

The Danger of Theology by Analogy

It is popular in the church growth movement to anchor the philosophy of local churches to one particular biblical model or metaphor. Most popular are those biblical metaphors that are inclusive, non-threatening, and uncontroversial. Let me illustrate.

The metaphor of “journey” is popular today. All of us are on a spiritual journey. So all the “seekers” who show up at church are invited to join us on our journey. We don’t need such antiquated concepts as church membership. Membership implies discrimination—some are in, some are not in. Membership hurts feelings. It expresses a value judgment on the spiritual status of people. After all, who are we to judge? Isn’t that Christ’s role? So let all—reprobate, agnostic, mystic, whoever—come and join us on our journey.

But there are journeys and there are journeys. There is a journey *to* Christ and there is a journey *with* Christ. Both may last a long time. The latter journey, however, has a definite starting point clearly identified in Scripture. To view these two journeys as one and the same is to blur a distinction clearly made in Scripture.

Christian Standard recently applauded one congregation that invites all in attendance to join their journey. There are no formal membership requirements. (We used to call this “open membership.”) So what would prevent the congregation across the street from coming over one Sunday, professing to be part of the journey, then voting to sell the church property? And why should we assume that only those who come to a church building are on this journey? How about all those whose spiritual journey has not yet brought them to a church facility? Are we arrogant enough to assume that our journey is superior to their journey? So perhaps when we have a congregational vote on something we should run newspaper ads inviting all those who are on the journey to cast their vote!

Even more popular is the metaphor of “family.” Family members often disagree, but they are still family. So all believers are part of Christ’s family. Technicalities like baptism and the Lord’s Supper don’t really matter. Relationship is what counts. If we have a relationship with Christ, we automatically must have a relationship with everyone else who has a relationship with Christ. That makes us “family.” Doctrine (a.k.a. baptism) only divides. We must stress our family relationship.

But not all relationships are of the same quality and standing. My wife and I have passed through various relationships over the years—puppy love, mature love, engagement and finally marriage. We did not join the married couples class when we exchanged friendship rings back in high school! To say that all people who have a “relationship” with Christ are part of the Christian family is equivalent to saying that all the teenagers who think they are in love are married!

The family metaphor has also been used to justify touchy-feely activity in the church. One preacher closes a service by saying, “We’re all family. In my family we like to hug and hold hands. So everyone grab the hand of the person

next to you.” Well, I know families where they pinch blackheads for each other. Should we start doing that in the church?

There is another point that concerns me about this stand that any relationship with Christ makes us part of his family. If we blur relationship distinctions in the spiritual realm, by what logic can we distinguish between relationships in the physical realm? Following the “relationship” logic regarding the church would seem to me to compel us to recognize “shacking up” as just as good as the marriage relationship. Furthermore, is it not on the grounds that all relationships are equal that homosexuals demand legal sanction for “gay” marriage? If someone says, “But that’s different. The Scriptures speak plainly about the nature of marriage.” I would argue that likewise the Scriptures speak plainly on the nature of salvation and “marriage” to Christ.

Like “family” and “journey” the new birth metaphor (John 3:3) also has been pressed to teach what clearly contradicts the plain language of Scripture. A few years ago it was popular to argue that an unborn child was still a brother even before birth. Therefore, all the unimmersed should be recognized as brothers-in-the-making. That being the case, the unborn brothers should be accepted into the family of God (local church membership) as we eagerly await the moment when those conceived by God’s Spirit choose to be born of the water.

Many have moved passed the idea that any form of baptism makes a person an “unborn brother.” Today it is anyone who profess a “relationship” (whatever that means) with Christ that is considered part of the family of God. But why stop there? Does not Scripture say, *Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us all?* (Mal 2:10). Why not use that verse to insist that all men are in the family of God whether they have discovered Jesus or not? Would that not be the next logical step in the implementation of the family model? So the next time the church must decide to borrow a million dollars to build a “Family Life” center, why not just have an open referendum in the community among all the “brothers” to determine the issue?

Like one popular talk show host says, I illustrate absurdity with absurdity. One of the dangers of metaphors is that they can be pushed beyond their intent. This is why our application of biblical metaphors always must be circumscribed by the plain statements of Scripture.

Another problem with theology by analogy is that in the New Testament (if that is relevant anymore) there are multiple “models” or metaphors used to describe what it means to be a Christian. That’s good in my book. It keeps us from “going to seed” or “going overboard” on one particular metaphor.

Take the model of citizenship, for example (Eph 2:19; Phil 3:20). There is a formal moment in which an alien becomes a citizen, regardless of how long the “journey” to that point, or how many family members he may have in the country already. Likewise the marriage model (2 Cor 11:2; Rom 7:4) implies a formal moment when a couple, heretofore single, are recognized as married. So it is also with the liberation model (Gal 5:1; Heb 2:14f). A particular document properly signed emancipated a slave in Paul’s day. The same is true of other biblical models of what it means to be a Christian. If the Christian is a soldier

(Phil 2:25; 2 Tim 2:3), there must be a moment of enlistment; if he is a branch (John 15:5), there must be a grafting into the vine; if a priest (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6), there must be a consecration service; if an adopted son (Eph 1:5; Gal 4:5), there must be a formal act of adoption. And so it goes.

Fortunately we are not left in the dark about the formal moment at which the alien receives citizenship, the slave emancipation, the child adoption—a moment in time when the unattached are married, the branch grafted, the priest consecrated, etc. Need I tell the readers of this journal that this special moment is identified for us in Acts 2:38, Mark 16:16, and 1 Peter 3:21?