

Three Keys to Achieving Christian Harmony

By Daryl Wingerd

Imagine a group of young children playing together without selfishness or unkindness, without one child pouting and complaining if things don't go her way, without another feeling bullied or excluded, and all without constant parental intervention. You're probably thinking, "I've never seen that kind of natural harmony among young children, at least not for more than a few minutes at a time." Your observation is accurate, because harmony does not come to us naturally. What comes naturally is discord.



Most adults have acquired the social skills to give the *appearance* of harmony with others. We are governed by laws and social norms learned from childhood that require us to tolerate each other, treat each other with courtesy, and to some degree, walk in step with each other. We have learned to restrain our selfishness and pride so that to the casual observer, we don't look like a group of carnal young children. But the potential for discord still exists just under the surface, and the pressures and stresses of life bring it out more easily and quickly than most of us would care to admit.

Paul focused attention on the issue of harmony in his letter to the Romans, particularly in chapters 12-16. His main objective was harmony in the church between Jewish and Gentile believers, addressing the social and cultural enmity that went back centuries. In Christ, Paul insisted, even this longstanding and historically entrenched discord could be, and must be, replaced with harmony. So how did Paul say this should be accomplished? At the risk of over-simplifying a complex passage of Scripture, I would suggest that he gave us three basic keys to harmony: truth, humility, and love.

Truth

Paul spent the first eleven chapters of his letter presenting the glory of the gospel of Christ, describing God's impartiality between Jew and Gentile, and insisting on the exclusivity of the work of Christ and faith in him as the only way of salvation. No one else, whether a Jew seeking God's favor through keeping the Law of Moses, a Gentile worshipping his false gods, or a false teacher masquerading as a Christian but perverting the true gospel to gain cultural acceptance, can avoid condemnation. Paul instructs believers to live at peace with those outside the church when possible (12:18), but none of his exhortations imply the kind of "inter-faith" harmony insisted on by many today. To the contrary, Paul instructs Christians to "watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them" (16:17). True Christian harmony must be grounded in the truth. So, the first key to true inter-

personal Christian harmony is a common first love and first priority: a shared faith in Jesus Christ, and a common focus on pleasing and honoring him.

Humility

In a church, or a Christian family, or between believing spouses, the second key to harmony is humility. "For by the grace of God given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment" (12:3). "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited" (12:16). Instead of pridefully elevating ourselves and expecting such treatment from others, we are to "outdo one another in showing honor" (12:10). Harmony is the result of you fulfilling your own God-given role with humility, while putting others first.

Love

Paul writes, "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection" (12:9-10). This genuine brotherly affection, grounded in our common humanity, cemented by the shared experience of receiving mercy through Christ, and polished by a humble estimation of our own weaknesses and failings, is the third key to achieving harmony. And Paul is not through: "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (13:8).

Paul wrote elsewhere in a way that encapsulates all three keys into one:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

In your church, in your family, in your marriage, is there discord? If so, can you now better understand why this might be? Knowing which key(s) might be missing in your case, are you now better prepared to pursue and achieve genuine harmony? I hope and pray you are, and I leave you with Paul's prayer for the Romans:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 15:5-6)

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