

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 12: Dealing With Differences in Priorities

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Rarely mentioned among the sources of denominational division are what I would call differences in "priorities" or "emphasis." These are not differences in doctrine, for two bodies may adhere to the same doctrines but have very different priorities. We might describe them as practical or historical differences, but they are distinct enough even within those classifications to deserve special mention. One major problem, I think, in the quest for reunion, is the tendency to confuse priority questions with other sorts of doctrinal and practical questions.

Perhaps the best way to understand this issue is first to look at the nature of priorities in the individual Christian life, and then by comparison at the nature of priorities within denominations.

Priorities Among Ultimates

When God says "no" to us, he requires an immediate response. When he says, "Do not steal," if I am stealing I must stop right then and there. I have no right to ask him to wait. Repentance, turning from sin, is not a long, drawn-out process, but a single act.¹

But when God says "yes," the situation is somewhat different. His positive commands require a somewhat different sort of response from his negative commands. Positively, God commands us to pray, evangelize, worship, feed the hungry, visit the sick, study the Scriptures, train our children, edify fellow

¹ I recently heard of a man being disciplined by his church for adultery who said that he was "in the process of repenting." What he meant was that he was committing adultery less frequently than before! That is not biblical repentance.

believers, seek justice in society, show love to our spouses, even replenish and subdue the earth, and so on. Does he expect instant, immediate obedience to those commands?

We may be inclined to say “yes,” and that inclination comes from a good motive. We think of Abraham who, when he heard the word of God to leave Ur of the Chaldees, simply got up and did it. Even more impressive is his seemingly instantaneous obedience to the awful divine command to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son and the heir of the promise.² We think of the disciples who stopped what they were doing and obeyed Jesus' command to follow him. We think of Jesus himself who readily obeyed the Father's every wish. There seems to be here a pattern of immediate, instantaneous obedience as a model for our own.

Surely there are times when God calls us to do something “now.” Jesus did not accept would-be disciples who wanted first to say good-bye to others, or to bury their dead. He wanted them right away. But God does not always command us to do something “now.” Indeed, God commands us to do many things that *cannot* all be done immediately. Think of all the things God commands, some of them listed in the fourth paragraph of this chapter. So many things! In the nature of the case, they simply cannot be done “now.” If I spend the morning going door to door presenting the gospel to people in my neighborhood, I won't be able to visit my sick friend in the hospital until afternoon. If I spend the next hour in prayer, I shall have to postpone writing this chapter of my book, and so on.

So I come to an obvious, yet somehow surprising conclusion, that some good works must be *postponed*. Obeying God is not a simple matter of hearing his Word, then going out and doing it immediately. Sometimes we must put off one good work until tomorrow so that we may do another today. Sometimes when I hear God speaking in the Scriptures, I must reply, “Lord, I'll do that later; you have given me something else to do now.”

That means that in relation to God's commands, each of us must develop a system of *priorities*. We must discover not only what God requires, but also what command to carry out first. Priorities among ultimates! Priorities among absolutes! The whole idea sounds so paradoxical! We're not used to thinking along these lines. We normally assume that if two commands are absolute, that is, from God, neither can take precedence over the other. But we know now that that cannot be right.

The problem faces us every day, even every moment: what shall I do first; what shall I do now? Generally we make our decisions without really thinking

² To be sure, we should not assume that the Genesis account tells us everything that happened. It may well be, e.g., that Abraham wrestled with the divine Word before he left Ur. But Rom. 4:20ff. commends Abraham on the whole as one who did not “waver” in his obedience to God's words.

much about priorities. We make priority decisions off the tops of our heads, unreflectively. Yet these decisions often have enormous consequences. Where can we turn for help?

On the problem of priorities among ultimates, sermons often do more harm than good. Sermons almost never tell us what good works we may leave until later! They almost never tell us what prayers may be left unsaid (for now), what Scriptures unread, what needy people unfed, unvisited, unevangelized, uninstructed. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a sermon that did tell us such things. The very nature of the sermon seems to be that of encouraging us to *do*, not to leave undone.

There are good reasons why sermons are like that, which I will not list here. What is harder to justify, however, is that sermons often not only fail to solve our priority questions, but they often make those questions more difficult.³ For sermons usually suggest, if they do not actually imply, that we should be doing *all* good works *all* the time.

One week we are told that evangelism is absolutely central to the work of the church and to the life of the believer. Everyone must be passionately concerned about evangelism. And if we are passionately concerned, of course, we will spend time evangelizing. The preacher may present to us as an illustration a Christian who has led thirty people into the kingdom during the past year; the illustration makes us ashamed of ourselves.

