

“That They May Be One”: Conservatism, Cooperation, and the Center of Christian Unity
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The adjective “conservative” to describe Christianity has fallen on hard times, even among those who have a heritage in what might be called historic fundamentalism. For many Christians today, the term “conservative” is considered a bad word—at least if the term is used to describe anything beyond allegiance to the inerrancy of Scripture and orthodox, evangelical doctrine. When the word is used to describe a particular philosophy of culture, beauty, or worship, “conservative” is often considered something extra biblical, unbiblical, or even anti-biblical.

Is conservative Christianity important? Or, to put it another way, should philosophical differences over culture or worship hinder cooperation between Christians? To answer that question, I would like to first explain exactly what I mean by a conservative philosophy of culture and worship, then explore what constitutes the center of Christian unity, and finally examine how a biblical understanding of Christian unity and necessary disunity applies to differences over philosophy of culture and worship.

1. A Conservative Philosophy of Culture

a. Belief in Transcendent Absolute Principles

The first pillar of conservative Christianity is affirmation of transcendent, absolute principles, which are declared as such by the sovereign will of the self-existent Creator. These principles govern all creation and reveal its meaning and value. They are revealed to us in creation, in our consciences, and mostly perfectly in the written Word of God.

b. The Importance of Form

The second pillar of conservatism is a commitment to conserve those cultural institutions and aesthetic forms that best reflect a recognition and respect for this transcendent order. Conservative Christianity recognizes some forms of expression were designed to express transcendent truth, goodness, and beauty, while other forms were by nature designed to do something entirely opposite. If Christians wish to preserve God’s truth, then this must include not only the preservation of *what* God said in his Word, but also preservation of *how* God said it through particular kinds of cultural forms. What art forms are chosen to express God’s truth—in corporate worship or in other contexts—are of utmost importance since they express not just theological facts, but those facts imagined in certain ways.

2. The Center of Christian Unity

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a. Boundary and Center

The boundary of Christian unity is the gospel, but within that boundary, unity among Christians is dependent upon the degree of agreement in matters that are secondary to the gospel but that are important nonetheless. This is the genius of the idea of fundamentalism.

b. Fundamentalism and a Conservative Philosophy of Culture

The difference between what I have called a conservative philosophy of culture and a progressive philosophy can be illustrated in the Fundamentalist/New Evangelical divide of the mid-Twentieth century. However, while a truly conservative Christian will always embrace the idea of fundamentalism, unfortunately many of those who claim the label of fundamentalist have long abandoned a conservative philosophy.

3. Worship, Culture, and Cooperation

a. Differences over Philosophy Must Always Affect Cooperation

- i. Philosophy of culture is clearly not on the same level as the gospel—it is not the boundary of Christian fellowship.
- ii. Fundamental disagreements over philosophy of culture and worship must affect the ability to cooperate as Christians on some levels.
- iii. Agreement over a philosophy of culture will often make cooperation possible even when there are other secondary differences of doctrine.
- iv. Philosophy of culture and worship is rather high on the list of important, so-called “secondary” issues, even higher than many doctrinal matters.

b. Philosophy vs. Application

Differences in philosophy often result in significant differences in application, and it is usually these differences in application that are most apparent and that appear to be the primary reason for limiting cooperation. Yet in reality, it is the more important philosophical differences that are the real reasons for cooperation limits.

4. Conclusion

The essence of conservative Christianity is a belief in absolute, transcendent principles of truth, goodness, and beauty and a commitment to preserve those values and pass them on to future generations. And it is a recognition that certain ways of expressing those transcendent principles are better at preserving and accurately passing them on than

others, particularly those forms that most correspond to the kinds of aesthetic expressions that God inspired in his Word. Such a philosophy will always affect cooperation among Christians who otherwise share unity in the gospel. One's philosophy of culture is important because culture affects everything, especially the gospel.