

Voices: Christian unity and truth

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When Gavin Ortlund wanted to create a ministry that promotes theological depth, apologetic clarity and a genuinely Christian public witness, he called that ministry [Truth Unites](#). His logic is clear and compelling: When we focus on the essentials of the gospel, we remember all that binds us together as Christians.

Unfortunately, history too often has been a powerful counter-witness to this hopeful vision. Truth has been a weapon disciples of Jesus use against one another, and we Baptists seem particularly prone to reach for this weapon.

Christ is clear: His ministry will not always bring harmony (Matthew 10:34-36). There will be those scandalized by Jesus' perspective on the world, by his claims about himself, and by his call to renounce the idolatrous and destructive loyalties that have shaped individuals, family systems, communities and societies.

But it isn't supposed to work that way in the church. Ephesians 4:1-6 contends Christ has given us a common repository of truth—a "faith" that is to unite the people of God in mind, in heart and in ministry.

Romans 14:1-15:13 further argues this common faith—which Paul describes in great detail earlier in the letter—should both motivate and assist us in bridging the gaps in the Christian family.

So why does truth often seem to be more of an obstacle to unity than an aid to it?

The nature of truth

There is no doubting the centrality of truth for the Christian religion. It is the “truth” that frees us from the devil’s malevolent schemes and from our own sinful predilections (John 8:32).

But Western Christians often have thought of truth purely in propositional terms. This truncated understanding of the concept flies in the face of the Old Testament’s relational construal of truth. Moreover, it is inconsistent with Jesus’ incarnational understanding of the concept (John 14:6).

A purely propositional understanding of truth is much easier to weaponize. We may not be able to tell whether an opponent lives a faithful life submitted to the saving authority of Jesus, but we can tell whether they affirm our checklist of sacred beliefs. If they do, then they are one of us. If they don’t, then they are the enemy.

We deceive ourselves into thinking we can “fire at will,” doing whatever we have to do to punish them for opposing our construal of the truth.

That is not to say propositional truth is unimportant. Facts matter—especially when we are talking about God, creation, humanity and more. But knowing facts does not mean we know truth, and it is all too easy for us to manipulate facts for our own ends.

Social and psychological influences

The complex nature of truth only problematizes another critical issue: How do we discern truth?

If we construe truth purely in propositional terms, we can fool ourselves into thinking finding truth is merely a matter of discovering, collating and applying facts. But if truth is also relational and incarnational, then the

work of discerning truth is far more complicated than we often have imagined.

As diverse thinkers—including Jonathan Haidt and Jim Wilder—have pointed out, a scavenger hunt approach to the process of constructing and construing truth does not account for the decisive role nonrational mental faculties play in forming our beliefs, convictions and values.

Loyalties, desires, prejudices and other artifacts of the nonrational mind invariably influence how we construct our personal identity, which in turn influences what information we process and how we use that information to form our understanding of truth.

Moreover, there is a symbiotic relationship between truth claims and social identity. The unique matrix of perceptions, values and rituals that characterize the group always influences how individual group members process intellectual input and social stimuli.

This doesn't mean the individual mind is a slave of the groups to which that individual belongs, but it does mean he or she will have to work harder to come to conclusions that differ from the dominant perspectives of those groups.

Thus, much of our confidence in our ability to discern truth from falsehood is misplaced, especially if we do not attend to the many and varied social and psychological forces that constantly grapple for our allegiance.

It also means we have good reason to relate to those who disagree with us with empathy, for we know they, too, are struggling against powerful and obscure forces.

Disagreement as contamination

As Sharon McMann and Mike Cosper recently [observed](#), there is another obstacle to the marriage of unity and truth. Humans have a primal instinct for order, and that instinct often leads us to assume we somehow are contaminated if we associate with people who do not share the beliefs and values that form our most important social identities.

It is not hard to see how this instinct can be toxic for unity. Enormous pressure is placed on members of a church or denomination to demonstrate their loyalty to the group. As a result, the boundaries these groups draw around themselves become increasingly narrow, and even those with whom they share many perspectives in common are labeled as enemies, because they do not subscribe to the entirety of the church's or denomination's agenda.

Such reactions to disagreement misconstrue the character of God, misapprehend the nature of truth, and overestimate the ability of any individual or institution to rightly or completely understand truth.

Yes, as a variety of biblical writings make clear, we have an obligation to protect the individuals and congregations under our care from false teaching, but too often we confuse intentionally distorted doctrine with honest disagreement.

We come to conflicts in a spirit of fear rather than a spirit of mutual affection and curiosity. We present quarrelsomeness as a virtue and deride winsomeness as cowardice or compromise.

Even still

In spite of the complications I have enumerated above, I am convinced Ortlund's instinct and vision are correct. We cannot find unity outside the

truth of the gospel, and even if we did, we would find it at the cost of our souls.

Recognizing the complex, personal quality of truth will help us marshal it as a resource for unity. Recognizing the many and divergent forces that influence our pursuit of truth will help us develop habits of the heart that make truth more accessible and make unity more possible.

Nevertheless, both unity and truth require us to sacrifice our idols and lay down our fears. Some will be unwilling to do that work, and we must persevere in our pursuit of truth and unity even in the face of their opposition.

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