Next week, the sermon is on prayer. Our lives must be full of prayer, we're told. If we don't spend a lot of time praying, we don't really love God and our neighbors. And Luther spent so much time praying each day! We are ashamed. Then the next week we hear about feeding the hungry, then studying the Bible, then contending against false doctrines, then influencing our social institutions, then working hard at our jobs, then caring for our families. And of course we must not "forsake the assembly," which seems to mean attending every church meeting possible.

I am a church musician, and I once preached a sermon which showed, by a good biblico-theological method, the centrality of *music* in the Christian life. We are, after all, saved to sing the praises of Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). Therefore, all of us ought to put much more time than we do into our worship life. We ought to study how to worship, just as we study how to pray and how to witness. If we really care, we'll join the choir!

But when we count up all the things we're supposed to do, we have to ask hard questions about them. Is it really right for preachers to heap such an enormous sense of shame upon their people on this account? Though all of

³ In case anyone is curious, my own pastor is not guilty of any of the following criticisms of preachers. If anything, I am mainly criticizing my own preaching

these things are "central,"⁴ "vital," "important," though all of them deserve a passionate concern, a sacrificial giving of time and resources, we cannot do them all at once. Ought we to be ashamed of that? Why, even if we *tried* to do all these things at once, the end result would be a lot of failure, frustration, and shame.

That is one side of the problem. The opposite result is also possible: failure to come to grips with this issue can lead to pride and arrogance. Believers are often very suspicious of other believers who have a different set of priorities from their own. The zealous evangelist who labors many hours to bring the gospel to neighbors and friends may look down at his stay-at-home brother who spends more time with his wife and children, and vice versa.

How do we deal with the problem? First, let us recognize that God understands our finitude. He doesn't expect us to do everything at once. He commanded Adam and Eve to "replenish and subdue the earth" (Gen. 1:28), but he did not intend for them to do that immediately or all by themselves. For at the same time as he told them to subdue the earth, he also told them to replenish it: he ordained reproduction. Subduing the earth was not a job for Adam and Eve alone, but for a great body of men, women, and children spread over the whole surface of the globe. Similarly, when Jesus called the disciples to "teach all nations" (Matt. 28:19ff.), he did not intend for the twelve disciples to do the whole job themselves and instantly. He envisaged, rather, a historical process (a long one, as it has turned out) in which millions of believers cooperate in this great task. Not all believers do the same thing, either. They have different gifts (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12), and therefore different callings, but each one makes a contribution. Some will knock on doors, some will develop businesses to support those knocking on doors,⁵ some will pray for those who are knocking on doors, etc.

And when God calls me to pray, as he does in Scripture, he doesn't necessarily mean that I should drop everything and do it immediately or for an unlimited time. Even Jesus got up from his prayers to do other things. Rather, he expects me to devote a reasonable amount of time to prayer. How much is reasonable? That depends on the person. Some have more opportunity and leisure for this than others, like the "order of widows" in the New Testament (1 Tim. 5:3-16, especially verse 5). Gifts and calling make a difference. How do we determine our gifts and calling? General principles of Scripture, our opportunities and abilities, the support of the church (cf. Acts 13:2, etc.), the Holy Spirit enabling us to make our decisions according to love (Phil. 1:9ff.; cf. Rom. 12:1ff.; Eph. 5:8-10).

⁴ One interesting thing about Christianity is that a great many things in it can be called "central." It is a circle with many centers; or perhaps only one (Christ) which can be seen from many points of view. I call it "perspectival."

⁵ I am not, incidentally, saying that this is the only justification for working in a business. The cultural mandate of Gen. 1:28 is also an important basis for it.

Some, then, are called to pray more than others, some to knock on more doors, etc. Those with one gift/calling are not to look down on those who have another, for they are one body in Christ. One is like the hand, another like the foot, another like the brain. Each needs the others if the body is to function correctly (1 Cor. 12). No one should feel guilty,⁶ and no one should be arrogant or prideful.

Denominational Priorities

Now we can say things about denominations similar to what we have been saying about individual Christians. For among the many kinds of differences they have, denominations also differ from one another as to their priorities. One may give special attention to Christian education, another to evangelism, another to social action. One will have a strong interest in maintaining proper procedures. Another will at times cut corners in the established procedures to accomplish some other goal. The point is not that denomination A believes in, say, Christian education while denomination B does not. (What denomination would dare say that they don't believe in teaching the gospel to their children?) Rather, some denominations put a higher emphasis or priority on Christian education than do others.

