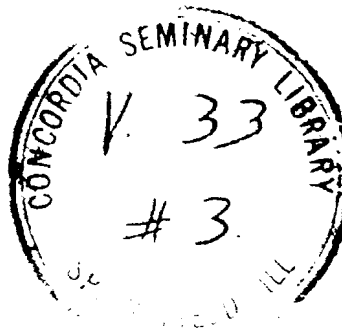


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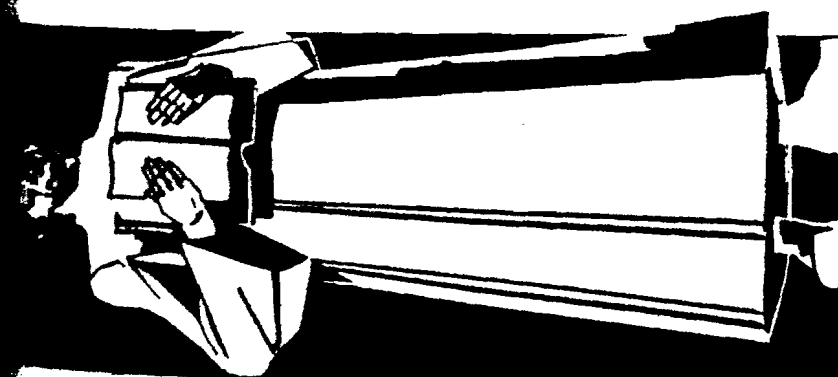
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VOL. XXXIII • NO. 3
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A Place for Humility in The Search for Unity

RICHARD J. SCHULTZ

THE THESIS WHICH this brief offering presents is that in seeking unity of belief and profession and practice in the church, as elsewhere, human beings must humbly examine the psychological forces behind their own positions. The danger is that we forget our own human dilemma. As human beings we are all subject to subtle pressures and forces which produce responses beyond our control. For this reason we pray for the corrective and clarifying influence of the Holy Spirit. In seeking unity where there is disturbing diversity, we must find a chink in the armor.

The assumption that we are always acting with deliberate and conscious rationality and that our responses are free from predetermining factors can lead to rigid polarization. If a man is presumed to be acting and speaking in an independently rational manner, I can judge his disagreement with my position in one of two ways. He is either a fool or a scoundrel. Otherwise I must conclude that I am a fool or a scoundrel. If we both assume that we have faced objective evidence in a wholly objective manner, a great and impassable gulf is established between us. The impasse is resolvable only by someone admitting deliberate rejection of clear evidence or lack of intellectual capacity. Neither admission is likely.

One way out of the dilemma, of course, is to deny the possibility of objective evidence. The path of hopeless relativity has been adopted by many. It stops arguments. It also stops any kind of agreement other than an agreement to disagree. If truth for me is only that which has been screened through my unique perceptive processes, I can have no hope of achieving the beauty of brotherly unity. I am alone and uncomfortable forever. I can then only settle for simply respecting the unique and non-repeatable perceptions of others in return for having my own unique perceptions respected. It's a different world for all of us and who knows which is real, or if any is real. If I cannot live with this, I can search out those who, through some psychic accident, perceive truth in a way compatible to my perception—and, of course, avoid those whom I find incompatible. Depending upon my personality, I will practice frigid aloofness from those who make me uncomfortable, or I can engage in a running battle to rationalize my position. No matter how smug this makes me feel, I am forced to the unsettling conclusion that truth is relative to the perceiver. I may perform some emotional abracadabra to make myself *feel* sure, but the core of my being cringes in uncertainty in the lonely nights.

Such a position with reference to God's truths revealed in Scripture is unthinkable, of course. The multitude of Scriptural references to the universal intention of God's revelations are sufficient evidence

that God offers His truths as being equally understandable and mutually perceivable by different minds. "God will have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth." Our sturdy protestation of the perspicacity and trustworthiness of Scripture is basic to the practice of theology and to the sharing of God's precious revelations. Moreover, all of human experience testifies to the fact that an individual man's perception is not innately *sui generis*. We do perceive many things in common.

We are confronted with a solemn query. If Christian brothers disagree in matters of doctrine (which is so important that it has eternal reverberations for all mankind), where shall we seek the cause and cure of disagreement? We are not ready, except in our nastier moods, to ascribe differences to intellectual obliquity or lack of moral integrity. We cannot subscribe to a chaos-producing principle of solipsistic perceptivity. Where there is honest concern about differences and sincere desire to establish and maintain unity of faith and confession, we must find some acceptable point of flexibility.

