Your Group ≠ Christianity, Your Leader ≠ Jesus

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Like 24
Tuesday, July 30, 2019

I hate to break it to you, but you and your group are not the whole Body of Christ.

Let me explain. Carl Trueman wrote this today, and I find it profoundly true. He was addressing the *Young Restless Reformed* movement, and the recent announcements by Joshua Harris. I very intentionally *don't* want to talk about that. I could get a lot more "likes" and "shares" if I framed this post against Harris as a foil, but I consider that neither wise nor gracious. I *do* want to talk about the larger concern Trueman raises. He wrote;

> Early in the movement's history, I spoke with a couple of the leaders. One told me that his organization was "God's means of doing something great in this day and age." As delusional as such a claim obviously was, it did seem to reflect the general ethos at the time. Another told me that I needed to understand that the movement was "leveraging celebrity culture to do something for the gospel." Boromir tried to do something similar with the ring of power, as I recall.
>
> Many evangelical Christian organizations and movements have a similar kind of messianic self-consciousness. And it eventually leads to great evil. As soon as you identify God's purposes with those of yourself or your organization, ordinary Christian principles—honesty, decency, etc.—quickly disappear. A few years ago, a minor evangelical arriviste was caught in serious sin. His employer's announcement of this might be summarized as follows: "When we are doing so well for the Kingdom of God, we can expect the Devil to attack our best men." Maybe. But the logic was that of every tinhorn cult leader: The evidence that we are corrupt, or employ seriously corrupt people, is really just evidence of how important to God's Kingdom we are. How convenient. It is the Christian equivalent of Wall Street's "too big to fail" ethic.

Paul's Plea For Diversity

I recently worked through I Cor. 12-14 in detail. (I shared some material on Spiritual Gifts here). One of the things that struck me again when I came through chapter 12 was a principle that rather revolutionized my life a few years ago. It hits me every time I come to the passage today. You can walk briefly through the chapter with me here, where I do an overview of the whole chapter. A superficial reading of I Cor. 12 might conclude that Paul is arguing for unity in that chapter. This is partly true, and unity is a concern at several points throughout it. But actually, read carefully, what Paul is doing in chapter 12 is making an earnest plea for *diversity* in the body. In the Corinthian church, a misshapen eschatology and misshapen spirituality had concluded that the gift of tongues was some kind of mark of higher spirituality, and the disastrous result was an exaltation of tongues, with a concomitant devaluation of the other gifts. The diversity of the body was being lost. And Paul would have none of this.

14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.
(1 Co 12:14–26)

Paul argued firmly that the church must value every expression of every gift, in a balanced way that both gave freedom to the Spirit to work, and also maintained order and decency. I think his primary perspective through most of the chapter is about the local church in Corinth, and how this principle plays out in a local church. When Paul talks about "the church" his eye is always most strongly on the local visible institution which Christ has redeemed. But the universal body is also never far out of his sight. And when we apply his words to the universal body, it becomes apparent that Paul was sounding the same alarm that Trueman is sounding.

A Dangerous Equation

It is appropriate to have certain convictions, and it's appropriate to have denominational distinctives. Your group may value miraculous gifts, and so you group around others who do as well. Or your group may value expository preaching, and so you gather around those who share your passions. Every Christian group has its distinctive emphases. Arguably, this makes those within each group better at the things in which they specialize, and that can be ok. As long as you recognize that *you are one part of a larger body, and that the things you have made your emphasis do not need to be (in fact, should not be) the focus of the whole body.*

You've stockpiled every sermon by every great preacher on your iPad? Great. Don't demand that everyone else do the same. You've spent a dozen hours this week in intercession? So awesome. Allow that not every Christian has that calling. You led 20 people to Jesus in the past year? I couldn't be more happy. Don't expect everyone to do the same. Learn to allow, recognize, and value the parts of the body of Christ that do things differently than you do. You may not even realize it, but you desperately need them to fill your lack, just as much as they need you. Your group, with its distinctives, is still only one small part of the larger Body of Christ. Your group is one small branch in a *very large* vine (John 15).

