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COEXIST

Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker. It consists of seven symbols: the crescent and star of Islam, a peace symbol, a male/female symbol, a Magen David (Star of David), an I with a pentagram as its dot, a yin/yang, and a Roman cross. Combined they are supposed to spell out the word “coexist.” (There is a version where $e=mc^2$ for science replaces the gay rights male/female, but the one described is the most common. The original only used the crescent, Star of David, and the cross, with letters for the o, e, i, and s.) It represents a fact of life, as well as a wish for peaceful coexistence between all religions and beliefs. Originally it was a plea for peace between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, but has been modified to include other beliefs.

To coexist means to exist in the same vicinity at the same time. Thus this bumper sticker represents a fact of life. As people, we all coexist, regardless of our belief systems. We live together, whether peaceably or not. The secondary meaning is to live together in peace. This is the ideal expressed by this collection of symbols. And it is a good ideal. In fact (although some might not represent it well) it is a Christian ideal.

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person. (1 Cor 5:9-13)

Paul recognized that we must live together. In another place (Rom 12:18) he wrote, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” His ideal was that the Christian should be able to coexist, under either definition, with others.

Admittedly, some (perhaps many) who call themselves Christians have gotten away from that ideal. We see hate crimes against Muslims, gays, abortionists,

military veterans, and many others, sometimes in the name of Christ. Certainly some of these other groups commit crimes against Christians as well, but that is no reason to act hatefully against them. As long as Christians bring themselves down to the level of hatred we are not going to win souls for Christ. Nobody, including other Christians, wants to associate with hateful people.

One problem, though, does occasionally raise its head among the ones advocating coexistence. That is the idea that one cannot coexist without disagreeing. One can differ without being intolerant. One can identify homosexual acts as sin without being homophobic. Coexistence, under any valid definition, does not mean that we must accept others as they are without question or qualm. Tolerance does not demand that either side of an issue give up or give in. There are certain points on which a Muslim and a Christian necessarily cannot agree; the fundamental doctrines about the person of Jesus cannot be reconciled. That does not mean, however, that a Muslim and a Christian cannot live together peaceably, and even be friends. The doctrines of both religions even demand that.

Yes we can—we must—coexist. We can “agree to disagree” as long as we do so in love. Even if, as one cynic put it, the cross is who the bumper sticker is directed against, those who live under the cross must follow Paul’s admonition, and not separate ourselves from those outside the church, because that is the only way we may possibly show others the validity of our faith.

(For the record, this article was written before the announcement of the “suspension” of Phil Robertson from “Duck Dynasty” because he expressed his biblical beliefs in a totally separate venue.)

CONTENTS

Coexist	1
A Better Way	2
Going to Church	4

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A BETTER WAY

Those chapter and verse divisions can be a problem. Especially when we read the printed word, too often we take verses or chapters to stand alone. We forget that they are part of a larger context. We forget that the chapter and verse divisions are arbitrary, and often faulty, choices of men and are not part of the original text of the Bible. It is sometimes a mystery why the divisions are made where they are, dividing thoughts, paragraphs, or even sentences. For instance, smack dab in the middle of another discussion, it is there. It seems to be a totally different subject, perhaps because of the way somebody once divided the Bible into chapters. We take it as an independent section, sometimes memorizing just the one chapter; sometimes we quote just the section of the chapter. Few people look at it in the larger context, and so miss Paul's point. It is "the love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13.

To understand the meaning of even the "definition of love" in that chapter, we really must see why it is placed where it is. What seems to be a digression is really the whole point of a three chapter (in our way of dividing things) arc. The section is a discussion of the uses, and abuses, of the miraculous gifts available to the church at the time of the writing. In particular, it is an indictment of

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self.

the abuses of the miraculous gift of speaking in human languages not learned in the normal way, commonly called "speaking in tongues." In chapter 12, Paul chides the Corinthian church for letting the different miraculous gifts divide the congregation. Some were taking pride in their particular gift, and claiming to be better than those with other gifts or those with none. (In chapter 14, he particularly describes what he seems to consider the least important of the gifts, speaking in languages.) At the end of the 12th chapter he says it was good to desire the better gifts (such as prophecy). Then he says he will teach them something even better than the miraculous gifts.

