

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 9: Dealing With Differences in Practice

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The contrast between doctrine and practice comes readily to the minds and lips of church people, as roughly the equivalent of the common "theoretical/practical" distinction. The Westminster Shorter Catechism identifies the content of Scripture as beliefs and duties (Q., A. 3), and bases its own two-part structure on that contrast. Sometimes the basic idea is put as a distinction between "faith and life."

At best, this contrast is only a rough, general one. Many matters are hard to classify on one side of the distinction or the other. What about the sacraments, for instance? Indeed, the actual beliefs and doctrines of Christians are revealed in their actions as well as in their words; practices are ways of expressing doctrines. And conversely, doctrines emerge out of practices, ultimately from the deeds of God, Jesus and the apostles, and proximately from the behavior of Christians that influences their doctrinal formulations.

Therefore, most of the considerations mentioned in the previous chapter apply here as well. In "practice" also, Scripture warrants tolerance of differences within certain limits, and we ought to practice that tolerance (carefully observing the limits) to maximize unity. But without getting into heavy epistemology, I will here use the familiar distinction as a very rough tool, to make some sense out of the relation of this to the previous chapter.

Obviously I will not be able to deal here with *all* the "practices" of the church, which would require omniscience. However, I shall deal with some of the more important ones which have historically been barriers to church union. That a church practice inhibits church union does not necessarily make it a bad practice. Rather, such a practice needs to be considered to see if it can be carried on in such a way as not to discourage unity.

Sacraments

Certainly among the most important "practices" in the church are the sacraments, about which there are many differences among the denominations. Disagreements exist as to the definition of a sacrament, how many there are, the subjects to which they should be administered, who is entitled to administer them, what constitutes "valid" sacraments, what procedures are correct, what the sacraments symbolize, what they "seal," and how Christ is "present" in them. Many of these issues are doctrinal and fall under the observations of Chapter Six. Let me here discuss a few matters which cause problems for unity in addition to those we have already considered.

Are Differences Over the Subjects of Baptism Tolerable?

It is sometimes said, for example, that Presbyterians and Baptists could never unite because they differ on the subjects of baptism and therefore they would differ as to the membership of the church. This is a significant question because there are Baptists who agree fully with Reformed theology, and even Presbyterian government, except on this one subject. I did say earlier that church membership is an important matter, a way by which an individual believer can be put under the oversight of a particular body of elders as the New Testament requires. Thus, the idea of a "membership roll" is a legitimate one. The question is, however, whether that roll must be absolutely precise. Surely it would not be a breach of decency and order if a Presbyterian Church were to merge with a Baptist Church and keep a roll of members "and their children," leaving open (i.e. tolerating a difference as to) the actual status of these children, and allowing each family (or each congregation within a denomination) to practice its own convictions as to whether or not the children should be baptized.¹

I do believe in infant baptism myself; I think it can be proven from Scripture.² But the argument for it is somewhat difficult, and I can readily sympathize with my fellow-believers who don't agree with me. The debate could have been easily resolved in the first century by reference to the apostolic practice. But many years have gone by since that time, and during the Reformation the Protestants and Anabaptists came to distrust the claims of the Roman Catholic Church to transmit the apostolic practice without distortion. Whether that distrust was right or wrong, it made the question far more difficult than it otherwise would have been. All in all, I would encourage union between

¹ Alternatives: (1) Allowing the decision to be made by the individual congregation, so that each presbytery or convention would include churches of both convictions. (2) Allowing, say, Baptist and non-Baptist presbyteries within an overall Presbyterian denomination

² See John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952).

Baptist and Presbyterian bodies which are otherwise agreed, allowing for diverse opinions on the subjects of baptism.

The Validity of Baptisms by Other Churches

Another problem is in determining the validity of baptisms from outside one's own denomination.³ The early church took a rather liberal view on this subject. Augustine argued that the church should recognize the baptisms of schismatics and heretics, and his view did prevail, though it has been questioned by many since his time.

There are some today who accept the validity of only those baptisms performed within their own denomination. For shame! That view seems to me to represent the epitome of denominationalism, and denominationalism at its worst. It is a view without any basis in Scripture, one that elevates particular denominations far beyond their legitimate status, and which in effect denies the existence of true faith beyond its own organization, insulting the whole body of Christ.

My view is that when a person claims to have been baptized, showing a fairly knowledgeable understanding of the theology of baptism, we should take his word for it unless we have evidence to the contrary. That is to say, the burden of proof is upon those who would show that his claim is false. To deny someone's claim to have been baptized is essentially an act of discipline. And discipline in Scripture, like American civil law, follows the principle of "innocent until proven guilty." In biblical terms, the principle is "two or three witnesses" (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19). That is, if you want to prove that someone is guilty, you must make a strong case. In the absence of such a strong case, you dare not accuse someone of wrongdoing.

What might constitute evidence of invalid baptism? That might in itself be matter for disagreement among Christians. The individual church or denomination would have to decide; but acknowledging the burden of proof as I have suggested will necessarily lead them to accept claims to baptism in most situations, and that will be favorable to unity. But they might choose to recognize as evidence of invalid baptism, e.g., evidence that the "church" which performed the baptism had repudiated the gospel and therefore had no right to baptize anyone.⁴

³ Similar questions arise as to the recognition of ministerial ordination.

