

How shall we deal with those with whom we disagree?

Posted by Bob Young

Have you noticed that God made us all different? Why did God create us different?

One New Testament answer is "so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith, and we all become mature, and we are no longer be infants." (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Now some people think that unity cannot be based on being different, but that it is based on being the same, especially when this same is just like me (or just like you). After all there is only one Christian perspective on Bible teaching, doctrine, and issues, right?

Thus some think if we are to be unified, we must agree on every issue. After all I have the mind of Christ on all issues, and most of my friends agree with me.

Some think unity is based on being in the same economic strata of society. We who ride to our worship services in our relatively new cars from our nice homes have little in common with those poor underprivileged (or lazy) men and women who seek handouts.

Others think that unity is based on worship. I really like the more spirit filled worship when we sing the more exciting songs. It's there that we REALLY praise God. Or, why doesn't everyone like the "Golden Oldies".

Diversity is God's idea and it is good. Genesis 1:1 says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, darkness; 1:3 light; 1:5-8 created the sky separate from the water; 1:9ff added dry land, reproductive vegetation, seasons, light - sun, moon, stars - living creatures, birds that fly across the sky, great creatures of the sea, living creatures for the land, livestock, wild creatures that move along the ground, finally he created humankind - both female and male. It was **all** good! This complex diverse universe created by the creator of the universe tells us that it was good - that diversity is **fundamental** to the design of the universe.

The first characteristic of God we see is creativity. He made both male and female in his own image.

Our heavenly parent made us all different from each other. Think of our uniqueness--fingerprints, weight, body shapes, personalities, personal preferences in music, food, sports, adventure, and reading. If we have a healthy personality and good self image we can easily accept this uniqueness.

Unfortunately many of us think far less of ourselves than does God who designed and made us. We see primarily our faults, and primarily the strengths that others seem to be given. Even in our churches we try to replicate one another. A well known spiritual leader/ author defines discipling as "the process of reproducing in others what the spirit of God is doing in you and in turn enabling them to reproduce in a third generation." This definition of making disciples can be very destructive. Implicit in the definition is that our Lord desires you to be like me and your experiences to be like my experience. Both the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of spiritual gifts teach us that diversity is good, designed by God himself. Diversity in style, interests and spiritual calling is at the very core of how God designed us.

Many of us think that happiness in relationships will come out of us all thinking the same way. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding, in all thy ways acknowledge Him and HE WILL DIRECT THY PATHS." We do not need permission of the majority to know God's direction for our life. Scripture teaches that we need the benefit of insight and perceptions given to those around us, but that we are responsible for our own actions. In Romans 14, the apostle Paul exhorts Christians not to pass judgment on one another in disputable matters. Unfortunately, many of us seem to have few or no disputable matters. After all, those who claim to have views different from ours must need the enlightenment that we have been given. Christians do not

agree on all matters pertaining to the Christian life, nor do we need to. Verse 14 says, "Each of us will give an account of him to God." It is God who is the judge of our brothers and sisters.

Sometimes we feel inferior when we think we are different. We become critical of others who are different from ourselves. The affirmation that God made us different puts both these ideas in a bad light. We may not like diversity, but it is designed by God. Do we rush to apply certain litmus tests for orthodoxy, style or consistency? Do we reject something just because it seems to contradict some value we have already embraced? Can we accept paradoxes?

We are afraid of uniqueness. We are threatened. We are afraid to express our ideas, convictions or feelings because they are different from either most of those around us. The church should be a sanctuary for those seeking God, a place where, when we question our faith or the status quo, legitimate questions are welcomed and form the foundation for us to learn from one another. If we feel we must maintain a certain image with someone, we put a damper on intimacy. If we put others down, even subtly, we quench the enthusiasm for discovering new truth. Speaking the truth in love is very difficult when the truth is that we disagree with the party line and we greatly fear rejection.

We judge uniqueness. While some of us struggle with self-confidence amidst our uniqueness, others of us develop a strong critical attitude against those who are not like ourselves. This judgmental attitude is as common inside the church as it is outside the church. Sometimes participation in certain programs of the church becomes the litmus tests of spirituality. You aren't in a small group? You don't attend Bible class? You don't come back on Sunday night, or Wednesday night? Do we put people in boxes?

After a "too long" introduction, I have three questions, and seven principles.

Questions

How did Jesus treat people, especially the immoral, impure, etc.?

What does the Bible say about our interactions with those with whom we disagree?

What impact should grace have on our relationships with those with whom we disagree?

Principles: How shall we treat those with whom we disagree?

- 1 Act with gentleness and humility, Romans 15:1-3; Ephesians 4
- 2 Never forget that all are saved by the grace of God, Romans 14:4
- 3 Respect the viewpoints of others, listen to the viewpoints of others, Romans 14
- 4 Respect the conscience of others, Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8-10
- 5 Teach more accurately the way of the Lord in word and in action/attitude, Acts 18, 1 Peter 3
- 6 Remember that God blesses "seekers", Romans 14:6-8; Hebrews 11:6
- 7 Seek, commit to, and maintain unity, desiring to remain together, Romans 15:5-6; Ephesians 4