The same applies to more "doctrinal" matters. Say that denomination A emphasizes that God is to be worshipped in "reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28). Denomination B, in turn, emphasizes that worship must be of such a style as to demonstrate God's love to the people who attend (Jam. 2:1-13). Now, denomination B certainly would not wish to deny Hebrews 12:28, nor would denomination A wish to deny James 2:1-13. But there is a difference of emphasis or priority between them that can lead, indeed, to rather different styles of worship.

Other differences are partly priority differences, partly simple disagreements. I certainly would not reduce the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism to a difference in priority or emphasis.⁷ These are differences of exegesis, of theology. But there is an *element* of priority difference here too: when a Calvinist tests his doctrinal formulations, he tends to be preoccupied with the impact of that formulation upon the divine sovereignty, though he also wishes to do justice to human responsibility. Arminians, however, while not wishing at all to deny the sovereignty of God, tend to be more preoccupied with the need for a credible doctrine of human responsibility. It is interesting to speculate as to which came first, the priority difference or the substantive difference (I'm inclined to say the former in most cases.) Perhaps if both parties had tried harder to appreciate the priorities of one another, their difference might not have hardened into a substantive one. And perhaps the only way out will be for both parties to develop

⁶ Unless, of course, he neglects his calling.

⁷ A "priority" often coincides with what in an earlier chapter I called a "perspective."

their arguments with a greater appreciation for the other party's priorities. For neither priority is wrong, in my view.⁸ And since neither is wrong, there is room for mutual encouragement and affirmation at the priority level, an affirmation which ought to precede and govern all debate.

In my view, denominations should not remain separate because of priority differences alone. Consider the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), two bodies with which I have had some experience, and which have considered church union with one another (unsuccessfully) from time to time. These two denominations have identical doctrinal standards and both have shown a serious purpose in maintaining those doctrinal commitments. There is a somewhat wider range of opinion in the PCA on some matters: the precise scope of Christian liberty, for instance. But those differences are very slight. Yet, there is a kind of nervousness in both groups about the possibility of church union. Why? Well, for one thing, there are in both groups many misunderstandings about the role of denominations in God's kingdom, misunderstandings which I hope this book will help to alleviate.⁹ But for another thing, there are definite differences in priorities between the two bodies: differences which provoke a sense of discomfort in those contemplating merger.

The PCA has a far larger missions program for its size than the OPC, though both bodies certainly believe in and support missions.¹⁰ The OPC gives much more support, per capita, to the production of Christian Education materials. The OPC is known for its profound and brilliant theologians, the PCA for its remarkable church growth. The OPC is known for the carefulness with which it follows Presbyterian procedures, the PCA for its speed (sometimes at the expense of "procedures") in getting new churches started.¹¹ Some have described the OPC as more "inward facing" and the PCA as more "outward facing," to recall a previous distinction. The OPC is known for its relatively tough ordination exams, the PCA for its openness to welcome new ministers and churches into the body.

⁸ As I argued in my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, it is legitimate and illuminating to read scripture from a great many "perspectives" and emphases. See also Vern Poythress, *Symphonic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

⁹ If I may venture a slightly exaggerated summary, which would probably be disputed in both bodies: the OPC believes in church unity, but only with a perfect partner; the PCA does not believe very deeply in church unity at all. At least that's the way it looks to me.

¹⁰ The PCA has the fastest growing foreign missions force in the world. The OPC recently had to cut back its foreign mission program because of financial constraints.

¹¹ When I was in the OPC, its presbyteries seemed to spend forever perfecting their minutes. I often wished someone had asked seriously how high a priority God would have us place on the perfection of minutes! Most presbyters, I'm sure, did not think of it as a priority matter at all, but as obedience to a divine command: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). But like all divine commands, this one needs to be placed in an order of priority in comparison with other such commands. The danger is that we try to keep command A perfectly (perhaps for the trivial reason that it is first on presbytery's docket) and never get to command B.

A bit of whimsy may clarify the issue: The OPC is like a homemaker, the PCA like a breadwinner. In the traditional family (rapidly disappearing, one would gather from the national media), the husband is the breadwinner, the wife the homemaker. The homemaker spends more time at home. She sees that the house is clean, that the children are taught the right things, that the right persons are on the guest list (and the wrong ones excluded). The breadwinner, on the other hand, concentrates his energies outside the home. He knows the house has to be kept in order, and he is glad that there is somebody around to do that work. But his own talents and interests lead him to take on more and more responsibilities on behalf of those outside the household. He knows he must meet *their* needs, not only those of his family; and he knows that if he does not go into the world to draw from the world's supply of wealth, his family will not survive. Homemaker and breadwinner may well respect the priorities of one another, or they may fight about them. At least it should be noted that their priorities are not the same.

