

Doctrines: Unity in the main points, freedom in the side issues

Ephesians 4:11-13 – So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

1 Corinthians 8:1 – We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.

Romans 14:4-5 – Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

Doctrines are important to a church and a denomination. They give clarity about the main points of our Christian faith. Because of that they bring stability and peace in the church and they help keep false teaching outside the church. They are a fundamental basis for our growth in Christ and help us to stay the course, when we face all kinds of problems in our lives.

So it is important that there is consensus in the church about these basic doctrines.

Paul writes about the danger of false teachers, who come up with misleading ideas: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse.” (Galatians 1:6-8)

And to the Corinthians: “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.” (2 Cor 11:2-4)

As Christians we are warned against false teachings:

“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.” (Col 2:8)

So stability and unity about the basics of our Christian faith are very important. In our churches, preaching and education should be completely in accordance to our confession of faith.

At the same time, it is a fact that we, as Christians, are all on the way in our growth in knowledge. We are all imperfect in every way, also in regards to our knowledge of the Bible and the Christian faith. We can have a sincere difference of opinion.

How do we deal with this?

God emphasizes in the New Testament the great importance of avoiding a division. “All of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” (1 Cor 1:10). “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them” (Titus 3:10).

It’s no problem when you don’t understand everything, or if you don’t agree with everything in your church. With mutual respect, you can talk about it with each other, find out if you can come to (more) agreement, think about it, study and pray about it.

You can, peacefully, give your opinion when you’re asked to, or you can choose to keep your opinion to yourself.

The problem arises when you go out on a mission to convince others in your congregation that you’re right. When you, by yourself, start educating others in your different views or let yourself be persuaded to do that.

Then you enter the area of causing division.

On the territory of the confession of faith; the basic doctrines of our faith, it is important that there is unity in the local church and in the GCI as a whole.

Besides that, there are a lot of other topics on faith.

The GCI takes the view that we can think differently about all these other topics and still be a congregation together in mutual respect and unity.

Here too is applicable that we shouldn't teach or force our points of view to others in the congregation.

A few practical examples:

1. Difference of opinion about how God created everything. Some believe in a literal 6-day creation, others believe in a creation over a longer period of time.
2. Difference in perception about the exact details of future occurrences like the Millennium of Peace, if there will be a rapture of Christians before the Second Coming, etcetera.
3. Difference of opinion about the celebration of Christmas; if we celebrate it on December 25th or not, if we have a tree or not, etcetera.

We can all personally have our own insights and make different choices and accept and respect each other in this.

It's also important that our confession of faith is the most important basic topic in our congregations. As soon as one topic becomes a pet topic, imbalance arises as well and that can cause division.

For example:

1. Preach constantly about the topic healing
2. Keep putting the emphasis on our responsibility to Israel as a nation
3. Emphasizing one particular spiritual gift, like speaking in tongues or distinguishing between spirits.

By giving varied education, always pointing towards the basics of faith, you can prevent, as congregation, that one topic is going to prevail. In the congregational life it is also good when one topic isn't going to prevail for a long time or permanently.

Finally, there are of course differences of opinion about practical matters, structures, forms and traditions. With these kinds of matters it's important that we pay attention to each other, that we are prepared to adjust ourselves in love to each other and to accept and respect each other.

A few examples you can think about:

1. Style of music in worshipping (classical, modern, gospel, etcetera)
2. Expressions of worshipping (raise hands, stand still, etcetera)
3. Structure of the service (length of the service, children in the service or not, and so forth)

To sum it up:

We strive for unity, by

1. Agreement about the confession of faith
2. Giving each other space, respect and acceptance on the area of:
 - a. Sincere doubts and questions
 - b. Differences in understanding topics on faith other than the confession of faith
3. Not causing a division by educating our different point of view to others
4. Avoiding too much focus on one topic
5. Accepting and respecting each other in practical matters, with a willingness to adjust

Questions:

1. How can you discuss differences in understanding in the congregation with mutual respect?
2. How do you prevent long-term pet topics in the congregation, without getting too rigid?
3. How do you deal with someone who gives his opinion in a more dominant way?
4. How would you like to deal with things when you don't agree with something?
5. How do you keep mutual unity and love in differences of opinion about practical matters?