

The Struggle of the Modern Day Church: "Interdenominational Stress"

Recently, I came across this question in a Bible Study on Colossians:

~Christian circles such as an interdenominational organization can at times speak a great deal of 'tolerance' or the need to accept every conviction for the sake of the members to get along. How does this passage (Col 2:6-15) give guidance about how we should 'tolerate' other beliefs and convictions?

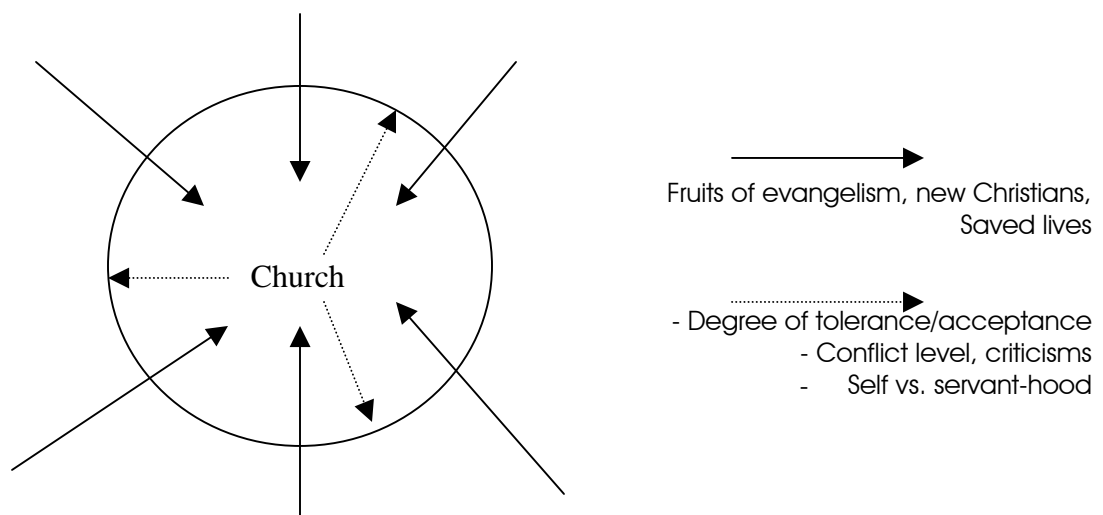
Prologue

Living in this age, whilst embracing the Christian faith, is by no means an easy feat. We are constantly bombarded with more questions than answers, more pressures than comfort, and more criticisms than encouragements. Basically, if we seriously consider the structure of modern day Christianity, we find that we are caught between what our real calling is, i.e. our commission/purpose. We see the different extremes of it, on one hand, the persecuted Christians and missionaries around the world (e.g. China), and on the other hand, the Christians living in 'confinement' within the comfortable four walls of the church building. Some say that Christians facing the reality of the outside world (the harshness and suffering) is the real deal; some say the 'internal' Christians are the senders, the supporters – financially and prayerfully. The question here is: aren't we all called to be gospel-presenters and 'real' Christians?

Now let us examine and focus on the internal aspect of this unresolved equilibrium. If the church sends out missionaries, then it must be able to follow-up, disciple and above all, 'accommodate' the new Christians. Next, we need to understand that there are many churches around who believes in this but may adopt different approaches and methods or even values, for that matter. After that, these different churches/denominations seem to grow independently in their respective styles and convictions. There are however, joint activities and programs that bring together the lot, but it can be observed that segregation takes place and there are certain subtle tensions between the groups of believers. Do we not have one common cause, one central foundation that is Christ? Yes, definitely but different outlooks and styles. The point here is not to criticize any denomination but to paint a general picture of the modern day struggle – 'interdenominational stress'.

The root of the problem

Many efforts to establish a good rapport between churches have proven limited to a certain extent. For instance, interdenominational organizations and churches have been set up, in the hope to produce a new church system that unites all believers under one roof regardless of their denominational background. But the stress and tension still exists as we fail to address the root of the problem. Let us now consider the internal and external factors based on the 'cell' model below.

