

Identity and Boundaries

As part of my current sabbatical, my wife Lynette and I spent two weeks in an intensive counseling retreat for pastors and missionaries. In some of the sessions we were challenged to look at the topics of identity and boundaries. Since being home, I've also been thinking about how those ideas relate to congregations and to conferences.

Our personal identity is directly related to the idea of boundary—physically we call that boundary “skin.” Interestingly, sometimes we talk about deep understanding as getting “inside another person’s skin.” Of course, we are more than physical beings, so we also must consider psychological and spiritual boundaries in knowing who we are personally.

Corporate identity is different, yet some of the same ideas apply. We can identify the physical congregations that make up Conservative Mennonite Conference. We can also point to our *Statement of Theology* and our *Statement of Practice* as two attempts to define



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the cognitive and spiritual boundaries, or “skin,” of CMC.

Our annual conference meeting was a good time of thinking about who we are—how we pass on the faith, what that faith is, and why we exist as a conference of churches. As no

two individuals are the same, so no two congregations are the same. Yet we join together for common purposes. Over time, of course, individuals and congregations and conferences change. (See “It’s not your father’s conference...” Page 9) With those changes, congregations will keep asking whether the common purposes that joined congregations in the past continue to be strong. Some congregations find those purposes are no longer sufficient, and others find common purpose with us.

I think our conference institutions have done excellent work in challenging us to consider well issues of identity. Rosedale Bible College has given

us clear outlines of what it means to be both Evangelical and Anabaptist through their annual symposia Rosedale Mennonite Missions has given good leadership regarding the call of Christ to make disciples of all nations. Perhaps a weaker link in our common identity is what it means to be, and make, disciples in our own communities. Congregations without strong links to our educational and mission agencies will, of course, miss out on the benefits of their leadership in their respective fields.

I continue to believe there is something important in the identity of CMC—that we exist for good reason. I hope that we can continue to find our way in the walk of faith, and that we can truly pass on the faith that we have received. The forms may well change, and ultimately institutions will die, but the church of Jesus Christ will prevail. Let’s make sure that our faith is rooted ultimately in Jesus. If it is, we will be better able to cope with the changes that are a natural part of identity formation and maintenance.

MODERATORS DESK

A Ready Answer

We remember Winston Churchill for his leadership, but he was also known for his quick wit. Here are two examples. On one occasion Bessie Braddock met Winston when he was drunk, so in disgust she said to him, “Sir, you are drunk,” to which Churchill replied, “Madam, you are ugly, and in the morning I’ll be sober.” On another occasion lady Nancy Astor was upset with him to the point that she said, “Sir, if you were my husband I’d put poison in your tea.” Winston shot back, “If I were your husband, I would drink it.”

Churchill’s quick wit reminds me of the instruction found in I Peter 3:15. “But in your hearts, set Christ apart as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (NIV) We are not asked to be quick witted in response to an inquiry about our

faith, but we are asked to be prepared to answer anyone who asks us about it. Furthermore, our response should be gentle and respectful, not condemning or harsh like Churchill’s humorous responses were.

As I pondered this verse I tried to remember how often I was asked about my faith in the past year. Should I have been asked more often than I was? In other words, do I exude a genuine hope in Christ? Do I want people to know that I am a born-again Christian, or do I hope people don’t find out I am one? Does my life reflect the character of Christ or the character of one who tries to ride the fence and keep a foot in both worlds?

Peter’s instruction requires two things of us. First, we need a current, genuine relationship with Christ. Secondly, it is impor-

tant that we have sufficient knowledge of the Word and what it means to live a Christian life to be able to talk about it intelligently. When our hope in Christ is real, it will cause non-believers to want what we have or at least want to learn more about it. For those of us who have a genuine hope, II Tim 2:15, tells us how to always be ready to answer. “Do your best (“study” in the KJV) to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and one who correctly handles the Word of truth.”

Spend time in the Word. Know what you believe. Walk close to the Lord, and you will always be ready at a moment’s notice to answer any who ask about your faith.



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