

Q. Should we stress unity over doctrine? The reason I ask is because my pastor wants to grow our church, so he is stressing what he calls “kingdom unity” rather than “doctrinal division.” Is this what Jesus did?

A. Think about this. Multitudes of thousands of people followed Jesus. They listened to His sermons, heard His parables, were miraculously fed by Him, and saw Him heal people and even raise them from the dead. Yet, at the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus had only about 120 loyal followers (Acts 1:15). How did this happen? Jesus never stressed unity over doctrine.

When Jesus perceived that what He was saying was turning people off, He did precisely the opposite of what most modern preachers would do. Instead of weakening His teaching, instead of dumbing things down, instead of going back to the lowest common denominator between His beliefs and the people's, He said something even stronger. In fact, when Jesus heard that the people were murmuring at His teachings, He made His teachings even less palatable to drive a wedge between Himself and the grumblers. As He said in Matthew 10:4, “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.”

There are too many places in the Gospels where Jesus did this to detail in this answer. But I will point out one classic example where Jesus continually made what He said harder to accept until He drove the people away. It is found in John 6.

In this chapter, we read that multitudes came out to Jesus while He was in the hill country around the Sea of Galilee. There were five thousand men, not counting women and children (verse 10). That's a pretty good start for a megachurch, isn't it? Using today's thinking, we would assume that Jesus will do everything He can to hold onto these people so he can preach the Gospel to them week after week, year

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after year. And, starting with such a large congregation, surely viral marketing will kick in and there's no telling where the numbers will go. But no, Jesus doesn't follow the world's rules.

First, Jesus notices that the people don't have food. So, He performs a miracle by using the five small loaves and two small fish offered by a little boy to feed these thousands of people. Impressive! Surely, this will keep the people coming back. If Jesus wanted a megachurch, He could certainly have built one based on this miracle. Seeing that Jesus fed them in the wilderness, the people correctly make a connection between Jesus and "that prophet" that Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 and 18 said would come after him and be like him (verse 14). Not only that, they want to make him a king! (verse 15). By stressing miracles over doctrine, food over hard teachings, He could have kept them unified.

But instead of making an acceptance speech, taking donations for the new 30,000 seat sanctuary, hiring some PR men to keep the ball rolling, and writing a book, He goes off into the mountains by himself. The disciples leave in a boat to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. A windstorm comes up and, no matter how much they work, they can't make any headway. Then they think they see a ghost. It turns out to be Jesus walking on the water. What an opportunity for publicity! But the crowds aren't there. As soon as Jesus gets into the boat, they are immediately at their destination (verse 21).

Then Jesus has a second opportunity to build a megachurch. The next day, the crowds come looking for Jesus and come across to the other side where He is. All Jesus has to do to keep this crowd together is to feed them again, avoid divisive doctrine, and teach nice things like kingdom unity.

Is this what Jesus does? Not at all. Jesus immediately picks on the one thing that unifies the crowd—their desire for food: "Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled" (verse 26). Then He tells them what to do: "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed" (verse 27).

The people, making the same kind of mistake as the woman at the well (John 4:13-15), think that Jesus is talking about some kind of food that will last forever. So, they ask Him how they can work the

works of God that will result in this kind of food (verse 28). Jesus then begins cranking up the difficulty level and driving a wedge between Himself and the people.

Now, so as not to make this article into a full commentary, let's just notice how Jesus continues to up the difficulty level of what He teaches until He drives the people away. In verse 29, Jesus tells them, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." In verses 32-35, He explains that He is the bread of life that comes down from heaven.

In verse 41, we read that the people murmured at Him specifically over this doctrine. Does He then make it easier for them? No. He starts teaching election ("All that the Father giveth me shall come to me") and irresistible grace ("and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out"—verse 37). Jesus is not among those milquetoasts who are afraid to teach the doctrines of grace because they are "divisive." Jesus is teaching the doctrines of grace in an evangelistic setting to rank newcomers. In the next few verses, He continues to speak of election and perseverance. Then, in verse 44, He goes a step further by speaking, not just of election, but of limited election: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day."

Then, as if this were not hard enough, Jesus states: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (verse 51). In verse 53, He adds another element: not only are we to eat His flesh, we are also to drink His blood. And if we don't do it, we have no life in us! This sounds like cannibalism to these Jews, and He is losing them fast. But does He stop and tone it down? Not one bit!

Notice verses 54-58:

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

The people are on the point of bolting: "Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" (verse 60). Surely, Jesus won't make it even harder, will He? Yes, He will.

In verses 61 and 62, fully aware that they were murmuring, He says, "Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?" In other words, if these things I have said offend you, you would be even more offended by my return to heaven. He then bluntly tells them why they can't believe and are, therefore, offended: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father" (verses 63-65). In other words, you can't understand these spiritual doctrines because you are carnally minded, and the Father hasn't given you the ability to understand. He virtually told them, you can't come to me because the Father hasn't drawn you, so stop wasting your time.

And they took the hint. In verse 66, we read, "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him." Did Jesus try to stop them? No. Instead, He turned to His twelve core disciples.

Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?
Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?

(verses 67-70)

Peter is living proof of what Jesus has just said. The crowds have gone. Those who remain (except Judas, whom God makes sure stays to perform his destiny of betraying Jesus) understand that Jesus has the words of life (obviously making a connection between "words of life" and Jesus' statements about His being the "bread of life" and our having to eat His flesh—i.e. internalize Him). They also believe and "are sure" (Greek: *egnōkamen*—"have come to fully know") that He is "that Christ, the Son of the living God." As Jesus said of Peter's similar confession in Matthew 16:16-17, flesh and blood did not reveal this to Peter. It was revealed to him by the Father in heaven.

Did Jesus blunder? Of course not! He knew that doctrine does not divide in a bad way. His stronger and stronger teaching caused a division between those who would not and could not believe because they were not drawn by the Father and those who would believe because they were drawn.

There are preachers who will avoid strong "divisive" doctrine, stress "kingdom unity," teach insipid pap, and keep the people coming by feeding and entertaining them. They will have a weak, carnally minded assembly that will never really do God's work because God has not drawn them to it. Those in such a congregation who are truly called will have to be stifled because their understanding of true doctrine will, by its very nature, cause division.

And then there are God's faithful teachers who are not fearful of strong doctrine, knowing that it will drive away only the carnally minded. Those who remain will be truly united in love by their common belief in the truth. This is true unity. It is not achieved at the expense of doctrine. It is, instead, achieved through doctrine. It allows for not everyone being at the same level of understanding, but it does not compromise the truth (notice Ephesians 4). If Jesus did not stress unity over doctrine, neither should we.

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