

Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

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TRUE AND FALSE UNITY

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“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27)

Over the past few months I have received many phone calls and emails like the following:

I need some advice; I have been told that I am a bad influence on the congregation and that I am dividing the body of Christ. What happened was that our pastor decided to change the church to the seeker sensitive model. He no longer preaches the gospel. The sermons are watered down and have little Biblical content. What Bible is used is from a paraphrase. The music is more entertainment than worship. Everything has changed. When I asked the pastor about it, he told me these changes were necessary for the church to reach new people and grow. I told him I strongly disagree and asked him to preach the gospel. He has most of the church board on his side. I was saved in this church and have supported it for many years. I do not want to be divisive; but it doesn't seem right that Bible teaching and gospel preaching have been removed from the church. What shall I do?¹

We are in the midst of a radical change in evangelicalism that has left countless Christians starving for God's Word in their churches. Proponents of the change label as “divisive” those who resist the movement away from gospel preaching and Bible teaching.

Opponents of the change are declared judgmental and selfish “Pharisees” and are told that they should be more loving toward others and quit hanging onto their old ideas about church. In short the troublemakers are told they must embrace the new paradigm or leave.

At issue is the true nature of Christian unity. Are we unified by God's work of grace that converted us, giving us the unity of the Spirit with all true Christians, or are we unified organizationally with the corporate “vision” of the new paradigm change agents? My thesis is that Biblically defined unity is a gospel-centered unity that always works toward the unity of the faith. Biblically defined unity is never a unity centered about the corporate vision of the new religious marketing agents.²

TRUE UNITY IS GOSPEL CENTRIC

Paul exhorted the Philippians to be, “[S]tanding firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27b). The book of Philippians is filled with passages that show Paul's passion for the gospel. He was imprisoned for the gospel, but he rejoices because his circumstances turned out for the furtherance of the gospel (Philippians 1:12). He saw the gospel as so important that he could even rejoice if it were preached by people having bad motives (Philippians 1:15-18). He rejoiced because the Philippians participated in the gospel (Philippians 1:5). As we saw in

Philippians 1:27, for Paul, Christian unity was all about the faith of the gospel. To stand against opponents was a good thing because there will always be opposition to the gospel (Philippians 1:28-30). Christian unity starts with the gospel and ends with the resurrection from the dead for those who have joined Paul in seeing the surpassing value of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8-14).

Therefore, there is no true Christian unity unless it is unity grounded in the gospel of Christ. This gospel includes the truths of the person and work of Christ (who He is, what He did, and why it is important: Philippians 2). Those who proclaim the gospel are always friends of Christian unity and will be welcomed by those who have been made one body by God's work of grace. Paul rejoiced because the Philippians proved to be friends of the gospel. They were not ashamed of Paul's imprisonment and had sent one of their own to risk his life to bring a gift to Paul. Paul had unity with the Philippians because of their common commitment to the gospel. This was not so with some other churches such as the one in Galatia. Anyone who speaks of Christian unity but is not a clear proclaimer and supporter of the gospel shows himself to be disingenuous.

SAVED FROM UNHAPPY CIRCUMSTANCES OR SAVED FROM GOD'S WRATH?

A regrettable development in current evangelicalism is that the term “gospel” is often used in a way that lacks the content of the gospel as preached by Christ and His apostles. Today we hear, “come to Jesus and have a better marriage,” or “come to Jesus and find purpose in life,” or “come to Jesus and He will solve your economic or emotional problems.” None of these statements is

the gospel. First of all, do the hearers of this weak message know who Jesus is? Perhaps some are Mormons who claim to believe in Jesus, but have a different Jesus. Secondly, do those who hear this message know what Jesus did for them? Maybe they hear that Christ died on the cross; but why? If Jesus came to solve their marriage problems, give them a better job, or get them off of drugs, why did He need to die on the cross for these matters? This confuses people because it is confusing. Jesus could help people solve problems without dying on the cross. God has the power to give people better marriages and find them better jobs without having His only begotten Son killed by murderous rebels.

