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Theological Hospitality

Nearly two decades ago John Frame, theology professor at Westminster Seminary in California, issued a strong call for orthodox Christian churches to work toward a post-denominational expression of the unity of the body of Christ. He termed his position "evangelical ecumenism." Frame clearly distinguished his position from the largely failed 20th century ecumenical movement which reorganized in 1948 as the World Council of Churches. He argued that the multiplicity of denominations is clearly contrary to Scripture and urged that evangelicals seek a path toward reunion, although he admitted that current realities made this proposal more ideal than real.[1]

I am convinced that the movement called "missional church" gives fresh impetus for a renewed search for evangelical unity centered in a robust, historic, Trinitarian orthodoxy. My friend John Armstrong, in a book soon to be published, gives voice to this very concern. He calls for a synergy of orthodox churches that can overcome historical, theological, and cultural obstacles to accomplish kingdom objectives. He terms this "missional-ecumenism."[2]

I like the term. The hyphenated word reminds us that the unity of the church is not for our benefit (primarily) but for the good of the world and the furtherance of God's reconciling purposes. I have commented in earlier articles on the significance of unity in the missional church agenda but, given its importance, I want to expand my discussion in the next several articles.

The biblical mandate

I suppose no serious Christian would argue against the idea of unity or question that God's intent is that his people be one. Clearly Jesus came to establish one church, "*my* church" (Matt. 16:18). He prayed that all his disciples might live in a unity that reflected the oneness of the Father and the Son (John 17:11, 21)--a unity of purpose, mutual honor, and love stronger than death.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) is certainly a concrete illustration of the apostolic concern to incarnate the unity Jesus prayed for in

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the challenging circumstances of Jew-Gentile interaction in the early days of the church. The decision of the apostles and elders was a compromise that respected Jewish sensibilities while at the same time welcoming Gentiles into the community but not requiring them to behave like Jews.

At a later point Paul admonishes the Roman Christians to "accept one another, then, [weak and strong, Jew and Gentile] "just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7) To the Ephesian believers he explains that Jesus by his death has destroyed the barrier of hostility between Jew and Gentile with the purpose of creating in himself "one new man out of the two" (Eph. 2:14-15). Therefore, they are to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). They are not to create the unity but *recognize its existence in practical ways*: "There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:3-5).

Of course there are many other texts that exhort Christians to be like-minded, to forgive one another's faults, to seek reconciliation, to love one another sincerely, etc. An obvious fact is that we have not done this very well, and the history of denominational proliferation is largely a testimony to our failure to keep the unity of the Spirit. This is troubling in itself.

But another problem compounds our failure, and that is our disturbing tendency to *minimize* our factiousness. Unfortunately it is often those claiming alliegance to Scripture who are the most defensive about our bad record of Christian unity. The argument goes something like this: "Yes it is true that the Bible instructs us to pursue unity, but unity must be based on commitment to the truth. When truth is compromised there can be no unity. Isn't this the point of Galatians 1:6-9 where Paul pronounces a curse against those who would proclaim a different gospel?"

Not only in Paul's day but throughout the history of the church there have been distortions of truth so egregious as to fall under the apostle's category of "a different gospel." However, the majority of situations in which appeal is made to Paul's statement do not really deal with issues of that magnitude. As I noted in a previous issue of this journal,[3] there is a combative style of orthodoxy which destroys the peace of the church by magnifying theological differences out of all proportion to their importance--the mountains-out-of-molehills syndrome.

This is the disease of *sectarianism*. John Armstrong writes, "The word implies mutual exclusivity, and exclusivity thrives where people and groups believe that they have a superior claim to truth." He warns that "when we follow this road for a long time, a knock on the door of our souls may well demontrate that no one is home. Our lives will have become filled with arguments, and our souls will be profoundly emptied of Christ's love."[4]

Is this not an accurate diagnosis of the malaise afflicting many parts of the church in our day? We live in a society torn by culture wars, partisan politics, and an epidemic of litigation. This atmosphere is parallelled in the American church. Relationships among God's people often feel like the feuding of the Hatfields and the McCoys.

Theological hospitality

The biblical exhortation to hospitality provides helpful imagery when thinking about the pursuit of unity. Christian hospitality is rooted in the character of God who welcomes us into his family through Christ. Various texts encourage believers to extend that same hospitality to one another and to the stranger in their midst (Romans 12:3; Heb. 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). This was a virtue already commended in the Old Testament.

Denver Seminary professor David Buschart uses this image as a guide for exploring eight different families or theological traditions within Protestantism.[5] Theological hospitality is the practice of welcoming other Christians whose understanding of Scripture and theology may seem strange or challenging to us. This welcome is appropriate, says Buschart, in light of the ontological reality of the church's *present* unity in Christ and the assurance of *complete* unity at the return of Christ. Thus his examination of each tradition (Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, etc.) is an exercise in careful listening and friendly (but fair) evaluation.

He makes it clear that the practice of theological hospitality is not a strategy of theological minimalism: "The pursuit of a fuller manifestation of Christian unity should not consist in the attempt to create a generic church (or, ironically, many generic churches). Christian unity consists not in a generic homogeneity, but in a unity that embraces incarnated particularities. The summons to ecclesio-theological hospitality does not consist in, for example, calling upon Dispensationalists to abandon their basic theological commitments and affirm ones that they do not see in Scripture in order to enter into some form of organizational identification with Pentecostals."[6]

We should understand, therefore, that commitment to a particular theological position or tradition is not in itself a hindrance to the faithful practice of hospitality. A crucial determinant is attitude. Do we see our tradition as a *fortress* (to be defended against the enemy!) or as a *home* (in which to welcome friends)? The latter requires us to practice humility, and this "entails admitting that one's theology is neither complete nor free of errors.... Such fallibility is often acknowledged, at least in principle, but theological hospitality requires acting upon this humility."[7]

Precisely! As in every area of the Christian life, it is easier to talk a good game than play a good game. Missional-ecumenism is the call to begin playing a better game.

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Theological hospitality is the *biblical* response to the church's diversity. But is is also essential to the church's mission. In the next issue we will consider why this is true.

[1] John Frame, *Evangelical Reunion--Denominations and the Body of Christ* (Baker, 1991).
[2] John Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small* (Zondervan, 2009), p. 153.
[3]http://www.biblical.edu/images/missionaljournal/vol1no7.pdf
[4] Armstrong, pp. 92, 97.
[5] David Buschart, *Exploring Protestant Traditions* (IVP, 2006).
[6] Buschart, p. 267.
[7] Buschart, p. 273.