"Anytime some small branch of Christian faith equates their branch with the whole tree, the diversity and integrity of the Body is threatened."
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I've seen it too many times, in different groups. Some small little subculture of Christianity decides that it alone deserves Gods favor. And suddenly, all the of the rest of Christianity needs to become like them. Instead of focusing on spreading the Christian faith, they become concerned with spreading their unique "distinctives." They confuse their *form* of the faith with the faith itself. Before long, they beg God for blessing, and become obsessed with public perception, because God's blessing of them will be seen as divine endorsement of their peculiar "distinctives."

"As soon as you identify God's purposes with those of yourself or your organization, ordinary Christian principles—honesty, decency, etc.—quickly disappear."
- Carl Trueman

In some extreme cases, when moral failures take place, they take a backseat to spreading the distinctives. Integrity is downplayed, and immorality must be hidden or swept away. After all, what would people think about their distinct group? God's reputation is on the line, you see, in their own reputation. They come to identify growing their own group with spreading the kingdom. Most dangerous of all, they lose their connection to the church catholic. This isolation from the larger body is what is ultimately so disastrous. Their unique distinctives then become almost another gospel - the only one they are really interested in propagating. This is to lose the power and centrality of the gospel of Christ. The gospel must be the central thing which we maintain in bold. All of your denominational distinctives, important though though they may be, must be a mere footnote.

> "Oh God, please bless us with ______ and give us _______ so that people will see your favor and realize that our circle is the one that is right about _____."

If you find yourself praying a prayer like this, you are on the precipice of several major mistakes. First, the notion that blessings are a sign of God's favor. But second, the idea that God has any interest in showing the rest of Christianity that they should really be just like you.

Take a moment to reflect on how astoundingly, and scarily, arrogant that is. If you've prayed that prayer, the arrogance of it probably hasn't sunk in yet.

Your distinctives are important. They help shape you, and they reflect your thoughts and convictions. But they aren't the gospel you are called to profess, and your little circle is not the kingdom you are called to expand.

It happens with YRR groups, where Calvinism is the "thing" that matters. It happens with some "anti-reformed" groups, where *hatred* of Calvinism is the "thing" that matters. It happened with ATI groups I was raised in. It happened in IFB groups I was part of. It happens in branches of charismatic faith. And in so many others. Hear me well - your group is not Christianity, and your leader is not Jesus.

It was precisely this dangerous equation that I came to realize was all around me years ago when I grew increasingly uncomfortable in the Fundamentalism in which I was raised. I "left the Shire" as I have put it before. The central problem I saw, which I spelled out in the Email that finally got me kicked out, was that

"Our particular (and relatively minor) distinctions have been over-emphasized at the cost of the unifying gospel of Jesus Christ."

We were not the only ones in danger of so distorting the gospel.

This is a danger into which any group can fall.

Jonathan Edwards, when writing his defense of the legitimacy of the Great Awakening against the "old lights" (and his warnings about excesses) pointed out how easily a group can bind together in what appears to be a Christian love, but is actually a self love. The group comes to value the things that distinguish it from everybody else, and rather than being bound together by the gospel, are bound by an "us vs. them" mentality that separates them from the larger world. Their "peculiarities" then come to be not only their most distinguishable mark, but also their most prized one.