Paul told the Philippians of Christ's pre-existence with God and as God (**Philippians 2:6**), His death on the cross (**Philippians 2:8**), and His subsequent exaltation (**Philippians 2:9**). This is the essence of the person and work of Christ. This work of Christ was not to help people have less stress in the workplace, but to deliver them from the wrath of God against sin!

The true gospel is about God reconciling sinners (enemies) to Himself through the blood atonement:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. (Romans 5:8-10)

The false "gospel" being preached today says that Jesus came to save people from a lack of purpose, lack of happiness, or from living a stress filled and problem filled existence. The true gospel delivers sinners who are God's enemies (whether they know it or not) from God's wrath through the blood atonement. This is the gospel Paul preached and this is the "faith of the

gospel" around which Paul told the Philippians they should strive to unify. Any church that does not clearly and publicly preach this message from the pulpit, yet talks about "unity," is promoting a false and man-made unity that is unbiblical.

The true Biblical understanding of the gospel is shown by Paul's address to the Ephesian elders (**Acts 20:17-35**). Paul reminded them of his previous preaching to them: "*how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (**Acts 20:20, 21**). The gospel says, "repent and believe." If repentance is not preached, then the apostolic pattern is not being followed and the Great Commission is not being obeyed (see **Luke 24:47**). After God established a church in Ephesus through the gospel, Paul nurtured them. Here is his account of how he did so: "*Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God*" (**Acts 20:27**). Whatever of God's purpose is revealed is to be declared publicly. The implication is that the preacher who knows the whole counsel of God but fails to preach it is guilty before God.

STRIVING FOR TRUE CHRISTIAN UNITY

The New Testament pattern is gospel preaching (which includes the person and work of Christ and the need to repent and believe) followed by nurturing the flock with the whole counsel of God. This is God's means of establishing true Christian unity. There will always be attacks against this unity. There were such attacks in Paul's day and Paul prophesied that attacks would come to the Ephesian church after his departure:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which

He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:28-30)

This passage shows a couple of things. First, there will be attacks from within the church that will threaten Christian unity. These attacks are against the faith of the gospel. Second, pastors (or elders or overseers, whatever term one uses) are commanded to guard the flock against these attacks from false teachers. The key words for church leadership, overseers, elders, and pastors, are used in Acts 20 of the same group of people.³ This shows that there is no "bishop" somewhere with final authority over the local church.

The epistles show that Paul always publicly refuted teachings that were changes or additions to the gospel of God's grace. God graciously saving people through the gospel is the beginning and foundation of Christian unity. Those who teach things that are not consistent with this principle threaten true Christian unity. Paul's response to those people who preached the true gospel with bad motives as opposed to how he addressed those who preached a false gospel show how important it is that the gospel is preached accurately. He rejoiced about the former (**Philippians 1:18**) and anathematized the latter (**Galatians 1:9**).

The content of the gospel is everything. If we cannot get that right, we are in grave peril! Paul writes, "*But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed*" (**Galatians 1:8**). The content is key; not how nice, kind, wonderful, or charming the preacher might be. If an angel from heaven preaching a different gospel should be rejected, how much more should some kindly pastor who seems so endearing. Some of the wolves devouring the church today are very nice people.

For Paul, to "[S]trive for the faith of

the gospel” meant to fight all changes to the gospel and to challenge all compromises of the gospel. To so strive is the essence of Christian unity. But, when pastors tell their flock that members are violating Christian unity when they ask their pastors to preach the gospel—that is a perversion of the Biblical idea of unity. Those pastors are not concerned with the unity of the faith; they are concerned with conformity to their man-made agendas. Do not be intimidated by such persons. Those who strive for the faith of the gospel are true friends of Christian unity.

