

Homogeneity

God never works this way

Recently, I wrote an article called *'There are no straight lines in nature'* showing how God works in many surprising, difficult and mysterious ways to bring us to maturity, whereas man's planning is always rational, methodical, mechanical and wrong. It was an exhortation to follow God and not trust in our own wisdom. This paper touches on a similar matter: man's continual attempt to bring homogeneity into the work of God.

Homogeneity is the activity to make everything or everyone the same; to package things together in order in a neat fashion; to bring people into line, ordered in ranks. It is like a set of tin soldiers that are all identical. God never works this way; in his army there are short and tall, fat and thin, clever and dull, fast and slow, extrovert and withdrawn, loud and quiet, and many more character types. He does not make us all the same and doesn't chose all the same type of people.

Let's look at some examples of God's choosing.

The twelve disciples

Jesus chose his men very carefully, after much prayer to ascertain the will of the Father. Could there be a more disparate group? Four were common fishermen of quite differing character (brothers Peter & Andrew, James & John); one was a tax collector (Matthew); one was false (Judas Iscariot); Simon the Canaanite (rather 'Kanean') was a member of a radical Jewish sect and very political, while Thomas seems to have been weak in faith. We know virtually nothing about Philip, James (son of Alphaeus), Bartholomew (Nathaniel), and Lebbaeus Thaddeus (Judas). [Matt 10:1-4; Lk 6:13-16]

Fishermen would have balked at being identified with a despised tax-collector, while several would have been suspicious of a sectarian zealot like Simon. Peter's exuberant rashness would have destabilised any small group. No human leader would have chosen such a diverse group of people to be his followers.

The Gospel writers

Again there is no conformity. Matthew was a tax collector writing for Jews to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, promised in the OT scriptures. Mark was a servant writing under the direction of Peter, to collate the latter's thoughts about Christ before his impending martyrdom. Luke was a Gentile and a professional doctor, writing under the influence of Paul to teach Gentiles about the Christ. John was a fisherman writing near the end of the first century to reveal the spiritual glory of the Lord Jesus and to testify to the truth of his divinity.

Matthew focused upon showing Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and is less harsh on the Jewish opposition to Jesus. Mark, although having been an eye-witness of some events, is passing on Peter's experiences and purpose and writes as if in a hurry. Luke acts as a historian and works on information gathered from many eye-witness, particularly the women who knew Jesus. He presents us with straight facts, including many features that are not found in the other Gospels. John relies upon his own experiences filtered by many years of learning from the Holy Spirit. Having read the previous Gospels, his purpose is quite different from them all.

All these form the basis of our knowledge of the Lord's life and earthly ministry, and together make a wonderful, though diverse, testimony from four points of view. The lack of conformity even extends to the presentation of some matters that are difficult to harmonise. God was not interested in a homogenous, uniform picture.

The Bible writers

The variances between the writers of the Old and New Testaments are enormous. Amos was a simple herdsman who tended sheep then pronounced powerful condemning prophecies and went back to herding. Moses was a prince of a great civilisation who renounced this wealth and became a major prophet. Ezekiel was a priest who was given to amazing apocalyptic visions, but another priest (Ezra) ministered more as a teacher. David was a great king of Israel whose prophecies were often composed as songs, but his son Solomon was a king whose godly wisdom is recorded as proverbs. Joshua was a soldier and general. Ruth was a Moabite woman who knew considerable suffering, but also joy. Nehemiah was a governor serving a foreign emperor. Esther was a simple Jewish woman who was raised to a position of great influence in a foreign empire and whose book never mentions the name of God. Unlike most other Biblical writers, Paul was a religious scholar while Peter was a very simple fisherman and James was a carpenter's son. We could go on.

Clearly God is not interested in creating a homogenous package in the way he works. His revelation is unified and without contradiction, but it is presented through diverse means, which makes it even more miraculous. To see the variation in God's choosing, just look at any Biblical church where you will find a very divergent set of people from all backgrounds, ages, personalities and status. It is cults that tend to collect a single type of people, usually impressionable and vulnerable teenagers and young couples.

