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There Have To Be Differences Among Us

Why the Evangelical Notion of Unity Stifles the Christian Mind

By Kim Riddlebarger

Many of our contemporaries, it seems, have grown increasingly sensitive about the whole enterprise of doctrinal debate. In many quarters, debate over doctrine is seen as "spiritually incorrect." The fear that unity—or at least the appearance of unity—might be somehow compromised has become a form of paranoia in many evangelical circles. A kind of vague and ill-defined veil of unity covers an evangelical movement that has no creed and no unifying doctrine, except perhaps the increasingly distant memory of Protestant orthodoxy and the doctrinal system that claims to be no doctrinal system, dispensational premillennialism.

But as in Hans Christian Andersen's delightful fable, it seems as though everyone knows the evangelical emperor wears no doctrinal clothes, except the emperor himself, and few are willing to point out the obvious. When differences of opinion arise because men and women of conviction occasionally step forward and dare to proclaim that a particular doctrinal position is biblical, to the exclusion of all other points of view, it is often somehow taken as a kind of personal affront by the evangelical, an outright attack upon his very character and most sensitive feelings. Difference of opinion is seen as something much deeper, almost sinister, something intensely personal, and the resulting "hurt feelings" that occur because the two parties cannot agree is seen as the worst possible calamity. But as long as this veil of unity cloaks the theological nakedness of the evangelical movement, the appearance of unity is maintained. Everyone is kept happy and the boat is not rocked. The enterprise continues on its merry way. Because there is no ultimate basis for doctrinal unity in this movement, the appearance of unity is maintained by silencing any dissent or questioning, thereby permitting the pretense of unity to continue.

A Superficial Unity

But what is overlooked in much of evangelicalism's notion of unity is that the movement faces a consequence even greater than the lack of unity, a consequence that ultimately matters far more than the "hurt feelings" or differences of opinion that may threaten the doctrinally ill-informed. We must honestly ask ourselves, the question, "Is unity really the ultimate end in itself?" What shall we do about those who are in grievous doctrinal error, and who may even deny key doctrines of the faith, but who profess to be an evangelical because of some "experience" and who are willing to keep the peace? Does their "unity" with other evangelicals transcend their own denial of the faith? What about doctrinal error significant enough to perhaps cost them their very soul? Have we forgotten that it is ultimately our doctrine that provides the substantial basis for

any real unity that we may have? Does the mind actually take precedence over our feelings in such matters?

It was the Apostle Paul himself who said that "there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval" (1 Cor 11:19). As a rabbi, trained under the famous Gamaliel, and later blinded by the glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ while on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Paul would, I think see things much differently than would many American evangelicals. As one who suffered unspeakable persecution for the cause of Christ (see the catalogue of his hardships in 2 Cor 11:16 ff), the apostle Paul would have little sympathy for apathetic and doctrinally ignorant American evangelicals who have championed a doctrine of unity that has more in common with Haight-Ashbury and "flower-power" than it does with serious reflection about the biblical conception of unity, which itself derives from the doctrine of the church. The long-standing Romantic ideal, popularized for contemporary culture in the anthem of the Beatles, "all we need is love," has its roots in the secularized American culture in which many of us in the "under fifty" crowd were reared. As the older members of evangelical leadership begin to retire or to leave this world for glory, the younger leaders of the movement who take their places demonstrate an increasing ideological influence from a culture that values "love" and "unity" as the two cardinal virtues that transcend all others. In such a culture, feelings replace the intellect as the barometer and organ of truth. Unity becomes an idol that is used to stifle any legitimate dissent and to gloss over the fact, as Barna and Gallup continue to embarrassingly reveal, that the evangelical movement is exactly that—a movement. As such, like every other movement and fad in modern America, it too will someday go the way of the hula hoop and the miniskirt. This is indeed a tragic thing.

Now, I know that there are many who will read the above paragraph and conclude that since I am a confessional Calvinist and of German descent, I am simply divisive by creed and by nature. And so, lest there be any such concerns, let me make it perfectly clear that the New Testament condemns, without equivocation, those who seek to cause division in the Church (Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20). Let me say it again so that no one misses it: anyone who causes division in Christ's church for the sake of causing division, or for personal gain and aggrandizement, or to build a religious empire for his or her own glory, does so under the judgment of Christ, the Lord and head of the church. Such division and faction is sin, plain and simple. The New Testament also condemns outright those who see doctrine as a kind of intellectual game in which winning doctrinal arguments is the goal. It is the same Apostle Paul who warns us about those who "are always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth" (2 Tim 3:7). Paul also warns us about those who allow their knowledge to "puff them up" and who take great pride in knowing more than others (1 Cor 8:1). Thus, acquiring knowledge for knowledge's sake is as sinful as is willful ignorance of doctrine. Therefore, knowledge of doctrine cannot be seen as an end in itself any more than can unity with a superficial basis, for true doctrine will inevitably lead us to a knowledge of the person and work of Christ, hardly things we can boast about. True doctrine about Christ will also lead us to the doctrine of his church, the mystical body of the Savior who has purchased us with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

Evangelicalism Has Become An End In Itself

Therefore, in order to explain the true place for unity and intellectual reflection upon the content and meaning of our faith, I must point out that the evangelical movement is exactly that—a movement. As such, it is not the church, nor is it part of the body of Christ per se. American evangelicalism in general, is not centered in nor on a doctrine of the Church, which alone is the body of Christ. Instead, as a movement, evangelicalism is often centered on charismatic individuals, dynamic personalities, enthralling communicators, cutting-edge technology, trendy self-help techniques, and parachurch organizations. Therefore, some experiential, rather than doctrinal, basis for unity becomes the only possible glue that can hold this diverse evangelical alliance together. For if unity between the diverse factions collapses, then the entire alliance crumbles and the huge evangelical empire falls. Since there appears to be no real objective doctrinal agreement in the form of a common confession of faith, the movement's existence is based on an emotional, entirely subjective sense of unity, stemming from an unbiblically defined experience of being "born-again." The objective (truth and doctrine) is jettisoned for the subjective (emotions and feelings). The intellect is simply pushed out of the way to make room for feelings and experience. The mind and intellect are replaced by the heart and the feelings. Doctrine has been replaced by "unity."

