

Artizo Discussion Paper – Section: Thinking Theologically

The Sinfulness of Denominationalism

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How do you know an idol when you see one? Are they always made of plaster or some other decidedly inert material? No, for covetousness is idolatry. (Eph 5:5). Idolatry is the false worship of anybody or anything. And remember, worship is not simply falling on your face in front of a statue - it is giving our whole lives as living sacrifices (Gal 1-6), whether it be to God or some other person or thing. The litmus test of idolatry is people's willingness to do without. If something is a matter of indifference, then it is no idol. If it is important or essential or cannot be removed then it has become an idol.

A common 'idol' in the New Testament was circumcision. Of itself, it was of no consequence to the gospel. Whether men were circumcised or uncircumcised did not matter. However, when certain Jews insisted that all Christians be circumcised, Paul was vehement in his opposition. It was a matter of legalism and Christian freedom. Things of indifference can be treated indifferently until someone puts them under the rule of 'insistence', and then they must be treated as matters of enormous importance.

A church in the country had a very large tapestry cross at the front of their meeting room. The minister didn't like this particular form of religious art but thought it was fairly harmless. Some of the congregation objected to it as idolatry which the minister felt was overstating the case. At a congregational meeting, discussion ensued as to whether the cross should be removed. To the minister's horror he heard members of the congregation saying that they could not pray to God in the building if the cross was not there. They may have been caught up in the rhetoric of the moment, but their sentiments demonstrated the idolatrous place that this tapestry had come to occupy in their lives. If it was a nice piece of artwork, it was of no consequence; if it was an aid to worship that had become indispensable for prayer, then it had to be removed.

THE ARCHIE BUNKER SYNDROME

Canada is made of people from many ethnic cultural backgrounds. Those who have migrated here only recently, and those whose ethnic community is very small, vigorously seek to maintain the distinctive nature of their ethnic background. Part of these ethnic traditions is the national or family religion. Evangelism in Canada has therefore led to a clash of cultures. This has been particularly painful because it has divided families that were already in conflict over the generation gap and cross-cultural inter-marriage. Prior to the Second World War all this was classically fought out between Protestants and Roman Catholics, frequently over the subject of marriage. But the increasing diversity of the Canadian community has brought with it increasing conflict between different ethnic and social groupings. This tangled web of conflict only exacerbates the problems we face in evangelism.

The solution for the majority within the community is assimilation. "If they want to come and live in Canada they can learn to live like Canadiana!" By making them 'like us', we solve our problem. Because ours is the majority, mainstream view of life, it must be right. We don't mind them coming here and working in our factories, making a good living and paying taxes to our government but we don't want to have to change to become like them; that was never part of the deal.

This mindset is reflected in the Christian world by insisting that those who become Christians join up with our white, Anglo-Saxon, ethnic churches. There is an incredible blindness and hypocrisy in members of the Church of England complaining about Christian groups setting up 'ethnic' churches. Many Anglicans expect people from different ethnic backgrounds to adopt Anglo-Saxon culture when they become Christians. The possibility of changing the Anglo-Saxon culture to welcome in their new Christian friends from a different background seems never to have crossed their minds. The Anglo-Saxon culture is seen as sacrosanct. That people cannot accommodate themselves to this culture is their problem - after all they are the new Christians - they don't know how Christianity is to be conducted - they must learn to adapt to our ways.

Thus many people in our community are not reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ because we have been more interested in preserving our mainstream, majority, Anglo-Saxon culture.

This cultural inflexibility is reflected within each group in our society. The problem expresses itself differently in different groups, but the idolatrous attitude is the same. Since the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, Roman Catholicism has accepted a great diversity of theological viewpoints. Some of these have maintained an expression very similar to the decisions of the Council of Trent. Others have moved into liberal theological viewpoints or Charismatic Pentecostal viewpoints and even Biblical Evangelical viewpoints. No longer can someone say that a person is a Roman Catholic and therefore have some idea of what they believe.

This has muddied the waters of ecumenical dialogue considerably but has opened up evangelistic opportunities and fellowship across denominational lines that had not previously been available. We now can find people within the Roman Catholic Church whose theological position is that of Martin Luther and John Calvin rather than that of the Counter-Reformation. Bible reading for all, justification by faith alone through the grace of God, the priesthood of all believers - these are now accepted by some Roman Catholics. However, while we can rejoice at seeing individual Roman Catholics embracing these beliefs, there is another gospel issue of today that we must tackle: the liberty of the Christian man.