The diverse works of creation

Just as God does not choose the same type of people, neither do we see mechanistic conformity in his creative works. Consider the amazing complexity and diversity in the animal creation. Even within the same order there is a multiplicity of design. Mammals vary from humans to blue whales, from kangaroos to mice, from bats to walrus and from pygmy shrews to apes. Some mammals live in water, some on land; some glide, some fly while some swim. Some walk on all fours while a few are bipedal; yet others don't even have legs at all. Within the class of insects there is huge diversity amongst the thirty orders and many thousand species. Some fly, some walk, some swim, some burrow. Some have wings while others, such as silverfish and springtails, don't. Some metamorphose, while others do not.

Even within the same type of design there is huge diversity. The human face involves two ears, two eyes, a nose and a mouth upon an oval shaped head; and yet the complexity and variation of facial types across nations is enormous. Even within the single organ of an eye, there is massive diversity observed in colour, shape and other features.

In the cosmos we continue to see diversity. Stars are basically balls of incandescent gas and dust energised by a nuclear fusion process; though some have a form of gravitational, rotational or thermal energy. Yet even though they are all made of gas and dust, the heavens show that there is a huge amount of variation in size, colour and form. Some appear to us as blue, reddish, yellowish or white. Some are huge while some are called dwarves. Even planets are not similar; some are gaseous (Saturn, Uranus, Neptune), some are rocky or metallic (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars), while some are mostly covered in dust. Some are absolutely huge (Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, Uranus), while others are quite small (Pluto).

Clearly God does not work on the basis of homogeneity; he chooses to excel in diversity and constant variation. There is nothing mechanistic about the way God works; all of life breathes diversity.

Homogenous churches

Having established that God does not work on the principle of homogeneity, we must consider how this impacts church life.

There are some who have established churches under the control of a man and have set up homogenous congregations within a larger structure. One example of this is the homogenous structures in the large Korean church led by Paul (David) Yonggi Cho as described in his books. In order to better strategize and control, he set up churches/cells based on the principle of homogeneity. Thus there were groups that contained all lawyers, or were composed just of women and so on.

Now, in the first place, the principle of having a large church that can be broken down into multiple congregations or home cells is utterly unbiblical. We never see such a thing in scripture and the idea is contrary to the principles of local church life. Secondly, the local church is never a homogenous mass but a collection of the saints in a given area of all types.

Failing to understand this, there are still folk who are trying to form churches on the principle of homogeneity. For instance, some are trying to plant churches in offices, containing all the same type of people (office workers). Apart from the contradiction of many church principles involved in meeting in an office at lunchtime, this homogenous idea is against God's purpose. Others are already forming churches that are only composed of black people, or Chinese, or Sudanese or Jews, and so on. These are diametrically opposed to the universality of the people of God; the church contains Jew and Greek (i.e. all nations).

There are even many new churches that only contain a special type of people based upon a new and erroneous doctrine – that of Messianic Jews. This is based upon the errors of Dispensationalism and proposes that there is a special type of Christian, a Jew who retains his religious Jewishness and meets with others in a very Jewish fashion. The Jewish feasts are celebrated - when God says that they are bondage and obsolete (Gal 4:9, 24-25; 5:1). They use Jewish terminology - even if it is not their normal language (thus Christ is called 'Yeshua', 'God' is written down as 'G-d', their church may be called a 'synagogue' and the leader may well be called a rabbi). Some even change scriptural designations, for instance, calling the apostle Paul 'rabbi Saul'; this ignores the fact that he himself called all his Jewishness, rabbinic learning and experience as 'animal excrement' (Phil 3:8). They fail to understand that Paul derisively called those who brought the church into Jewish bondage as 'the mutilation' or 'evil workers' (Phil 3:2) or 'false brethren' (Gal 2:4).

All attempts to create a church on some homogenous principle are not only false but dangerous. They are a means of deception that will bring people into bondage and squeeze the spiritual life out of you.

Identifying error

How do you simply identify a church that is founded upon a false principle? By observing if its *raison-d'être* is Christ or something else. A church that gathers under the principle of being Jewish is not focused on Christ but Jewishness. A church that gathers only black people together is not focused on Christ but racism. A church that only meets in an office block is not focused on Christ but homogeneity. A church that only meets to promote

community is not focused on Christ but social principles. The church that only gathers in order to evangelise is not focused on Christ but upon a strategy.

The Biblical church seeks to centre on Christ, to celebrate his life and work, to worship him, to glorify him, to learn from him, to hear his word, to edify others in that word, to build people up in Christ, to give what they have of Christ to others, and to testify to Christ's name. There is no place for the ideas of man. This is God's strategy and it is his will that we must obey.