Sine qua non

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all

knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. (1 Cor 13:1-3)

Much of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is against division. They were divided by "preacheritis." They were divided by legal arguments. They were divided by issues of food. They were divided by their approach to the Lord's Supper. And they were divided by the miraculous gifts some of them possessed through the laying on of Paul's hands. It is in this latter context that Paul says that the greatest miracles are worthless without the right attitude—considering the needs of others above those of oneself, commonly called love.

Of what value is the gift of languages not learned in the normal way (whether of men or, if there is such a thing, of angels) if one uses it selfishly? The speaker might as well be a musical instrument that cannot teach or admonish. There are even greater gifts, such a prophecy, interpretation, and even a faith that can perform miracles. But even these greater gifts are meaningless when used for self-aggrandizement. Even the non-miraculous, and seemingly good, attributes of generosity or martyrdom are worthless when used to cause division.

All of these things Paul lists are good things. The spiritual things (the King James Version supplies the word "gifts" unnecessarily) were of great value. The church of the first century could not have existed without them until the completion of the New Testament. Almsgiving and dying for Christ were admirable, and sometimes necessary. Paul says, however, that those good things are worthless when used for self. Love/charity (the Greek word *agape*) is not an emotion, it is a choice. It is the decision to do good for others, even those who harm you, even when it might lead to your own hurt. It is a decision to let others get the glory or the credit for something you did. It is a decision to bite your tongue in order to preserve unity, when you would rather cause division. A divisive person (or church) is not showing this kind of love. Without love, there is no value; there is nothing.

Love Characterized

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. (1 Cor 13:4-7, ASV)

Some have called this the “definition of love.” It is really less a definition and more a partial list of characteristics of love. It is a catalogue of particular characteristics that Paul wanted to emphasize because of the factions in the Corinthian church. As such, it would probably do the modern church good to look closely at these characteristics, considering the great number of divisions in the churches today.

It is probably no coincidence that Paul begins with the attribute of patience. At times the most divisive thing in a church is somebody’s impatience. There may be more direct ways to divide the church, and Paul will list those; but a lack of patience makes all other situations worse. It may be impatience with a novice Christian. Sometimes those who are firmly convinced of the correctness of their doctrine tend to be impatient with those who have not been taught. Even earlier in the letter, Paul told the Corinthians that they were not yet skilled in the word of God. (1 Cor 3:2) If they were still babies, why should they be impatient with those who were even less fully grown? Impatience may take another form. Churches have been divided because one person or group wanted something to happen sooner than others were willing. It may even be something valuable, such as a program of evangelism. Because others are unwilling (“we tried that before”) or not ready the impatient choose to create division or discord. When, on the other hand, one is thinking of the other, he is able to understand (if not agree with) the other person’s position, and take time.

How many disagreements could be staved off with a little kindness? The whole point of kindness is consideration of the needs of others. Without that, most people would not be kind. There is a brand of kindness that is purely selfish, but most people eventually see through that. Being considerate of others goes a long way toward uniting people.

Many of the remaining qualities deal with the selfish attitudes some of the Corinthians (and worldly people in general) possessed. Envy, self-seeking, taking offense, bearing grudges. These lead naturally to division. We want for ourselves, and feel that nobody else should have what we have. We don’t like to feel less smart, less rich, less important than other people. That is even where taking account of wrongs comes in. If we are as important as we think we are, then when somebody wrongs us it cannot be forgiven. When everybody thinks more highly of themselves than others, division must necessarily happen because everybody feels wronged. Love is characterized, rather, by “in honor preferring one another.” (Rom 12:10)

Boasting, self-inflation, unseemly behavior. A literal translation of that last term would be deformity. When we boast about our accomplishments and inflate our own self-worth, we are actually deforming ourselves. It is like a balloon made in the likeness of a face. It needs to be properly inflated to recognize the face; but if it is

overinflated the features become distorted and unrecognizable. When we puff ourselves up, others are driven away. Few people like to be around when a balloon is about to pop. And if we inflate our own egos to the point of distortion, we will eventually pop.