⁴ Of course, formal judgments by one church that another church is totally apostate have been exceedingly rare in church history. Augustine did not make such a judgment against the schismatics and heretics of his day; the Protestant reformers did not make it against the Roman Catholic Church; the Puritans did

Fencing the Table

A related question arises in connection with the Lord's Supper. The Apostle Paul tells us, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 11:28-30). Interpreters differ as to the nature of the sin here described as "not recognizing the body of the Lord." It is plain, however, that this sin has serious consequences; so serious that those who may be guilty of it are best advised not to take the bread and cup. To protect people from these serious consequences, many churches have made some attempt to restrict the sacrament to those who can reasonably be expected to partake worthily (cf. verse 27). These attempts are sometimes called "fencing the table." Sometimes this consists only of a warning from the pulpit. Other times the officer(s) of the congregation physically withhold the sacrament from those about whom they are in doubt.

Who may take communion? In some congregations, only members of that congregation in good standing may partake ("closed communion"). That "plays it safe" with 1 Corinthians 11:27-30. In some other congregations, communion is restricted to members in good standing plus others who can give evidence of their good standing elsewhere. Sometimes "elsewhere" is restricted to the denomination in question; sometimes it is more broadly applied. "Evidence" is, in some cases, a letter from one's home church. In other cases it may be one's own testimony. These approaches are sometimes called "restricted" communion. "Open" communion exists where the minister presiding at communion gives a warning,⁵ but leaves it up to each worshiper whether or not he will partake. Sometimes the minister's remarks will recommend participation only by those who are members in good standing of Christian or Evangelical churches.

Open communion certainly permits members of different churches or denominations to have maximum access to one another's communion tables. In that sense it promotes unity and therefore ought to be preferred if it can be shown to be a scriptural procedure. I believe it is scriptural. Note: (1) 1 Corinthians 11 puts the responsibility for taking communion worthily entirely upon the individual: "A man ought to *examine himself*... But *if we judged ourselves* we would not come under judgment." (2) Elders in the church have only spiritual, not physically coercive power. They may exhort, but they are not, like the civil government, given the power of the sword. They may give advice, and often should; but they may not physically prevent people from taking communion.

not so judge the Anglican Church; nor did J. Gresham Machen so condemn the Presbyterian Church U. S. A

⁵ Sometimes, to be sure, there is not even a warning. That is also open communion, but I do not favor it. A minister does have a responsibility at least to warn worshipers of spiritual danger

(3) Only open communion preserves the biblical judicial principle of "innocent until proven guilty" as discussed above. If people hear the warning and claim (by taking the elements) that they are fit to receive communion, the church is obligated to accept their testimony unless it has strong reasons for believing otherwise.⁶

Worship

The sacraments are part of worship, of course, but let us now look at worship from a more general viewpoint. In present-day America, the church is in ferment concerning worship. Many different approaches and styles are found, all arguing their scripturality and competing for the allegiance of Christians. Differences over worship are certainly one source of disunity within the church today.

I hope to write a book on worship sometime which will argue (as you might expect) that Scripture permits a fairly wide range of approaches and styles.⁷ We cannot go into all the arguments now. Suffice it to say that although one can show various advantages in, say, formal liturgical worship, it is impossible to show that scripture *requires* this as the *exclusive* mode of worship for God's people. The same is true for the other common alternatives.

If we grant this conclusion, I believe that we will have to consider a wide variety of matters in determining how we shall worship. And one of those is, again, our concern for church unity. There are some kinds of worship which tend to be exclusive, where congregations do various things that are not well understood outside their churches and/or their denominations. The impact of this sort of thing on visitors is not beneficial. I have visited churches where the members regularly stand, sit, kneel at various points of the service, but where there is no way a visitor can gain information as to what to do and when. Sometimes, the members are little or no help to the visitor, and the visitor feels left out.

Worship ought to be conducted in a welcoming atmosphere. No one should be made to feel out of place because of his clothing, his poverty (Jas. 2:1-13; 1 Cor. 11:22), his race (Gal. 2:11-14; Eph. 2:11-22), or, presumably, his

⁶ When it has such a strong reason, as when an excommunicated person known to the elders seeks to take the sacrament, the elders ought to engage in some additional and fervent pleading, but nothing more.

⁷ Nov., 2000: The Lord did enable me to write this book: in fact, two of them. See my *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 1996) and *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 1997).

inexperience in the tradition of the church. In worship, too, love of the brethren must abound.⁸

In my view, these considerations favor an informal type of worship in which most everything is explained to visitors, and in which the music and language are simple and fairly familiar in style. However, these arguments do not necessarily rule out other kinds of worship. I have been in formal liturgical services where the various activities were clearly outlined for visitors and where the congregation was exceedingly hospitable.

Other practices which reinforce denominational divisions and inhibit the growth of unity will be discussed in succeeding chapters. The moral to this one is that we ought to take the unity of the church into account when we discuss ways of doing things in the church. Often, I think, we tend to plan our church activities without even thinking about the bearing of these activities on unity. I pray that God will eliminate that dullness from our hearts.

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⁸ It simply is not true, pious as it may sound, that in worship we must concentrate on God alone. Scripture requires of us even in worship to care for one another in love.