Now, many in the OPC and in the PCA believe that these differences in priority are incompatible. They think that the two churches cannot join together unless they become more like one another. I think that these opponents of union fail to see the distinction between doctrinal differences and priority differences – or they fail to understand that the differences between the two groups are indeed largely differences in priority. If I am right that the differences are differences of priorities, then the two groups ought not to remain apart. For the two kinds of gifts are complementary, not in opposition. The PCA needs more theologians and Christian educators; the OPC needs more evangelists and church planters. Each needs the help of the other in deciding when and how much to bend "procedures" in order to hasten the advance of the gospel. Or, to revert to my metaphor, the homemaker needs a breadwinner, and vice versa. And when we recognize that homemaker-gifts and breadwinner-gifts are complementary, then our sense of the possibilities can change. After all, homemakers often fall in love with and marry breadwinners, and these sometimes live (relatively!) happily ever after.

What is it that enables us to see differences as they really are, without exaggerating them? It's the love of Christ. Love and marriage go together, in the spiritual world as in the natural world; and it is love that holds the marriage together.

As we seek to evaluate our relationships to other denominations, we will observe many sorts of differences. But it is important for us to distinguish substantive differences from priority differences, even when sometimes (as in the Calvinist/Arminian example) these types of differences are both found together. Making that distinction will give us a much clearer view of things and will, I believe, naturally pressure us toward reunion. As we saw earlier, denominationalism is largely responsible for the present uneven distribution of gifts in the church and for the inaccessibility of the gifts of some to Christians of

other denominations. A determination to redress this imbalance will force us to work toward reunion.

Emphasis in Ministry

Love will also enable us to make wiser judgments about what to *emphasize* in the preaching and teaching of our churches. This is an important "priority" question that all of us have to face. In my previous book,¹² I attacked the tendency for theologians to criticize one another on the basis of "emphasis:" "Theologian A does not sufficiently emphasize x." I pointed out there that there is room for many differences in emphasis since the work of theology is to apply, not merely to state, biblical content. Even relatively minor matters, like the head-coverings of women in 1 Corinthians 11, are proper subject-matter for theology, even if the theologian does not attempt in the same context to emphasize more central biblical topics.

In this regard, however, pastors are different from other theologians. Most people get 90% or so of their Christian teaching from a local church. It is therefore important that the ministry of that local church provide a balanced diet of spiritual nourishment. An academic theologian can sometimes afford to spend his life studying obscure subjects of interest to him but not to many others in the church. But the pastor of a church cannot afford that kind of luxury. If the teaching ministry of a church "majors in minors" or "rides hobby horses," the people will not be fed.

The "proper emphasis" of church ministry must be, roughly, the emphasis of Scripture itself. I say "roughly," because the Word must be applied to the people in the congregation, and of course these people are very different from the people to whom the Bible was first addressed. We must talk about many things today that Paul did not talk about: abortion, nuclear war, Christian influence in politics, television violence and pornography, etc. Still, the center of our preaching and teaching (and indeed the "answer," in a sense, even to the modern problems) must always be "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). This is the great message that all true Christian churches share, regardless of denomination.

One anti-ecumenical tendency is for churches to emphasize their *distinctives*, the doctrines and practices which separate them from other churches, denominations and traditions, at the expense of those doctrines and practices held more broadly by all evangelicals or even by all Christians. Some churches, for example, that believe the premillennial view of Christ's return put such an emphasis on it, even making it a test of orthodoxy, so as to produce an imbalance in their teaching and an unnecessary degree of separation from other believers. Whether or not that doctrine is true is not the point right now. The

¹² DKG, 182-83.

question is whether that should be a major emphasis of the church's preaching and teaching, coordinate with, say, the resurrection of Jesus.

I believe that we should accept a wide variety of different emphases in different ministries. Again, no one can do everything, and so no one can have a perfect balance. At the same time, some emphases are better than others, and we ought in general to emphasize the more important matters over those which are less important. For the most part, the "more important" matters (scripturally determined) coincide with those doctrines and practices believed broadly throughout the Christian church, rather than with the distinctives of any one denomination. Such emphasis will be beneficial to church unity, but also to the very quality of ministry within the church. Fewer lessons are needed as much as the lesson to put first things first.

Denominational chauvinism often includes the view that the distinctives of one's denomination are more important than the great doctrines shared among all Christians. Thus, it often leads to serious imbalances in preaching and teaching. On the contrary, I would maintain that denominational distinctives never have that kind of importance (more on this in Chapter 14).

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