> Indeed there is a counterfeit love, that often appears among those who are led by a spirit of delusion. There is commonly in the wildest enthusiasts, a kind of union and affection, arising from self-love, occasioned by their agreeing in those things wherein they greatly differ from all others, and from which they are objects of the ridicule of all the rest of mankind. This naturally will cause them so much the more to prize those peculiarities that make them the objects of others' contempt. Thus the ancient Gnostics, and the wild fanatics that appeared at the beginning of the reformation, boasted of their great love one to another; one sect of them, in particular, calling themselves *the family of love*. But this is quite another thing than that christian love I have just described: it is only the working of a natural self-love, and no true benevolence, any more than the union and friendship which may be among a company of pirates, that are at war with all the rest of the world.
> - Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks Of A Work Of The Spirit Of God*

Meet The Church Catholic

Perhaps one of the greatest antidotes to this ailment - the tendency to treat our little expression of the Christian faith as though it were the only "true" form of Christian faith, is to swim deep in the waters of Church History. We set aside for the moment some of the absurd claims of various "restorationist" groups that claim they have a historical line "back to the apostles" of groups just like them (every such claim is demonstrably absurd, whether made by various fringe groups of the Church of Christ, of the Baptist "Trail of Blood"). The reality is, every single Christian group today has a history, which has caused them to pick and choose the things which they emphasize. That's not wrong, it's honorable. We have our denominational heroes, who stood for and shaped the particular forms of church organization, liturgy, theological emphasis, practice, and so much more. Learn about your heroes. But don't assume that Christian history started with Luther because you are Luthren, or Wesley because you are Methodist, or the Radical Reformers if you are Anabaptist, or Calvin, or Spurgeon, or whoever you look to as starting your small branch. And whatever you might have been taught, your branch *is* small, and it *did* have a "start" after the apostles.

Learn about the wider sweep of all of church history. Meet the Apostolic Fathers and hear their passion to serve Jesus, even as you realize how different you are from that first generation of Christ-followers at some points. Watch on as the Apologists defend the early faith. Sit at the feet of some of the great minds of Church history, like Athanasius, John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, the Cappadocian Fathers, the mystics of the desserts, and more. Don't let the Reformers be your only diet, as though the gospel were birthed with them in the 16th century, but don't neglect their contribution to Christian faith and thinking either.

As you meet these men and women who came before you, you will undoubtedly be struck by how "different" from you they are, and how different your form of faith from theirs. And that is exactly what we need, in order to put our own little groups into proper historical perspective, rather than reimagining history in our own image. As Craig Blomberg once said, "Fundamental matters of the faith require forceful proclamation; peripheral ones, more tentative affirmation." Learn to value the early Creeds, and the universal faith they profess. In other words, meet the church catholic.

"In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."
- Rupertus Meldenius
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As you study the ancients, you will also learn to separate the things that matter most, upon which Christians everywhere have always agreed, from things which also matter, but matter less, about which good and godly Christians have often sharply disagreed. Learn to keep the disagreements in perspective against the agreements. Learn the importance of the Vincentian Canon as you come to value, "that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." Learn the wisdom of that unknown Rupertus Meldenius and his plea that we maintain, "In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity." Learn to separate essentials from non-essentials, and cling more tightly to the former than the latter. As one author put it, learn to "catholicize your heresies." Have the humility to admit that your group is not the one and only perfect expression of Christian faith, and that you may indeed need to learn from others. Church Historian Phillip Schaff explained Meldenius' phrase in, *History of the Christian Church* (vol. 7, pg. 650);

> It was during the fiercest dogmatic controversies and the horrors of the *Thirty Years' War*, that a prophetic voice whispered to future generations the watchword of Christian peacemakers, which was unheeded in a century of intolerance, and forgotten in a century of indifference, but resounds with increased force in a century of revival and re-union:
>
> "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways I've seen this expressed is by C. S. Lewis in his introduction to "On The Incarnation" by St. Athanasius. I wish I could quote the whole preface, where he urges the importance of reading old books. Some snippets make the point. How are we to be protected from thinking our own group = to Christianity?

