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Year 1983

Doctrinal Differences: Do they Matter?

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FUNDAMENTALISM TODAY



by Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson

Doctrinal Differences: Do They Matter?

The threat of persecution has always brought about greater Christian unity and purged the carnality of the church. Anyone who has ever preached in the Third World countries cannot help but be impressed with the deep sincerity of the church there. Because of the overwhelming effects of war and poverty, there exists a brand of Christianity that surpasses anything known in the United States today. Christians are extremely serious and dedicated to serving our Lord Jesus Christ. There is very little talk of the kind of frivolities that so often characterize American churches.

Third World Christians are not interested in programs and promotions, nor easier ways to convince people of the gospel. Rather, they are interested in a deep and personal relationship with the living Christ. Everywhere there is evidence of a dynamic church which attracts thousands by the quality of the lives of Christian believers. While some undoubtedly attempt to use the poverty of the church in the Third World to promote the efforts of conciliation as an end in itself, it is also apparent that genuine togetherness is being experienced by believers of all types. One pastor put it this way: "When bullets are flying overhead, you do not bother to ask someone what his theological beliefs are if he is a brother in Christ."

Under such pressure, the church of Jesus Christ has often learned the true meaning of love, joy, and peace. Churches in many parts of the world today do not have the luxury to disagree, which we have in the United States. Because of prosperity and affluence, the American church has had the opportunity to grow and expand to great proportions, while maintaining great doctrinal differences that undoubtedly will remain at the core of our unique expression of the Christian faith. It is highly unlikely, apart from external persecution, that American Christians will bury their differences in the decade or even the century ahead!

Division Is the Distinctive of Democracy

In a free democratic society, where every individual has opportunity to hold his own distinct belief and practice, we have experienced the rise of virtually hundreds of religious denominations. While this certainly may seem confusing to some, it is definitely better than the alternative, which is the

suppression of religious variety in favor of a state religion. One of the criticisms of the medieval church against Martin Luther was that he would open a "Pandora's Box" of religious beliefs if he were to take the authority of the church and place it in the hands of a common layman having the right to interpret the Bible for himself. Luther's response was, "Better that, than the evils of ecclesiastical tyranny!"

While the differences that divide us may seem trivial to a non-Christian, those differences mark a unique and distinctive contribution of the various aspects of American Christianity. The formal state religious atmosphere of Europe is certainly foreign to the vibrant and virile forms of Christianity in America. We have historic denominations such as Baptist, Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian. We also have distinctive varieties within these mainline denominations: Southern Methodist, Orthodox Presbyterian, Reformed Episcopalian, Conservative Baptist, and Missouri Synod Lutheran, to name but a few. In fact,

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there are over one hundred kinds of Baptists in the United States alone!

Beyond the mainline denominations we have literally scores of smaller denominations, sects, and cults: Adventist, Apostolic, Brethren, Christadelphian, the Church of Christ, Christian Science, Friends, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mennonite, Mormon, Nazarene, Pentecostal, Unitarian, etc. One does not have to agree with these various expressions of religious belief to appreciate the liberty to choose to believe whatever one wishes according to the dictates of his own conscience.

Conciliation or Compromise?

Beyond the basic denominational labels that separate us as Christian believers in this country, there are also a number of theological labels that divide us. It is naive to believe that

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the great theological issues separating Calvinists and Arminians, Charismatics and non-Charismatics, Fundamentalists and Liberals will be reconciled within our lifetime, let alone within the last twenty years of this century. Attempts at conciliatory movements have been many and varied in recent years. The so-called Ecumenical Movement attempted to unify the various mainline denominations in the 1960s. An offshoot of this attempt was the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). After 20 years the Ecumenical Movement has yet to bring together even the more liberal of our Protestant denominations.

"The world will not be impressed by a mere coming together in externals while there is central disagreement about the fundamentals of the faith."

While this may seem disconcerting to some, one writer recently answered his own question: "Why do Christians fight over the Bible?" His reply: "Because they believe it!" If the Bible is important to one's Christian belief, then it matters greatly to him what it says and what it means. If his religious expression can do without the Bible, one is more likely to accommodate other beliefs regarding doctrinal matters.

From the earliest times of church history debates have always waged between the issues of conciliation and compromise. In the early days of the Church, Roman persecution drove many fringe followers of Christ into hiding or compromise with the pagan state. When the persecution lapsed, the church was faced with the issue of what to do with these betrayers of Christ now seeking forgiveness and readmission into the church. This resulted in the now famous "Donatist Controversy," in which the early Christians became divided over whether conciliation was a genuine expression of Chris-

tian love and forgiveness, or whether it was a compromise with weakness and infidelity. Throughout her history these two issues have been a matter of concern to Christian believers.

Cooperation or Confusion?

Christians favoring cooperation despite denominational differences have normally tended to emphasize unity based on a common commitment to Christ. However, the understanding of this matter has varied greatly with different ecclesiastical and theological movements. The early days of the twentieth century saw Fundamentalists of all denominational stripes rally together around the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith (the inspiration of Scripture, the Virgin Birth and deity of Christ, His substitutionary atonement, His literal Resurrection and His Second Coming). In those days, Fundamentalism brought together men of diverse backgrounds such as J. Gresham Machen, Clarence Macartney (Presbyterian), J. Frank Norris, William Bell Riley (Baptist), and Bob Jones, Sr. (Methodist). In the early days of Fundamentalism, the movement was united by its distinctive belief in the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Scriptures, and the necessity of personal conversion, etc.