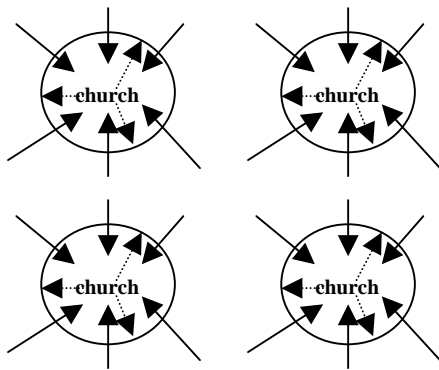


The model represents the church and the internal and external factors affecting it. It is a two-way cycle by which the modern day church structure is stabilized. Although it seems to be an oversimplification, it nevertheless emphasizes an important point. We know that a church grows in number due to the influx of new Christians or new members (e.g. from other churches). But there is also a pre-existing condition in the church that limits the input. This is the degree of tolerance of the current members, the capacity for

acceptance, the unresolved conflicts and criticisms and the general 'tolerance' of the church. This is often due to the fact that, we as Christians often question or evaluate sermons/ministries/members by the degree to which is best suits our needs and the extent to which it benefits us. It is this very attitude of self-centeredness that gives rise to the internal problems above. Christians, on the other hand, should develop a sensitivity and caring attitude towards others and follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially in the area of servant-hood, i.e. having other's welfare/interest at heart. Ultimately, the stability of the inner structure is determined by the character of every individual, which contributes to the larger picture that is the body of the church as a whole. Are we reflecting Christ's character or own selfish motives?

Now, consider the adverse effects that result when the internal factors overwhelm the external, i.e. the rigidity of the structure and the incapability to expand. The 'cell' lyses and becomes disunited, disjointed and disoriented. The circle of believers is destroyed and it splits up and becomes fragmented. The believers are scattered and dispersed, choosing their own paths. So instead of multiplying as a product of healthy growth (e.g. church-planting/extension), the church splits up (c.f. 1 Cor 12:12-26).

Now, by understanding this basic model, we are in a position to understand the interdenominational stress that occurs on an inter-church level.