> The only safety is to have a standard of plain, central Christianity ("mere Christianity" as Baxter called it) which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective. Such a standard can be acquired only from the old books...
>
> Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books...
>
> None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction...
>
> The divisions of Christendom are undeniable and are by some of these writers most fiercely expressed. But if any man is tempted to think—as one might be tempted who read only contemporaries—that "Christianity" is a word of so many meanings that it means nothing at all, he can learn beyond all doubt, by stepping out of his own century, that this is not so. Measured against the ages "mere Christianity" turns out to be no insipid interdenominational transparency, but something positive, self-consistent, and inexhaustible.
>
> I know it, indeed, to my cost. In the days when I still hated Christianity, I learned to recognise, like some all too familiar smell, that almost unvarying something which met me, now in Puritan Bunyan, now in Anglican Hooker, now in Thomist Dante. It was there (honeyed and floral) in Francois de Sales; it was there (grave and homely) in Spenser and Walton; it was there (grim but manful) in Pascal and Johnson; there again, with a mild, frightening, Paradisial flavour, in Vaughan and Boehme and Traherne. In the urban sobriety of the eighteenth century one was not safe—Law and Butler were two lions in the path. The supposed "Paganism" of the Elizabethans could not keep it out; it lay in wait where a man might have supposed himself safest, in the very centre of The Faerie Queene and the Arcadia. It was, of course, varied; and yet—after all—so unmistakably the same; recognisable, not to be evaded, the odour which is death to us until we allow it to become life:
>
> > an air that kills
> > From yon far country blows.
>
> We are all rightly distressed, and ashamed also, at the divisions of Christendom. But those who have always lived within the Christian fold may be too easily dispirited by them. They are bad, but such people do not know what it looks like from without. Seen from there, what is left intact despite all the divisions, still appears (as it truly is) an immensely formidable unity. I know, for I saw it; and well our enemies know it. That unity any of us can find by going out of his own age. It is not enough, but it is more than you had thought till then. Once you are well soaked in it, if you then venture to speak, you will have an amusing experience. You will be thought a Papist when you are actually reproducing Bunyan, a Pantheist when you are quoting Aquinas, and so forth. For you have now got on to the great level viaduct which crosses the ages and which looks so high from the valleys, so low from the mountains, so narrow compared with the swamps, and so broad compared with the sheep-tracks.
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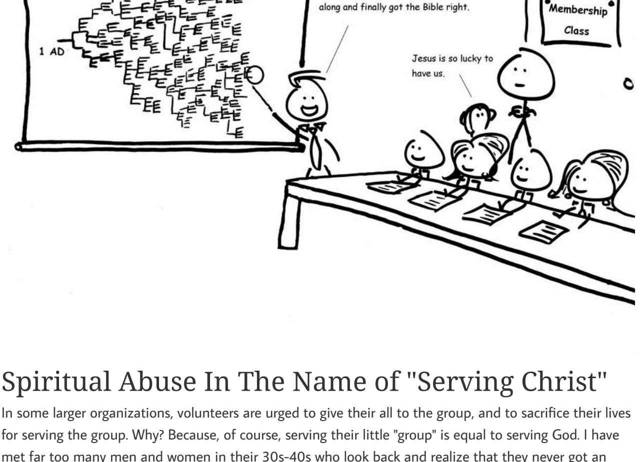
> - C. S. Lewis, "Preface: From the First Edition," in On the Incarnation: Translation, ed. John Behr, trans. John Behr, vol. 44a, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 12–15.



Spiritual Abuse In The Name of "Serving Christ"

In some larger organizations, volunteers are urged to give their all to the group, and to sacrifice their lives for serving the group. Why? Because, of course, serving their little "group" is equal to serving God. I have met far too many men and women in their 30s-40s who look back and realize that they never got an education, never furthered their career, set aside relationships and social development, all to serve the "cause" of their little particular group. Then they wake up one day and realize that they have wasted decades of their life serving a "cause" they no longer believe in. The pain of disillusion is crippling. For many (maybe even most) they throw out the baby with the bathwater, and leave Christian faith altogether. I understand. (I think something like that probably happened with Joshua Harris, but I don't want to speculate on what we cannot know. I have watched it happen to others). For those wise enough to see, they are able, with time and help, to disentangle Christian faith from the subculture of it which they served.