Even before the Fundamentalist controversy, some Christian groups were emphasizing "No creed but Christ; no law but love." While certainly not denying the centrality of the doctrine of the person and work of Christ, these more moderate evangelicals were willing to work with those of varying denominational and theological commitments. In time the issue of conciliation reached its apex in two different and distinctive arenas. The first was in regard to the issue of Cooperative Evangelism related to the crusade ministry of Evangelist Billy Graham. His willingness to cooperate with known liberals for the cause of spreading the gospel in major citywide crusades became an issue of great contention among Fundamentalists and Evangelicals alike. For all practical purposes, this issue became the watershed that divides Fundamentalism from Evangelicalism even today.

The second arena of contention was that of the sudden, explosive growth of

the Charismatic Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. With emphasis on the experience of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the resultant expression of the gift of tongues, Charismatics tend to take the attitude that "doctrine divides, love unites." Non-Charismatics cannot underestimate the tremendous conciliatory impact that the Charismatic Movement is making on American Christianity. Charismatic television, radio, Bible studies, businessmen's meetings, etc., have leaped over the barrier of religious and denominational ecclesiasticism right into the living room of the average American. Isolated from his

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denominational affiliation, the viewer is challenged to examine Christian belief for himself. Without a doubt the Charismatic Movement has done more to de-emphasize doctrinal differences among varying Christian groups than any other religious movement in the twentieth century. While this may be a cause of great rejoicing to Charismatics, it is a cause of great concern to Fundamentalists who fear that the doctrinal beliefs upon which the Christian faith is founded may well be swept aside in the rising torrent of "conciliation at all costs."

Christianity and the Centrality of Truth

It was Martin Lloyd Jones who observed, back in 1962, that "truth alone creates unity." In his book *The Basis of Christian Unity*, he argued that unity can never be isolated or regarded as something in and of itself. He observed that unified fellowship followed the unity of doctrine among the early disciples. He further observed that the starting point in considering the question of unity must always be regeneration resulting from belief of the truth.

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Otherwise, the church develops nothing more than a facade of unity based on an external, rather than an internal, basis of cooperation. He warned then: "The world will not be impressed by a mere coming together in externals while there is central disagreement about the fundamentals of the faith."

Since truth and error cannot be reconciled, it behooves the Christian today to take a long and serious look at the very reason and desire to see unity within the church. The question the world is still asking is "What is Christianity?" There cannot be true unity without the foundation of the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Machen observed over 50 years ago that Liberal Protestantism, with its denial of the

essential Christian doctrines, was not a new form of Christianity—it was not real Christianity at all!

Unity and cooperation among true Christians must always be based upon adherence to the essential doctrines of the Bible. That commitment gave birth to Fundamentalism in the first place. Jesus said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Christianity finds its freedom *in* the truth, not *from* the truth. We can never surrender true biblical convictions for the convenience of conciliation. We cannot drop our principles for popularity. It is the truth that changes lives, and it is the truth that must always be the basis of true Christian unity.

Face the Facts

by Cal Thomas

WHO SAID THAT?

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other groups want Americans to believe that the founding of our nation, and its direction ever since, has been for a totally secular purpose—that religion and religious people were and are to be kept out of government and relegated to churches and synagogues.

While rummaging through a desk drawer at home the other day I discovered quotes from some of our former leaders who obviously did not share this ACLU view of America. Guess who said this: "Our success in striving to help our fellow-man, and therefore to help ourselves, depends largely upon our success as we strive, with whatever shortcomings, with whatever failures, to lead our lives in accordance with the great ethical principles laid down in the life of Christ, and in the New Testament writings which seek to expound His teachings." This violator of church-state separation was Theodore Roosevelt.

Or how about this: "There are great problems before the American people. I would be afraid to go forward if I did not believe there lay at the foundation of all our schooling and all our thought the incomparable and unimpeachable Word of God." That imposer of morality on others was none other than Woodrow Wilson.

Or this: "We shall win this war, and in Victory we shall

seek not vengeance, but the establishment of international order in which the Spirit of Christ shall rule the hearts of men and of nations. We won't get a free world in any other way." The author of that "intolerant" remark was Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Guess who said this: "Without God there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life. Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first—the most basic—expression of Americanism. Thus the Founding Fathers of America saw it, and thus with God's help, it will continue to be" (Dwight D. Eisenhower).

Finally, there is this: "Jesus Christ preached the Law and the prophets—the twentieth chapter of Exodus, the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, the preachings of Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Study the Sermon on the Mount, the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the tenth chapter of St. Luke, and then turn back to Matthew chapter 22 and find obedience to the law of the land."

On another occasion this person said, "The Old Testament and the New will give you a way of life that will cause you to live happily." His name? Harry Truman.

A secular nation that is not supposed to be influenced by religion? I don't think so.

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