Have you ever been glad at another’s misfortune? Why does that happen? Often people are happy at the suffering of others because it makes them look good. How do you feel when others laugh when you fall down or drop something? You feel like you have, or want to have, nothing in common with those others. Apparently the Galatians were prone to the same failing, because Paul had to warn them against it.

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be

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tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (Gal 6:1-2)

When our goal is to bear another’s burdens, we cannot be divisive. We are looking outside ourselves with empathy. We create unity, not division. Our rejoicing is in God, and the effect of his love for us. God forgives us in order to restore unity with him. Can we do any less with our fellow man?

Love covers all, is trusting, is hopeful, and bears up under all things. After looking at the negatives, Paul tells the people how to prevent division: covering faults, believing in the good in others, expecting the best outcome, and quietly bearing wrong. Division in a church, a family, or a workplace is almost always due to selfishness. When we stop looking to ourselves and start looking out for others, we do not contribute to the division.

This was Paul’s solution to abuses of the miraculous things of the spirit. Stop using them for your own purposes and start using them for God’s purposes. It is a recipe for unity within a congregation even today when we no longer have the miraculous gifts. When one stops worrying that another wants to paint the walls pea green, to carpet the auditorium, or to have the chairs Bronco blue and orange, then one can concentrate on the more important things. After all—and this is the real point of 1 Corinthians 13—“love never fails.” These other things will end. The miraculous gifts were soon to disappear. A building will eventually crumble. The other things we elevate to importance will become unimportant when we die. But love is greater than the miraculous, or the mundane, because it continues. It goes on, because God is love, and God will never fail.

GOING TO CHURCH

As I was growing up, we often talked about “going to church.” But then, there were those people who pointed out that church is not a place, it is a group of people; therefore, saying “going TO church” is like saying “going TO family.” On the other hand, I would sometimes say I was going to band or chorus, which is the same sort of thing.

Those objectors did have a valid point, although the way they expressed it did not always hold up grammatically. Church is not bricks and mortar. Church is not a nave, an apse, and transepts. It is not, as in the old rhyme, “Here’s the church and here’s the steeple.” The point was that since the church is not a set place, it is difficult to “go” to church. The church, a group of people, can meet at a riverside (Acts 16:13), a public building (Acts 5:42; 19:9), or a private home (Romans 16:9). The church can, at any time, be under a tree or in a parking lot, scattered throughout the city or assembled in one place.

There is much value in this thinking. Those that think of the church as a building may have little emotional tie to the place. It may be fancy or plain, but it is still just a place. If the church is merely a place, then it truly doesn’t matter what church you belong to. One place may be as good as another, or not. One may be more comfortable or more ornate. One may be open all the time while others may lock their doors except at certain times. It really doesn’t matter. If the church is a place you go to, then when you are not in that place you have no obligation to God. You may be good in church, and the greediest man in the world in the business world. If church is a body of believers, however, you are either in or out; you can’t be in at times and out when convenient. Church as a group who shares common beliefs demands that you exemplify

those beliefs at all times. Moreover, church as a family of believers carries with it the obligations of family. “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in.” (Robert Frost, *The Death of the Hired Man*) But the corollary is true as well; family is where when others go there you have to take them in. Church is a group of forgiven people, who feel the obligation to forgive; a worldwide family of brothers and sisters who love you just because you are family. That is why people should feel the need to be with the church rather than ask, “Do I have to go to church?”

But there is also something to be said in defense of “going to church.” When one uses this phrase with the understanding that church is not a physical location, then one is personifying the assembly as the church. We do that so often with other things. I recently took my car to the shop because it had an oil leak. Technically, only the oil pan gasket had the leak, but the whole represented the part, just as sometimes “wheels” (the part) represents the whole. If we go to church, as in going to the assembly of the body, we are recognizing that the whole assembly is made up of the parts, known as saints or Christians. It can apply, beyond that, to any function or assembly of the parts of the church. If I go to the park downtown to help others give clothing to the homeless, I am going to church. If you help at the Christmas party for a ministry to at-risk children, you are going to church. Participating in a Bible study, in conjunction with the broader assembly of the church or in a private home, is going to church.

If we are the church, then maybe we can’t go to church. But if church is the body of believers doing the will of God, then when we go to do we are going “to church.”

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