To be sure, Christ calls us to give it all for him, and his kingdom. But that's precisely the problem. Spiritual abusers have too often equated serving their little group with "serving God's kingdom," and the result has left lasting wounds in thousands of young people who later learn that this little group was in fact only one small part of a much larger body. It is *Christ*, and *his* kingdom for which we are called to give it all. To be sure, we serve Christ in our own context. We could hardly do otherwise. When your circle is the particular *context* in which you serve Christ, that's awesome. I have a context as well, a "circle" in which I serve. But never confuse the fact that while that circle is the context in which you serve, Jesus alone is your only Master and Lord. No denomination, circle, group, or leader perfectly embodies him. And any group or leader that claims to, and uses their platform to gain your service, is guilty of Spiritual Abuse. Sacrifice for Jesus is beautiful. Sacrifice for a small little sub-group that fashions itself the only one that God honors is little more than idolatry.

If you are in a group or circle that constantly calls you to abandon everything to follow Jesus, rejoice to be among such radical and authentic followers. But if you are in a group that talks regularly about sacrificing everything, for their distinct and unique "cause," which urges setting aside college to instead work for them for free, and giving up your whole life to propagate their brand of the faith, *run*.

You And Your Group Need Christians And Groups Outside Your Circle

Your little group may be great at what it does, and is probably better at what it prioritizes than groups without that priority. Maybe you have a greater focus on reaching unreached people groups than anyone else, or you see and respond to social needs in ways others don't. You may be the most beautiful "hand" the body has. Be a great hand. But always know that the hand is one small part of the body -- and it can never be the whole. Perhaps your group gives more attention to doctrine and the life of the mind. Be the greatest mind the body could have. But know that the mind is only one part of the body, and you desperately need every other part as well. Calvinists need their Arminian brethren. Those charismatics who value experience over theology need the careful reflection on theology of their cessationist sisters, and their cessationist sisters need the openness to the Spirit of their Charismatic brothers. Those concerned to emphasize the personal salvation inherent in the gospel message need the social justice emphasis of their cousins, and the SJW's need the emphasis on personal sin and personal salvation of their cousins. Those who wish that evangelism was all the church did need the teachers, and those who which systematic theology was all the church did need the activism of the evangelists. Those who wish the whole of the weekly service was a 3-hour prayer meeting need the activism of those concerned for justice, and those who have rarely spent more than an hour in prayer need to learn from the intercessors.

Fill in the blank with whatever little group you are a part of. The distinctives are important. I'm not saying the things that set you and your group apart from other Christians don't matter. I am saying that their importance must pale in comparison to the gospel which makes you the same. Craig Blomberg notes that I Cor. 2:6-16 has been abused by virtually every form of "spiritual elitism" in the history of the church, even though that's the opposite of Paul's intent there. I end with his words;

> But attitudes of elitism are far more pervasive. In an age of specialization, we are bombarded by claims that the key to a happy, healthy Christianity, individually or corporately, is to be found in some new technique of evangelism, practice of certain spiritual disciplines, strategy for church growth, self-help therapy, Sunday-school curriculum, form of music or style of worship, and on and on. When these so-called "keys" pit their agendas against the majority of believers' beliefs and practices and move away from the humbling, central focus on the cross of Christ, they have become elitist and potentially divisive and must be rejected.
>
> So too the church has become increasingly populated by single-issue people, analogous to single-issue voters in the political arena. One person constantly clamors for apologetics to be taught as the cure for all the church's ills; another repeatedly insists that foreign missions must overshadow every other commitment. A third is captivated by the writings of a famous Christian celebrity and promotes them as if they never erred. A fourth harps on nothing but social activism.
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> This list could be extended indefinitely, but it illustrates how factions and ultimately heresies begin—when one aspect of God's agenda for humanity is so emphasized that other crucial, balancing aspects are ignored.
> - Craig Blomberg, 1 Corinthians, NIVAC, pg. 68–69.

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