TRUE UNITY IS NURTURED THROUGH THE PURE TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible is God’s unchanging authority for all true Christians throughout the church age. It stands to reason that the more our thinking and practice are in line with the Bible, the more unified we shall be. People with a love for God because of His work of grace through the gospel and a love for the truth of Scripture will be more unified with one another as they learn Scripture together. This is how the very first church came together: “*And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*” (**Acts 2:42**). It should be obvious that the “apostle’s teaching” is found in the New Testament, not in some new book that appeals to the unregenerate mind.⁴ Recent movements are promoting small groups using **Acts 2:42** as the proof text. This passage is not about the size of the group; but about what they did that nurtured their faith. It is a perversion of this text to use it to promote the study of anything besides a literal translation of the Bible.⁵

The fact is that Christians who have been nurtured on the Scriptures purely taught will find themselves in unity with other such Christians even when they come from diverse cultures or different denominational affiliations. In recent experience I have enjoyed unity with people from a variety of denominational backgrounds because of our shared passion for the gospel and

God’s word. On the other hand, I have met others with backgrounds similar to mine with whom I have had no such unity; we are at odds over just about everything.⁶

People with very different views on such matters as eschatology and modes of baptism can enjoy significant unity. It is not that these matters are not important—they are. Those who agree that Scripture settles all issues and that whatever Scripture says about any matter is ultimately authoritative, those people have a framework within which to work. However, if the gospel itself is compromised, there will be no unity.

Careful exegesis of Scripture nurtures the unity of the Spirit that God created through conversion. Not only does such Bible preaching and teaching unify our beliefs, but it brings unity between Christians as God uses His word to change lives. The unity of the Spirit Paul speaks of in **Ephesians 4:3** is that which God created through baptizing us into one body: “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit*” (**1Corinthians 12:13**). I have argued elsewhere that God’s Word is a means of grace.⁷ Since the unity of the Spirit is to be preserved so that Christians might demonstrate the virtues of humility, patience and love toward one another (see **Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12-14**), we need an inward work of grace so that we overcome the fleshly motivations that would hinder this unity. This growth is nurtured by God’s Word: “*like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation*” (**1Peter 2:2**). When human wisdom rather than God’s Word is preached in the public assembly, Christians are being robbed of one of God’s means of changing lives that would preserve the unity of the Spirit.

Furthermore, when Christians are not nurtured with the “*pure milk of the word*” we are not progressing toward the ultimate goal of the “unity of the faith” (**Ephesians 4:13**). The words of man that are substituted for the Word

of God are a hindrance to the unity of the faith. Though “life enhancement”⁸ preachers may be popular because they appear to be more practical (i.e. relevant to the perceived needs of “seekers”), they have laid aside God’s agenda for the church. Again, thinking of the teaching in **Ephesians 4** on unity, how shall we, “[A]ll attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ” (**Ephesians 4:13**) by listening to a series of sermons on how to cope with stress in the work place?

Exegetically sound, expository preaching preserves the unity of the Spirit by giving people God’s means by which He graciously changes lives and promotes progress toward the unity of the faith. Notice the problems that are to be therefore laid aside: “*As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming*” (**Ephesians 4:14**). The winds of doctrine that are blowing people about and undermining their precious faith must be resisted. Equipping the saints with God’s Word will give them the spiritual strength to withstand these winds and to progress in true Christian unity.

To summarize, gospel preaching aims to bring people into the unity of the Spirit because it is the means God has chosen for converting lost sinners and baptizing them into the body of Christ. Bible teaching spiritually nurtures those who have been converted and helps them grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. This is a means of mitigating fleshly attitudes and behavior, thus preserving Christian unity. Finally, the goal of gospel preaching and pure Bible teaching is that Christ’s body may come into the unity of the faith. I do not believe that full unity will happen until Christ returns. It is, however, the job of Christian leaders to guard and nurture Christian unity until He returns.

FALSE UNITY IS MAN-CENTERED

We saw that in the New Testament,

true unity is gospel-centric. The false unity that is being promoted today is not like that. In most cases it is unity under a religious leader's "vision." What is meant by the term "vision" is not the same as the Biblical usage. It is used in a modern marketing sense and relates to the leader's mental image of what he wants the product and corporation to be like in the future.