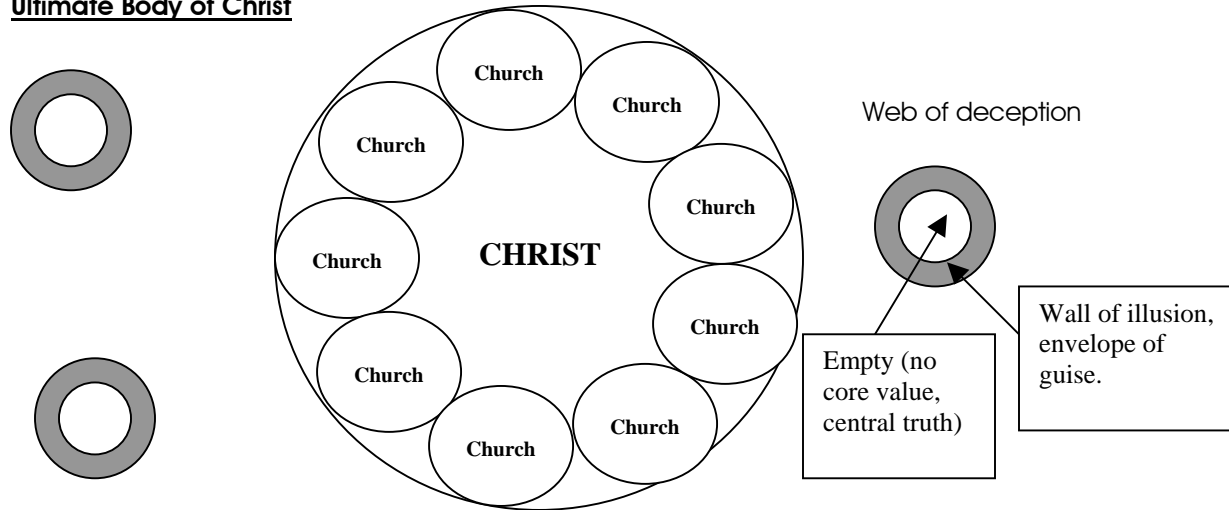


After considering a church on an individual level, we will now consider groups of churches in a collective manner. If each church possesses its own set of internal and external factors, it would seem an extra burden to take it a step further by accommodating different values and styles in structure. It does not seem to be complementary in nature but rather, at times, treated as contradictory. We often find ourselves in a position of argument and debate regarding the 'agreeing or the disagreeing' of certain beliefs of other churches. As a result, we develop a metaphorical perceptive barrier towards another denomination or church structure.

This hinders the interaction and the relationship between the different church organizations as we form certain 'ideas' and formulate 'preconceived thoughts' regarding various systems. An age-old approach of enhancing ties 'politically' through diplomatic formal meetings among various board members has proved useful only to a limited extent. It is a temporary solution to a long-developed problem. It disguises our differences and tries to bind the churches in a political sense or on a larger scale. It is important to recognize that it is the mindsets and perspectives of the individuals of the church that needs to be transformed and not merely a 'politically-inclined' guise over the whole church. We need to go back to heart of the word of God and follow the examples of Jesus. Paul calls us to be encouragers in heart, united in love, and most importantly set our focuses right by seeking full understanding, wisdom and discernment that comes from Christ. In short, it's the individual organelles that make a difference to the cell as a whole. Only then are we able to bring out the most of joint celebrations and events, having effective relationships and ties between churches, which ultimately forms the entire body of Christ – reflecting His likeness and character.

Lastly, while all this sounds ideal, the notion is definitely not impossible for our God is the God of the impossible and we can indeed do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Now as the fibers are interwoven among various denominations, we are then able to counter effectively on a larger scale, the darts of the evil one, which are, in this age, in the form of 'hollow and deceptive' philosophies that challenge the truth concerning Christ and His work. The adjectives employed by Paul is wonderfully expressed in the sense that the plausible arguments today are flawed and have no central truth or foundation, hence the 'hollow'. These fine-sounding ideas serve to pollute, corrupt, deceive and delude Christians and thus, weaken the structure of the Church. To Paul, they are only an embodiment of nothingness/void with a membrane of deception encapsulating lies. Together, as a church, with individual and corporate strength and above all, with Christ as our core, we are in a position to counter all these philosophies that give rise to gray areas in our faith – blinding our eyes to the simple truth that is Christ and His Word.

Ultimate Body of Christ



Note that each circle 'church' represents the various denominations or church groups. (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, etc)

To summarize, Christ is the head of the body, which comprises all believers regardless of denomination or background. So ultimately, this is Christ's bride described in Revelation where we will be presented holy, unblemished, and perfect before our Bridegroom at the final day of reunion (Rev 19:7).

Epilogue

Terms/expressions like 'tolerate', 'accept graciously' or 'get along' have a negative connotation, a sense of pre-existing hostility or past tensions that linger on. Instead of sparing these terms some thought, I would rather encourage you to think of how we should treat other believers. We should hold each other in respect and place one another in the highest degree of love. Brothers and sisters in Christ are all part of the same body, redeemed, reconciled – sharing the same faith and united in love (Col 2:2). We should develop an attitude of thanksgiving and rejoice like Paul that God's family continues to grow in numbers and in maturity (love, faith and hope). As a church and as churches of Christ, we should be kingdom focused and contribute to the common goal of extending God's kingdom together. We must never fail to recognize that the core and foundation of Christianity is Christ (Col 1:15-18). I pray that God will mould and refine our character day by day as we learn to develop a humble servant attitude and expand our capacity to love, accommodate, welcome and care for all people – regardless of denomination, race, culture, and social status. (Christians and non-Christians alike) AMEN.

In His humble service,

Aaron W.

(Love, peace and grace to you all)