

Unity and Diversity

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Some time ago I was asked to participate in a conference in Moscow of new denomination which consisted, by that time, of almost 1,000 churches. The denomination actually was born as a result of the split within the conservative Baptist movement. Ironically enough, the multiplication of Russian churches often come as a result of divisions.

Through all the changes in these modern times with the church's relation to the secular world through media, politics and even subconscious messages, there seems to be a decline in some of the fundamental evangelical issues that were once firm for many a believer. For instance, there was one piece of data which really struck me in the course of the conference. It was stated in one of the speeches that 54% of Christians did not believe in the resurrection from the dead! If this is not enough, one of the most popular questions a pastor is approached on is... how to get divorced in a Godly and Christian way. Through this, salvation issues and the covenant of marriage are under attack!

In Israel, you will not find these issues as pertinent or apparent. In terms of evangelicalism, we are not in as bad of shape in Israel since the statement mentioned above still does not characterize the Israeli Body of Believers! After all, I believe diversity is the real basis for unity (unless by unity you mean communist type of uniformity). The alternative to suffering is not joy but the absence of suffering. In the same way, diversity is not opposite to unity. I would rather say that the absence of diversity is the dangerous trend that in turn makes the unity fake and dead. I would go one step further and say that real unity is impossible without diversity.

In Israel, theological differences are very healthy and encouraging. You can see a spectrum of theological differences throughout the Land. Theologically most of the Israelis tend to stick with a pre-millennial position with Ryrie's three-point dispensational definition (literal interpretation, doxology and uniqueness of Israel, not as the church) though most of them would not define themselves this way. Basically, I would say you have tremendous unity in Israel, as a result (as I see it) that comes as a reaction to the surrounding hostile world, to replacement theology of the Christian Church in general and to Arab Christianity specifically.

Not relating to the eschatological role of Israel, we are divided and diversified in the treatment of the Mosaic Law and Jewish tradition in the life of the modern Jewish believer. Two "extremist" positions claim that keeping (or abandoning) the Law is fundamental to the very essence of belonging to the Body of Messiah, while the biggest part is quite flexible and tolerant toward both positions. I really believe that such tension is impossible to resolve on a purely theological basis and we have to leave both camps to continue in their understanding to try to love each other the way we are. We just have to admit that keeping/not keeping different positions of the Law is not essential to soteriologically. The same, of course, is said to be about the treatment of rabbinic tradition in the daily spiritual life of a Messianic believer.

Another issue we have to be concerned with is a recent development in the body of Israel when 12 congregations created a quasi-denomination that joined a Korean body of churches with a weird theological and cultic organizational structure. The leaders

of Kenes Arzi came with a clear statement of facts but the Kenes did not have any real authority, it just had recommendational values. In my opinion, the motivations for such a move is clearly financial and thus does not reflect the real (if any) theological positions of those congregations. Though such development is unacceptable, we have to try to continue the dialog with our brothers with the hope to bring them back to proper standing in the Lord.

Any civilized dialog has to be a major tool in dealing with all sorts of differences, including our treatment of our relationships with Arab Christians. We love our Arab Christian brothers (living in Israel and the Palestinian Authority) and pray for them regularly. There is a joy among all when we can dialogue and sit together to praise and worship our Lord. There is an increased movement to listen slightly too much to their issues and one can not help by feel sided with their plight with the deterrent falling on big bad brother, Israel. Emotions become very high among joint youth gatherings or information sessions for visiting churches that its hard to have a balanced view of Israel's covenant to the Land versus the hardships of the life they have been dealt. It is an unfortunate issue. We have to be very cautious in the so called 'reconciliation movement' and not to compromise the foundation of the Messianic identity of our faith. It is true that we have to try to seek peace with every brother, but not at any price. The real peace comes as a result of serious meditation on the Word of God and if this does not work, we better leave the things where they are, rather than pretend with a fake smile. It has to be stated that the gap between Messianic theology (what ever it means) and Arab Christianity is quite wide. These differences cause certain tensions within the Messianic body.

Despite the issues stated above, there is still diversity in sub-ethnic (Ethiopian, Russian, Spanish) approaches to congregational building and planting. I believe such diversity is very healthy and there are many things we can (and have) to learn each from other.

The bottom line - I am still optimistic and believe that with the desire to listen to each other, we can achieve real unity without simply imitating each other.

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