When I was in seminary I was required to take a class that dealt with church growth. Part of the requirement was to make a field trip to witness a successful church. The one we visited had grown from a few hundred people to 2,000 through creating a children's program that was so astounding and exciting that the kids dragged their parents to church. The other part of the program was to create community activities and teachings relevant to the parents who normally would not be interested in church. The pastor who had orchestrated this successful venture spoke at a seminary lecture. He spoke about vision and "vision casting." He told us that Bill Gates had visualized the Windows platform and cast his vision for that to his corporation and actualized it through the processes of the corporation. In like manner, the pastor is to be a visionary who in his mind can see the church becoming something it is not, cast that vision to his key people, and set up the processes necessary to fulfill this vision. This is what that pastor had done successfully. The result was a thriving "seeker" church that was popular with people in the community.

The unity that is necessary to create a church molded from the mental image of a religious leader's dream of an optimal future is unity under the religious corporation's vision. To fulfill the dream each piece must work together and each piece must contribute to the purposes determined by the visionary leader. The wisdom of business gurus has been mined by Christian leaders who have created religious versions to help pastors market the church. That is precisely what I was taught in the seminary class. I resisted this publicly in the class; but many of the

students bought it.

Here comes the problem. When this "vision" has to do with converting a Bible church into something else, there is an inevitable clash. The reason is that marketing the church to potential religious consumers in a given neighborhood is not the same as preaching the gospel. As I have said many times, the gospel offends sinners. The type of "vision" under which new paradigm churches unify is always linked to church growth. The church has to become something appealing to the unregenerate for this to happen in the way they envision it.

The vision that is cast to church leaders and then to the whole congregation is a plan to achieve church growth by studying a target market group and designing a church service that will appeal to that targeted group. People from that group are enticed to join the church and help reach more people like themselves.⁹ The clash comes because, to achieve this outcome, gospel preaching and pure Bible teaching from the pulpit have to go. Regenerate Christians need such preaching and teaching to grow. Sinners need it to hear the gospel to be converted. The target group will never want it.

The marketing survey of a given neighborhood will not come back with this result: "the overwhelming majority of people in this neighborhood when queried by a scientific poll say they are looking for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be boldly preached, the message of the blood atonement, and that the Bible be clearly taught verse by verse." The fact is that we are by nature objects of God wrath against sin (**Ephesians 2:3**). No unconverted sinner is going to say that he wants to hear that. The truth is that by nature we are rebels who trust self and man-made religion rather than come to God on His terms. Whatever "righteousness" we have before conversion is filthy rags. Which neighborhood sinner is going to say that he wants to hear preaching on such things? What people **need** (for the gospel to be preached calling them to repent and believe) and what they **want** (to

have their religious appetites met) are totally incompatible. If what they want determines the message of the church, the church will become useless salt without savour (**Matthew 5:13**).

Once the leaders have made one simple decision—that the prevailing concerns and needs of the unbelieving community will determine the program and message of the church—the inevitable result is that gospel preaching and Bible teaching cannot be the mainstay of the church.

MAN'S VISION PRODUCES FALSE UNITY

Once it is adopted, the new corporate vision for church growth will change the nature of Christian unity. The vision is only successful if all the "team members" are willing to commit their talents, time and effort to in unity see the vision to fulfillment. Like the business corporation counterpart it was copied from, it requires everyone from the CEO to the warehouse workers to pull together for the same corporate vision and purpose. That is the reason books that train pastors to adopt this view and thereby change existing churches, teach them to be prepared to lose previous members, even most of them if it is necessary. They cannot succeed while spending energy trying to fight or cajole naysayers (i.e. born again Christians who think the gospel should be preached). The result is organizational unity under human authority in support of a corporate vision that has little to do with God's true vision which was once for all delivered to the saints (**Jude 1:3**).