LOYALTY, LIBERTY OR LIBERALISM?

Martin Luther fought a battle over the issue of indulgences. The English reformers fought a battle and were burnt at the stake for their view of the Lord's Supper. Both these fights were symptomatic of the theological issues of justification by faith alone.

Indulgences are not all that common today, although the sacrifice of the mass is still something of an issue. However, loyalty, denominational faithfulness, ethnic integrity, these are very real issues. If a person genuinely believes in justification by faith alone and the priesthood of all believers, then they will genuinely believe in the indifference of church tradition. Denominational, ethnic, national background will be of no consequence, for there is neither Jew nor Greek, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free but all are one in Christ Jesus (Col 3:11).

Those who come from a Baptist background or a Presbyterian background, an Anglican or an Orthodox background, can all be treated as being one in Christ. Their particular tradition and background is a matter of complete indifference. If it is a matter of complete indifference then it will not matter if somebody changes from one tradition to another. The decision will be a purely

pragmatic one of where I live and with whom I am moving and where I can help and be helped. Crossing denominations should be of no more concern than changing congregations **within** a denomination. No denominational tradition can claim authority or control of the truth or membership loyalty that in any way parallels Christian fellowship.

The test of denominational idolatry is being able to leave. If a person can leave freely, then they can stay freely. But if a person is not allowed to leave, then they must leave. Evangelicals have always understood this and have been able to work under the banner of "All one in Christ Jesus" in a range of non-denominational ministries such as Scripture Union, the IVCF, the Bible Society, Missionary Societies, and so on. These are not 'inter-denominational' bodies, in that representatives of each denomination are not elected to a governing body that fairly represents all the denominational viewpoints. These are evangelical organizations that have rightly understood the gospel and can see that our fellowship must be based on the gospel alone - our denominational affiliations are matters of indifference and can be treated so. This is the genuine liberty of the Christian man.

However, liberty and **liberalism** must not be confused. Liberalism accepts all points of view as being equally valid. Within large denominations like the United Church or the Anglican Church or the Roman Catholic Church liberalism is the main theological system.

You can find members of these denominations who believe everything and anything - and nothing in common with other members of the same denomination. They have great freedom of thought but they do not have the liberty of the Christian man. They do not understand what matters matter and what matters don't matter. They fight for the matters of indifference. Thus although you may believe anything as an Anglican it is still crucial that you remain an Anglican. Your Anglican tradition has become your god, because you do not know the true and living God.

EXAMPLES FROM CHURCH LIFE

This problem is reflected in many current practices of church life. Students coming to the city generally look for a church that is of the same denomination as the one they have grown up with. In one sense that doesn't matter, because denominational affiliation is a matter of indifference. However, it would be much more important to look for the church that genuinely preached the word of God and rightly understood the gospel than to be looking for one with a particular denominational label. All too often, students continue in churches that have the same label as their home church but a different theology.

In evangelism we see people from Orthodox or Roman Catholic backgrounds who are encouraged to accept the truths of evangelical faith **provided** that they do not leave their Orthodox or Roman Catholic affiliation. "You can believe whatever you like provided you remain within the fold".

Or again, the irrelevant traditions and regulations of our denominational associations are used to bind up evangelical congregations so that they cannot adapt to outsiders and bring the gospel to them. They must continue in a language and a mode that alienates people from the gospel.

Again, churches will accept into positions of leadership and responsibility (just as denominations will appoint staff workers and committee members) those people who have correctly filled out their denominational affiliation forms, rather than those people who have a true and living faith in the Lord Jesus. Baptist churches that will not accept inter-membership of Bible believing and godly

Presbyterians (because they were baptised as infants instead of as adults), or Presbyterians who will not accept inter-membership of godly, Bible-believing Anglicans, are making matters of indifference into the basis of fellowship and the gospel. By our human rules and regulations we are subverting the gospel of freedom.

The test of an idol is whether it can be removed. Denominationalism in Canada is frequently idolatry. It is no longer sufficient to see that a Roman Catholic believes in the authority of Scripture or justification by faith alone or the priesthood of all believers - the crucial question is frequently whether they can leave Rome. If they can't, they must; and if they can, then they needn't. But in this, Protestants have become no better, and the Orthodox are much the same. It is only our freedom which will demonstrate a right understanding of the gospel of grace.

Questions:

1. Why did God create denominations?
2. What does the bible say about church government?
3. As a leader thinking about how you run a church, what must you keep and what can you not keep?
4. As a leader of a ministry, how do you know its time to leave your denomination?