Another way to discern false principles undergirding church life is to notice whom they exclude. A church that excludes Caucasian whites is not operating according to the principles of Christ – which is that all Christians are equal in him: white and black and are members of one another. A Messianic church that does not welcome those who disagree with their sectarianism and Dispensational theology is not operating according to the principles of Christ – which is that Jews and Greeks (Gentiles) are equal in him and meet on the principles of the New Covenant, not the Old one that has been cancelled (Heb 7:12, 18, 8:13, 9:10; 2 Cor 5:17). The basis of Christian gatherings is not national characteristics, but union in Christ.

Church principles

All these mistakes would be avoided if people would focus upon the simple Biblical principles which are vital for obedient church life. We can summarise these as follows:

- The focus of the church is always Christ and nothing else.
- The central feature is the Lord's Supper, to aid focus upon Christ's atonement. This is the reason why the church meets. It must be conducted with all reverence and opportunity for prayer, worship, and thanksgiving. A communal meal may precede the Supper, but is distinguished from the Supper.
- As well as the Supper there are: prayer, singing, scripture reading, sharing, exhortation, encouragements and admonishing, in the exercise of those ministry gifts that God has given to members. The church functions like a family, containing many disparate types of people. All ministry serves to build the saints up in Christ.
- The Sunday gathered assembly is an opportunity for *koinonia* (fellowship) where all can participate under God's sovereignty and the Spirit's direction. It is the job of pastors to ensure that this is orderly and decent.
- Leadership is by a team of equal elders who do not dominate but lead by example like fathers. Strategic decisions are made by consensus of all to gain the mind of Christ.
- Without teaching the church will suffer since the job of church leaders is to ensure that members are equipped to serve, and this is done by teaching. Teaching should also take place in homes where people can be catechised and matured in doctrinal thinking. Teaching always involves discussion, dialogue and questioning. Women are not allowed to teach or have authority over men.
- The exposition of the word of God undergirds all teaching ministry. There is no place for drama, dancing, slide-shows, light shows, media presentations or worldly entertainment.
- Evangelism is done naturally by members through their personal contacts.
- There are no church buildings, which work against the principle of the church as a family of interdependent, mutual ministries. The Biblical precedent is that the church meets in a house.

These principles work against all attempts to produce homogeneity and uniformity. A reliance upon the Holy Spirit will ensure that his direction is followed not man's; a prerequisite of this is utter dependency upon God and self-denial.

When man's plans are followed there is always uniformity, rational method, conformity to a human strategy, professionalism, goals, mission statements, submission to a man and ranks of leaders (authoritarian hierarchy); very often it also includes a lot of cajoling. Such plans cut out the independent thinkers, the mavericks, the questioners, ad hoc input, and also demonises those who disagree. These ideas do not bring peace, but restlessness, frustration and finally bondage.

Conclusion

God is always surprising us. The Christian life does not begin at point A and then work in a straight line to point B, rather it goes through many twists and turns, ups and downs, highs and lows, joy and grief, death and life. Man likes to work methodically, strategically, in a linear fashion; but God does not work like that at all. It was after many circuitous journeys in the wilderness over forty years that the Israelites reached the River Jordan, which was only two days journey from the Red Sea. It was after many trials, battles and wanderings between Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan that Abraham finished his pilgrimage. Jacob too wandered far and wide through trial, tribulation, long journeys, and confrontations before ending his course and being able to bless kings.

The Christian life and the experience of the church are not a train journey on a straight line passing through set stations, but they are like life, full of ups and downs, twists and turns, and filled with unexpected surprises (some good, some bad). Likewise, the building of the church, the responsibility of the Lord himself, is not undertaken in a homogenous manner, but is also filled with individuality, personality, distinctiveness; even eccentricity and idiosyncrasy. God works in a comprehensive and eclectic manner with people, not within narrow bounds. No man would have chosen deceiving Jacob, recalcitrant Jonah, proud Nebuchadnezzar or legalist Saul of Tarsus; and probably not even Simon Peter or doubting Thomas – but God did.

Any temptation to try to bring uniformity, conformity and homogeneity to the church must be resisted as earthly. Men must learn to trust God and obey his principles on church life.

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