One tactic that is commonly used by leaders who are converting Biblically defined churches to religious organizations designed to meet the needs of religious consumers is to accuse those who resist of being "divisive." They cite Bible verses to unsuspecting Christians who have tender consciences and do not wish to do anything that would be harmful to their churches. These Christians know something is wrong and they notice the church becoming more worldly, less godly, and placing

less emphasis on important Biblical doctrines. These Christians are told they are dividing the body and that the Bible warns about such people: “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them” (Romans 16:17). The problem is that this verse is not about unity under a new corporate marketing plan. The verse says, “contrary to the teaching which you learned” (i.e. from Paul).

Those who have replaced the unity of the Spirit and the unity of the faith with unity of the pastor’s personal vision are the truly divisive ones. They are guilty of the very charge they level against dissenters within the flock. Such leaders are causing dissensions and hindrances because they have willingly laid aside the teaching of Christ and His apostles in order to promote the wisdom of man.

A “factious” person in the Bible (Titus 3:10) was one who departed from sound doctrine or Biblical practice, not one who failed to help religious leaders fulfill their vision for the future success and glory of a religious corporation. For example, Luther was considered factious by the Roman Catholic Church. Whether he was or not has to be determined by examining his doctrine and practice with the Bible and doing the same for the Roman Church. One is not automatically a heretic or divisive because he or she has a disagreement with a man-made religious corporation. This is especially true if what is causing the division is the gospel itself.

CONCLUSION

Jesus said, “Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division” (Luke 12:51). The gospel is divisive when preached to the unregenerate. Those who respond in faith are divided from those who reject it. Christian unity is unity under and through the gospel. It is created by God when He regenerates people and makes them one in spirit with other believers. It is nurtured through the teaching of

sound Biblical doctrine that has as its goal the unity of the faith. False unity is unity that is demanded and prescribed by religious leaders to their own ideas and organizations. This is the unity that the religious leaders of Israel wanted and that Jesus threatened. His gospel divided their religious system and spoiled their unity. They decided they had to get rid of Him. The gospel will divide churches as well if they are not based on the gospel itself. The false unity of corporate vision to create growth through adding religious consumers to the organization will create a “church” that would be divided by the gospel if it were preached there. Those who promote pure gospel preaching are the friends of Christian unity. Those who promote man-centered “vision” for their religious systems are enemies of Christian unity. Be encouraged in your support for the gospel; the Bible says that you are pleasing Christ by so doing.

END NOTES

1. This is a sample compilation of many dozens of phone calls and emails I have received just like it.
2. They are called “pastors” but their role has little to do with feeding God’s flock and everything to do with growing a religious corporation through marketing.
3. The word for pastor (“shepherd”) is used here in verb form, to “shepherd” the flock.
4. The Purpose Driven movement uses this text as proof that small groups should be established. Most of these groups study PDL.
5. Examples of good, literal translations are KJV; NKJV; NASB; and the ESV (the new English Standard Version). I have debated some who claim that since the New Testament was not written then, they obviously were not studying it, so we cannot use this passage as proof of the need for studying the New Testament. However, that they were discussing the teachings of the then living apostles that they heard orally and that we instead study their authoritative

writings is not substantially different. It is still the teachings of the apostles.

6. To be more specific, I have found great fellowship in the gospel with Lutheran and Reformed people and found great resistance from some Baptists and Pentecostals. I graduated from a Pentecostal Bible college and Baptist seminary. The key issue is whether the pernicious seeker movement has penetrated a given church or not. Those who resist this movement and cling to the gospel are of one ilk, those who embrace it are of another.
7. See CIC Issue 84, *Means of Grace*; <http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue84.htm>
8. I borrow this terminology from Ray Comfort’s sermon *Hell’s Best Kept Secret*.
9. Dan Southerland, *Transitioning – Leading Your Church Through Change*; (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1999) is a “how to manual” for this type of process. In it he admits he lost 300 previous members, with not preaching the gospel being one of the complaints. But the process of converting to Purpose Driven resulted in a church of 2,000 members. This book is promoted by Rick Warren who wrote the forward and it is an eye-opener for those who ask, “what happened to my church.” There is a sophisticated plan that is laid out to intentionally change the church for the purpose of church growth and by the means of making the church appealing to the average, potential religious consumer.

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