves in a position to figure out ways to prevent our differences regarding non-essentials from destroying genuine Christian unity.

While actually creating unity may be a struggle, knowledge of how to do it is rather straightforward. It is one of those things which is simple but not easy. Unity among believers requires only two things:

1. We must be able to make the distinction between essentials and non-essentials.
2. We must be willing to allow other people be wrong on non-essentials.

To create unity, we must come to a place where we are willing to allow for disagreement, and even dispute, on non-essentials. As we do this, however, it must be done in a non-judgmental way. We all know, don't we, that our own beliefs related to disputed matters are right and that those who disagree with us are wrong. That being the case, we need to do a couple of things which can allow us to disagree on these matters while still genuinely loving our spiritual brothers and sisters. We must learn how to let others live with their wrong beliefs while still accepting them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The first thing we need to do is to genuinely grasp why someone might disagree with us. It is not enough to simply know what the disagreement is about. We also need to understand why it exists. As we dig out this information, we will not only gain personal insight into the life of a brother, but might even gain new insight into our own faith.

The second thing we need to do is grasp the relative importance of the particular issues we are disputing. Some might be really important. But often, in the grand scheme of things, the issues most disputed have no long-term significance at all. They are merely instruments of a power play.

There is one other matter we ought to be sensitive to as we relate to our spiritual siblings who hold different beliefs regarding non-essentials. As we deal with other believers, we must recognize that sometimes we are interacting with people who are significantly more or less spiritually mature than we are. Some practices and doctrines can seem quite threatening to the less spiritually mature. The more mature should be careful not to say or do things based on their maturity which might cause unnecessary unease in the body of Christ – all the while trying to help the less mature grow in their faith. On the other hand, there is so much more to the Christian faith than any single individual will ever apprehend. While we may think our own spiritual maturity level is high, there are certainly others who are more mature regarding particular matters. We should always have enough humility to at least explore more deeply those things which seem wrong to us in order to either confirm our own point of view or make changes if needed.

Making Unity Happen

It seems there is widespread agreement that Christians ought to be unified. In spite of that, there also seems to be very little overall unity. The biggest problem, it seems to me, is that most people want unity only on their own terms. That is, we know our own approach to the Christian faith is the right one and we are not willing to engage fellowship until those people who are wrong will change. This is not meant to make light of the problem. It is simply a statement of fact. The reason we worship together with people who agree with us is that it is comfortable. Worshiping together with people who hold different worship practices or believe different non-essential doctrines is not comfortable. So, what do we do about it?

Well, the simple answer is, we need to take a different attitude. Where there are differences, we have to decide which is most important; our relationship with God and our spiritual brothers and sisters, or winning an argument. As we have already noted, we can be absolutely wrong on the non-essentials and still be saved. There are a lot of issues where sincere, believing people interpret non-essential matters in different ways. In fact, it is rather likely that even we ourselves have some wrong beliefs about some

things without realizing it. Because of that, we truly ought to have an attitude of grace toward our brothers and sisters when it comes to non-essential matters. In the grand scheme of things, the non-essentials are just not important enough to break fellowship over.

Making unity happen is not a matter of being in the same church or believing the same things about non-essentials. Rather it is a matter of being members of the family of God. Unity happens based on the decisions we make regarding our relationships with other believers, not on non-relationship issues.

So the matter really comes down to two things. First, how good are we at making the distinctions between essentials and non-essentials? And second, are we willing to love other people and even allow them to be wrong on non-essential matters? When we answer these questions correctly, unity will follow. It really is possible to love our spiritual siblings and experience unity in the body of Christ.

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