What Divides Us [1]

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I recently had a couple of debates and discussions with brothers and sisters in Christ about various matters of the Christian faith. These matters divide many Christians and churches. But they are not matters which make or break Christianity (unlike, say, the differences between orthodox Christianity and Mormonism1). At least, they are not supposed to be, as the article Eight Issues That Do NOT Make or Break Christianity [2]2 contested. I agree with this article, but some people have grave reservations about some of these points. This is effectively saying "if you don't believe in x, you cannot be a Christian". In this article I want to address a couple of concerns raised around the aforementioned article.

The Article

The article in question was written by a guest on the esteemed Apologetics 315 [3] blog. It makes the claim that the following issues may divide Christians, but should not separate anyone, as none of them make-or-break one's salvation:

1. Young Earth Creationism
2. The Authorship of the Pastoral Epistle
3. The Inerrancy of Scripture
4. Whether the Flood covered the Entire Earth
5. The Character Witness of Christians
6. The Inspiration of Scripture
7. The Unity of Christianity
8. The Theory of Evolution

Of these topics, (1) and (8) are loosely related, while (3) and (6) are more closely related. For each of these points the author gives a brief explanation of why denying the point does not make or break Christianity.

Criticisms

Reading comments about this article (both on the article itself as well as elsewhere), the article drew a number of sharp criticisms. One is the style or tone in which the article was written. Some people felt it was too meek or apologetic for what the author was trying to assert. But the sharpest criticisms were reserved for a couple of points in particular: (3) and (6). I found it interesting how

many commentators agreed with the author in general, but not on one point. Whatever that point was varied from person to person. The fervor with which these criticisms were leveled makes me think that they have somehow become so entrenched in someone's theology that they cannot imagine Christianity without it. This can be a problem, as I shall argue later. Another explanation could be that some are struggling or have wrestled with doubts, and for the sake of their faith cling to a particular point. While I think that it is important to be sensitive and considerate to such people, this position can also be an unhealthy one in which to be.

Responses to Selected Criticisms

Firstly it is important to note that the main point of the author was to not argue either way for any of these points. If he had done so, it would be to challenge a strongly and popularly held belief in order to get people thinking about the necessity of that belief. Rather, we have to realise that while we may feel strongly about one or more of these points, we should not let this divide us as a global Christian community.

Meek, Apologetic Tone

I think this criticism was raised more as an annoyance than anything else. I recognised the tone in which the article was written. And I sympathise with the author. The reality is that he was writing to a hostile audience (see the comments for proof). He had something to say, not to start a quarrel (even though it would), but because it is important. And the worst part is that the hostilities do not come from anti-Christian circles, but from his own brothers and sisters. I am familiar [4] with being in this situation. So if you are irked about the tone of the article, please spare a thought for the position in which the author was when writing his article.

Young Earth Creationism

In the same week as the article was published, I debated creationism with a Christian young man. I have already explained my position [5]. What astounded me was how easily this person was willing to write off science. Being a scientist myself it is disturbing to see how laymen cherry-pick what they accept about science and what they reject. In my personal observations the young earth creationism and intelligent design (ID) arguments are roughly split down (specific) education lines. So the question arises: does secular education corrupt good Bible believers? I do not believe that it does. Science is a gift from God (Genesis 2:15–20). It is the tool with which we study God's good creation. God gave us science to come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the world that He gave us. But, comes the response, scientists can simply be wrong. Well, yes, scientists often are wrong. That is part of the learning process. But you cannot write off something like the Big Bang theory *a priori*3. You need to be a scientist and give scientific reasons for why it is wrong. The Big Bang theory has displaced another, incorrect theory of the universe. Indeed, it has—in my humble opinion—brought our secular understanding of the origin of the universe spectacularly in line with the Genesis narrative.

Another observation I have made is that "young" and "old" Christians object to ID for various reasons. The "young" Christians thinks that rejecting young earth creationism means that you reject the authority of the Bible. "Old" Christians look past this and see a much deeper issue: the ID necessarily means a rejection of a literal Adam and Eve. If you reject Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:26–28), you reject the Fall (Genesis 3), which is a significant cornerstone of Christianity and Christian theology.

Neither of these issues cause me to loose sleep. As I have previously said, I believe that the Big Bang theory and Genesis 1 narrative is harmonised. It is important to note that in case of either young earth creationism or ID, that there were no human witnesses to the creation and we are wholly reliant on God to reveal that to us. It was therefore God's prerogative on how He wanted to tell us the story: either literally, or allegorically. And I think that it is important to realise that we live in a privileged age of scientific discovery. We have the language, tools and education to understand the nuances of something like the Big Bang theory (assuming that it accurately describes the creation of

the universe, although I believe the exact details are continually being refined). Before us there were hundreds, if not thousands, of generations who did not have this understanding or education. For their benefit, the Genesis narrative would have been far more useful.

At this point I want to stress that, because God chose to reveal His acts of creation in a certain way, we *should continue* to preach the Genesis narrative. God structured it like that even for our benefit, and science does not give us a licence to alter the words of the Bible.

As for the concern over a literal Adam and Eve, I have previously addressed this [5].

Biblical Inerrancy and Inspiration

Biblical inerrancy seems to be a bastion for reformed Christians4. It is a firm foundation on which much, if not most, of modern reformed theology is built. Biblical inerrancy asserts that the Bible contains "no" errors. Such errors could be apparent contradictions. For example, in the Gospel of Mark, the women going to Jesus's tomb (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome) see a man dressed in a white robe (Mark 16:1, 5), but in the Gospel of Luke, the women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joanna) see two men is bright clothes (Luke 24:4, 10). According to Biblical Inerrancy, there is a rational explanation for this apparent contradiction (and if one cannot be postulated, there still exists one, we just do not know what it is). I do not want to argue for or against biblical inerrancy in this article, but it is important the there are strong [6] arguments [7] against [8] it.

