



But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. -

Matthew 15:9

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Factionalism

For the last few month's I've been working on a project with my wife. Our goal has been to write a Bible curriculum for elementary school that supports the truth about God that we've come to know over the last few years. I started to do something for grades 5 and 6, but it became clear that what I wanted to say was more appropriate to grades 7 and 8 and possibly even for high school. I just finished a fifth unit in the sequence I'm working on, which ended with lesson 43. I'm thinking 72 lessons about right, two for each week of the school year.

My first unit was about creation and about the situation in heaven that led God to create. We examined the Bible's symbolic account of events surrounding the origin of evil in the universe. The next unit looked at the implications of our approach to God's character on how he plans to save humanity. The third unit was a study of the book of Psalms, with particular attention to passages that seem to present a negative picture of God.

Then I hit writer's block for a day or so. I thought about church history, which many denominations teach with a view to demonstrating how they, and only they, are right. But that led me to the account of the early Christian church in the book of Acts. So that became my fourth unit. Sometime near the end of my work on the third unit I went in for back surgery (which was successful, thank you). That kept me away from work for five weeks, which gave me more time to work on the lessons than usual.

For my fifth unit I decided to do a series of lessons on doctrine. I decided that my approach would be to see doctrine as an approach to knowing God. The usefulness of a particular teaching is based on whether the God it presents is true to what can be known about God from the Bible and from nature. So this,

rather than a list of proof texts, would be the test I would apply. I decided not to take the position that any particular teaching was wrong, but rather look at the scriptural evidence and then ask what a particular teaching said about God.

That, and the work done on the book of Acts for the previous unit, led me to firm up some opinions about doctrinal dogmatism, denominational exclusivity, and how that compares to disagreements revealed in the book of Acts.

We humans are so self-oriented that we tend to spend our time dwelling on how we are personally better than the people around us. This is a form of arrogance that may dwell solely in the mind, but all too often leads to bigotry and to factionalism. "I'm right, and you disagree with me, so you must be wrong," eventually leads to, "In order to maintain purity of my associations I must separate myself from you and form my own group who will reject your falsehoods."

Thus we have over thirty thousand "Christian" groups today. Probably no other religion as so fragmented. Most all of these groups claim to have the truth about God, even if their "truth" differs from another group's "truth" in infinitesimal ways. Even within one denomination there are often different congregations in the same city or town that resulted from disagreements or personality conflicts.

What is it about human nature that leads us to not only disagree about what the Bible says, but to fall into the trap of "fighting heresy." The worst abuses of Christian organizations have been undertaken in the name of rooting out heresy. And the more authoritarian the organization the more violent it is likely to become in the process.

The most pernicious idea behind sectarianism is the call to unity. The Bible teaches unity in diversity. The basis for unity is love and the Holy Spirit, the two topics Jesus dwelt on with his disciples just before his prayer for the unity of the believers. It is NOT uniformity he was seeking. He wanted people to so love each other that we could respect those whose ideas are different than ours.

And what WAS the experience of the early church? Some of the believers, Paul among them, took the good news to the Gentile world and shared it with any who would listen. As you read Paul's writings it becomes clear that he had no use for "Judaizing" teachers. The law handed down by Moses had its use, but it never saved anyone and keeping it could drive you farther from, rather than closer to, God.

After his first missionary journey into what is now Turkey, Paul returned to

Antioch. The believers there made him part of a delegation sent to Jerusalem to iron out differences over whether Gentile believers should keep the law of Moses. There were some Pharisees who had joined “the Way” who felt the Gentiles should be circumcised. Paul, himself a former Pharisee didn't agree and hadn't taught the law to any of his converts.

The decision made at Jerusalem was to require four things of Gentiles. They were to avoid sexual immorality, food sacrificed to idols, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. Paul agreed with the first of those restrictions, and we have no record of his position on the last two. But the second he disagreed with in later writings. He did allow that some people could eat food sacrificed to idols because they had a strong conscience and knew that the idol was nothing.

But other people didn't have such a strong conscience, and Paul warned that exercising your freedom from human regulations in their presence could violate their conscience and lead them into sin. So a loving person wouldn't do anything that could harm someone else. And that's why Paul would write that “love is the fulfillment of the law.” Love is the unifying force that allows us to be unified even in our diversity of gifts, our diversity of opinion, and our diversity of culture.

I was raised in a sectarian tradition that, to this day, has a view of its exclusive grasp on Bible truth. We were taught that the ecumenical movement was a ploy of Satan to dilute doctrinal purity. Thus we had religious leaders calling on us to submit to their ideas so there would be “unity,” going forward to oppose a movement designed to bring unity. We don't have to give up our understanding of truth to be unified with those who disagree with us. We simply have to agree to treat these people as if they might be right and we might be wrong. In exchange they would do the same with our ideas.

Doctrinal uniformity is not required in the scriptures. All men would know who Jesus disciples are not by what they teach, but because they love each other. “And now there is faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is Love.”

Elkanah