Perhaps even more tragically, many in evangelicalism see the movement as a kind of end in itself. Thus, despite denials to the contrary, the mission and purpose of the movement and its leaders often transcend the mission of the church. In some circles, the activity of evangelicalism's charismatic and dynamic leaders are seen to be much more important to the cause of Christ than is the faithful preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, both of which should take place without fanfare or the presence of the media. Numbers and noise, instead of faithfulness to the Scriptures, become the standards by which to judge whether or not the movement actually has the blessing of God. Evangelicalism's leaders, therefore, zealously guard the movement from all challenges and threats to its unity. Not surprisingly then, evangelicalism's historic emphasis on doctrine rooted in the rich soil of apostolic and Reformation convictions instead becomes a burden, since doctrinal discussion has the greatest potential to divide the movement. After two generations of war with liberals, doctrinal discussion and doctrinal disagreement among evangelicals themselves is something that the movement is simply not prepared to handle. Thus any discussion of doctrine inevitably exposes the superficiality of the unity within the movement. Therefore, the self-serving type of unity so often sought by evangelicalism is often contrary to that described in the New Testament. We must remember that the evangelical empire and alliance itself is not the church, even though many of its members are Christians and, therefore, part of the invisible church and the true body of Christ. But the superficial unity sought by the evangelical movement as a movement is not the deep-seated unity centered in doctrine that is to be pursued by the Church as the body of Christ.

It is easy to go to the New Testament and cite passages about love and unity to justify using these as the basis for unity underlying the evangelical movement. But if you start with the biblical teaching about the church as the basis for understanding unity, instead of starting with the evangelical movement as such, you will inevitably see things in a different light. The Church is that body of believers who are part of the visible body of Christ, who as the Westminster

Confession states, "profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (XXV.II). As such, the members of the Church align themselves around a specific confession of faith, that is, they are united by a common profession of specific doctrines. Therefore, Christians are actually united on the basis of objective doctrines, not subjective feelings or common experience.

The Real Basis For Unity—Doctrine

The doctrinal basis for unity is spelled out quite clearly in scripture. It was our Lord who exhorted us to "love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37). In his high priestly prayer, when our Lord Jesus prays that we "may be one" (Jn 17:21), he first prays for those who are his, that is those who accepted his words (Jn 17:8). Jesus prays that his followers may be sanctified by the truth because "[God's] word is truth" (v. 17). Thus the truth inevitably takes priority over unity in these matters, since the church is unified by doctrine (the content of Christ's words), which is certainly cognitive (our Lord speaks of it as truth) and therefore, serves as the only basis for unity. This does not at all mean that unity and love are not involved or that they are unimportant. On the contrary, intellectual priority means that unity has an objective basis (Christ's words, i.e., "doctrine") rooted in something other than subjective feelings and a common experience (our "feeling" as one because of some experience that we all share). Unity is rooted in this common doctrinal confession about Christ and his word (Rom 10:10) We are to love those who profess to believe the same doctrines. Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is based on Christ's own work for us. It is based upon doctrine, not experience. And whatever we conclude, it is obvious from the Scriptures that unity is not based on the denial of the priority of doctrine as it is in much of evangelicalism.

While evangelicalism is a movement and is therefore subject to the whims of cultural trends, public opinion, and the fate of other such fads, the Church is not. The Church is given promises in Scripture that cannot be said to be true about a movement, even a good one, even a movement that may, in part, be proclaiming biblical truth. It is to the Church and the Church only that our Lord's words apply, "the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18). There is however, no such promise for a movement, even a movement that has accomplished as much for the kingdom of God as has evangelicalism, and in which many labor who are Christ's own.

Debate Can Be Healthy

Therefore, since the church alone has an abiding doctrinal unity based on the profession of common doctrines, there should be no irrational fear that doctrinal discussion will divide the body of Christ. Instead it is hoped that doctrinal discussion will lead us, as Paul says, to a greater knowledge of the truth, so that we can see which of us does in fact have God's approval on a particular doctrinal matter. Iron is said to sharpen iron. Debate and reflection are very good means of discovering the truth about doctrinal matters. This is why the scriptures repeatedly exhort teachers to be careful about their doctrine (2 Tim 2:14 ff; Jas 3:1), and why false teachers are to be avoided at all costs (see 2 Tim 3 and Jude for example). Paul reminds us that we have

the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16) and that we as followers of Christ are not to be conformed to the pattern of this age, but we are instead to renew our minds so that we can test and approve what is God's will (Rom 12:2). Jude (v. 3) exhorts us to contend (zealously) for the faith once for all delivered to the Saints. Peter likewise exhorts us to always be ready to give to everyone who asks us a reason for the hope that we have (1 Pt 3:15). And the list goes on.

It is because the unity of the Church is rooted in doctrine and not in a common experience that we are to seek unity around what we find objectively written in the word of God, and not on the common feelings and experiences that we may share with other religiously inclined people in our culture. Thus the only basis for unity found in Scripture is unity around a common profession of faith. In other words, the only satisfactory basis for unity is doctrine. Until evangelicals begin to recover the Christian mind, they are forced to live with a superficial unity, in which no one dare point out that the emperor has no clothes, when, if the truth were known, everyone knows otherwise.

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