For many people, this is a deal-breaker. If we cannot believe exactly everything that is in the Bible, how can we believe anything that is in the Bible? I believe that this is an overreaction. Mistakes do not necessarily imply lies. Even people who do hold to biblical inerrancy would admit that some slack needs to be given when talking about inerrancy. For example, in his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem (who argues in favour of biblical inerrancy) says that 5

> The Bible can be inerrant and still include loose or free quotations.

while defining inerrancy as

> The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.

In my opinion these two statements create a problem for Grudem and others who argue for inerrancy, but my point is that for whatever definition of inerrancy you hold, you have to allow for *some* slack.

It becomes clear that it is necessary to *define* what you mean by an error before engaging with someone in this debate. You also need to consider the scope: is an error in a single detail in one of the gospels of the same magnitude as having the entire life, death and resurrection narrative be a fabrication?

Tied to the issue of inerrancy is the issue of the inspiration of Scripture: did God divinely inspire the Bible, or was it haphazardly penned by human authors with no divine guidance. This question raises many implied issues and I can well believe why so many people feel so strongly about it. If God had not control over what went into the Bible, how can He be sovereign? How can people act independently of God? *Et cetera*. Some of these issues have merit. Others are rather one-track-minded6. In my opinion, again, it comes down to *definition*: what does it mean for God to inspire someone? I think everyone would agree that for someone to be inspired, God needs to intervene in the world. One way would be for God to put in a writer's heart exact word which should be penned. Another way would be being born as a man and walking on the earth, teaching people and

performing miracles. Let us take this second scenario and consider a completely, neutral, uninspired (as in the first scenario) observer. This person records events in a book or diary, much like they would record a sports event or political rally. If they write down what Jesus said and did (remember, we are assuming that they are not penning exact words as dictated by God), would their account not be profitable to teach us, thousands of years removed from the events, about what Jesus said and did? And the same goes for the stories of Moses, David, Solomon and the Judges. So I would contest that whichever way you argue, you cannot get away from some sort of inspiration. You might argue over the *mechanism* of inspiration, but being a universe which God created and in which He intervene (and continues to intervene), you cannot get away from inspiration.

Again, even if the Bible is not inerrant or inspired, God is *sovereign*. I do not believe He would have let people so corrupt[7] the text to the point were it became meaningless. Because of this, as with my view on Genesis 1, I believe that each and every Christian should continue studying and preaching the Bible *as it is*.

Conclusion

A big thing for me is the consideration of the non-believer. If you are in a sincere conversation with a non-believer, but they do not grant you one of these points (say, biblical inerrancy[8]) how will you respond? Will you allow that objection to scupper your efforts at evangelism? Or do you press the point that, regardless of what you have not been granted, Jesus and the cross are vital for getting right with God? Bear in mind that when someone is being evangelised, they are faced with difficult challenges, such as recognising and accepting their own sinfulness and having to submit before God, without being required to accept your pet theological point before you consider them to be a "true" Christian. Even though I do personally hold to the inspiration of Scripture, my faith does not hinge on it. I am willing to let go of that point and engage with the unbeliever. And if you are willing and able to do that for the unbeliever, why not for your brother and sister in Christ?

I sincerely hope, and pray, that these issues will not continue to *divide* Christians, but *bring them closer* as they exchange ideas through healthy, constructive debate. Indeed, I believe we need to discuss these issues. I am not advocating some universalist pacifism. Having these discussions do shape our theology and how we look at the world. And it is a virtue to be able to defend your own beliefs, but also to listen and seriously consider those who differ from you.

In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas.

- 1. See my declaration of faith [9] for more on what I consider "essential" and "non-essential" beliefs.
- 2. Had I compiled this list, I would have included (without necessarily advocating) annihilationism. Annihilationism is the belief that people will not suffer eternally in hell, but only for a period of time, and then are "destroyed", much like atheists believe happens when a person dies anyway. I know that John Stott [10], a much respected evangelist, held this belief. Glenn Peoples advocated this point in his podcast [11]. I hope to write on the matter someday when I have reflected on it more.
- 3. While I was writing this article, this article [12] from the Sententias blog appeared which argues against "creation science".
- 4. Much like Calvinism [4].
- 5. Grudem, Wayne. "Biblical Inerrancy *[13]*." In *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 1291. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994.
- 6. They seem reminiscent of many of the charges leveled against Arminians.
- 7. Minor corruptions in Biblical texts are well known and understood. These are usually few and insignificant. For example, one ancient manuscript might say "Christ", while the other says "Jesus Christ". One of these two is a deviation from the original text. Another example is the muddling of numbers, such as census data found in the book of Numbers. When the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered, they provided us with a full copy of the Old Testament that was a thousand years older than the previous oldest copy that we had (the Leningrad Codex). Despite a thousand years—and many different copies and copiers of the text—separating

these two texts, they are remarkable similar. They are almost identical, except for minor copy errors, such as certain numbers in the book of Numbers. There are no errors so big that it impacts the *theology* of the Old Testament.

- 8. Sceptics (with sincere doubts) may question this point of divine inspiration, because from where they are standing, the Bible makes this claim about itself (2 Timothy 3:16). I believe that it is not "the Bible" making the claim, but rather God, who, as the maximally great Being, is the only One who can legitimately make this claim about Himself (John 8:18). This might not be something which the sceptic can grasp in the moment.

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