Another possible "explanation" of variant stances might be found in innately differing personality structures. By nature some of us might be inclined toward a certain thematic approach to Scriptural revelations, while others just as "naturally" take another approach. If this is true and we are somehow at birth frozen into attitudinal stances, we can at least begin to understand and sympathize with each other and excuse each other. The difficulty here is that we are thrown directly into the midst of the old and unresolved nature-nurture conflict. We Christians readily admit that by nature we are all sinful and unclean. Without entering into the old dispute about the inheritability of personality structure and such qualities as artistic ability, we know that in relation to the things of God we are all hopeless and helpless by nature. By our baptism in Christ we are alive and new-born unto God. The natural man does not perceive the things of God. Our perception of God's truth is a work of the Holy Spirit and is a fresh and shining quality of the new man in Christ. It is not encumbered with inherited weakness.

Nevertheless, we do find Christian brothers involved in serious differences of perception of doctrine. This writer would propose that before Christians get enmeshed in discussions of *how* they differ, they would do well to ask *why* they differ. We need humility in the search for unity. Compared to our vehemence in doctrinal differences, we are generally gentle and understanding and forgiving about our failures in living the faith. Sin, we agree, does still easily beset the new-born Christian. Fleshly vestiges will trouble us to the grave. We are suspicious only of the man who boasts complete consistency in his confession and his life. It is at this point that flexibility is found.

The flesh is weak even while the spirit is strong. None of us denies his fleshly encumbrance. If then, a significant part of this encumbrance is unconscious submission to ego-centered and socially-

generated pressures, we have good reason for humble analysis of our own responses even in the holiest of matters. There has been sufficient and astute experimentation in the discipline of social psychology to demonstrate that we are all potential victims of such pressures. To recognize and admit them is often sufficient therapy to unfreeze us from our entrenched positions long enough so that we may establish warm and open rapport. This is not a sufficient condition for fruitful searching for unity, but it seems to be a necessary condition.

To explicate all of the factors which can isolate and insulate us would require a book. The point of this brief exploration can be made by citing a few examples. These are best proffered in the form of questions which we ask in humility.

To what extent for instance, do our attitudes reflect the expectations of others? Our own hearts tell us that we trim our sails to the winds prevailing. Rather solid evidence exists that dramatic and incredible shifts of attitude and action patterns occur with changes of social environment.

Self-concept may be another trap. In our actions and responses from day to day, we display a persistent drive toward self-consistency. Yet, we must ask how our self image is formed. It is formed by reflection from significant others. Self-consistency pressures can override judgment and logical processes. Once again we see that our responses are largely determined by the group within which we find our sense of worth. Self protection demands that we act and speak so that we retain our places of regard in the group to which we are committed and to whose emanations of approval or disapproval we are keenly attuned.

Which very human drives operate dynamically in our lives? The drive to be accepted, to be admired, to be looked up to are extremely powerful motivations. Again we are led to self-examination to find the why of our behavior. It is submission to these forces which must often be confessed as sin rather than devastatingly immoral actions.

The psychological tendency is toward patterning of experience. Thus, we tend to find the same kinds of patterns in all experiences. Moreover, we tend to impose patterns upon our experiences with other people. Having determined an expected pattern from another person, we tend to pre-establish that pattern upon subsequent encounters. Having ears to hear, we hear what we have decided to hear. Here, too, is where our penchant to attach labels upon people and institutions and geographical areas arises.

One need not hold a brief for particular theories or doctrines of social psychology. Enough is known, however, to make us painfully aware that the differences we seek to dissolve often have their source in someone's defensive reactions. The identification of such responses may not solve real cognitive differences. To confess that we are all subject to them does admit the grace of humility into the arena and allow for the kind of self-suspicion which leads to humble submission to the Word of God. The search for unity may take us into long and

difficult and serious study. Its fruits will not come to those who maintain rigid walls of self which cannot be breached. They will come to those who see that in our common sinfulness and weakness we may first successfully probe for weak spots. For it is not the Word of God which is weak. It is we who are so poor that nothing less than the blood of God's own Son could rescue us from our futility.