

Dealing with Theological Differences on Church-Planting Teams

By Andrew Hope

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Rarely in Christian circles do believers engage in long-term ministry together across denominational lines. One notable exception to this trend is frontline missionary work. For many who are called to the mission field, there is a real appeal in joining an organization that is not tied to their own denomination. Whether it is a sending organization's ministry focus, their regional focus, their ministry philosophy, or something else, most cross-cultural workers choose to work among the unreached through interdenominational organizations.

The interdenominational missionary sending organization is truly a rare bird. Thousands of us on the field find ourselves working in organizations alongside people with common calling, common convictions on the "big stuff," and yet very divergent convictions on secondary issues. There is also the added dynamic that we usually minister on teams where there are expectations to develop a unified vision and CP strategy. The potential for disagreement about, and division over, secondary issues is very real.

First, let me clarify some terms. When I say the "big stuff," I am referring to what I will call *primary convictions*. Most evangelical churches and sending organizations agree upon certain core beliefs: the doctrines of the Trinity, original sin, salvation through Christ alone, the inerrancy

of scripture, etc. Everyone joining a sending organization must agree and adhere to certain foundational beliefs such as these.

What I am calling *secondary convictions* are those organizations may not have a specific stance on: the mode of baptism (immersion or sprinkling), the miraculous gifts, the role of women in church leadership—to name a few. Within evangelicalism there is diversity of conviction on such issues, and we usually find that same breadth of conviction on CP teams.

To make matters more complicated, most of us find ourselves working in organizations that are increasingly multi-ethnic. Whether you are Baptist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, or non-denominational, Nigerian, Thai, Peruvian, or American, your secondary theological views do not preclude you from being a member of many sending organizations. The denominational and cultural diversity in many organizations inherently requires joining a body of believers who have a variety of perspectives.

Unity in the body of Christ, a primary conviction in our organizations, is not achieved in uniformity of perspective, but in the unity of calling and purpose: bringing God's Kingdom among the unreached. Our organizations champion the belief that it is better to work together amid differences, and to focus on the commonality of our primary convictions to fulfill Christ's commission to His church.

Of course, agreeing to work in an interdenominational and multi-cultural team is different than not having personal convictions about some of those secondary issues. It is likely that most of us have some strong convictions about several of them.

A question to consider in this context, then, is: *how do we interact with one another, considering these differences, so that we do not impose our own convictions on others while still holding true to our own?* And perhaps even more important is the question: *how will the churches we are planting form convictions about these secondary issues?* What

follows is a proposal for how to approach these two questions on diverse, interdenominational church-planting teams.

A Narrow Approach to Secondary Issues: Two Inadequate Approaches

While we all likely champion the belief in the unity of the body of Christ across denominational and cultural lines, not all of us may be keen on being part of a CP team whose secondary convictions are as wide as those of the organization. In fact, many would argue that narrowing those secondary convictions on a CP team can be helpful for two reasons: it helps avoid unnecessary controversy for the team as well as with the existing local church. Full disclosure, I will be arguing for the opposite. Let us look first at two inadequate ways of dealing with secondary issues—a theologically uniform team, and full submission to the national church.

Theological Uniformity on a CP Team

Some CP teams have decided to define and make uniform their stances on some secondary theological convictions. In recruiting, these teams look for people who share the same convictions as they do about those secondary issues. While this is a path for achieving theological unity on a team and what is taught to new believers, it can also be problematic to team and church-planting movements (CPM).

Suppose you were just accepted by your organization, and you felt a particular call to a specific people group or area. At first you receive great news: there is a team already there for you to join! Then you find out that this team has particular stances on secondary issues, some of which differ from those of you and your church. The team's requirement for agreement on those issues effectively prevents you from joining the team and therefore becomes a roadblock for following what you sense is the Lord's leading to this people or part of the world.

Fast forward five years, and it is possible (even likely) this team has lost some of its members and could need new workers. Working in hard-to-reach places makes recruiting team members difficult enough. This additional theological filter can make it almost impossible to find others who fit the team's criteria to join them. This well-intentioned stance can result in the dwindling or even death of a team.

This team may also find it a challenge to partner with local believers as well, since they may not find anyone who shares their same set of views on the field. Ironically, requiring theological uniformity on a CP team can directly result in disunity among the body of Christ.

When a team in an interdenominational organization narrows its theological convictions beyond its organization's own statement of beliefs, those theological restrictions effectively disqualify some members in the organization who have already been theologically vetted and have been deemed theologically fit to the task of working on a CP team. While a denomination's mission typically encourages their workers to hold and teach the same secondary views as the sending church, interdenominational organizations are uniquely suited to teams which are shaped by multiple perspectives from diverse parts of the body of Christ. If a unit or units on a team feel strongly that the team should have a uniform stance on some secondary issues not already stated in the organization's statement of beliefs, it could be an indicator that they might be better served if they were sent out by their own denomination's mission rather than by a multi-denominational organization.

Submission to the National Church's Theology

Another avenue some CP teams have taken on this issue is to partner with a local church, and then submit to the local church's interpretation on secondary issues. At first, this approach will likely strengthen the bond between the CP team and the local church on the field. However, a CP worker's personal convictions that may not align with the partner church could cause friction. More importantly, though, if the CP team is

expected to encourage new believers to adopt that local church's stance on those issues, it may cause problems.

While this approach may feel like the godlier path in submitting to the local church and finding unity in this way, it can inadvertently perpetuate extra-biblical secondary convictions. Take for example convictions about dress (what is and is not acceptable according to the Bible), stances on alcohol (either abused or taboo), worship (dancing, drums, etc.), the role of women in the church, and more. These secondary convictions often carry moral value in one culture, and therefore are not directly applicable when the local church is from a very different cultural background from the new believing church (for example, think of an animist-background partner church with a CP team who is church planting among Muslims). At worst, asking new believers to adopt these views can teach legalism and misinterpretation of Scripture, adding foreign cultural shackles to the gospel of Christ. Doing so also takes away the opportunity for the new believers to wrestle with biblical truths in the context of their own culture.

Unity Versus Uniformity in the Body of Christ

It is worth us taking a moment to reflect on how the theology of the body of Christ challenges us to take a different way forward than the aforementioned approaches. All evangelical sending organizations agree that there is only one body of Christ, only one Church. Unity is a primary conviction. Where we often get tripped up as believers in how we live this out is when we confuse unity for uniformity. Uniformity dictates that everyone must believe, think, and behave in an agreed upon way to be part of the group. The desire for theological uniformity is the impetus for the creation of many denominations.

Unity, however, is marked by common identification and fellowship. Yes, there is a foundation of common understanding and belief, but there is tolerance for different convictions on secondary issues for the sake of

maintaining that identification and fellowship. In short, it keeps the main thing *the main thing*.

The letters in the New Testament are filled with exhortations for unity amid massive differences. Most churches which received these epistles were diverse in culture, religious background, secondary convictions, and, likely, language. What is the advice from the apostle Paul to these explosively diverse churches— find the people you agree with, and “do” church with them? Not at all. Instead, Paul exhorts these bodies of Christ to be unified, while giving us windows into the eternal brilliance and purpose for doing so:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. (Rom. 12: 4-5, ESV)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews and Greeks, slaves or free— and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:12-13, ESV)

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (1 Cor. 12:20)

These are just a few verses which Paul was led by the Holy Spirit to teach and exhort us. There is no option in terms of Christian identification. Even though we may strongly disagree with people on secondary convictions, they are no less part of who we are. Our identity is found both in Christ, and in Christ’s body, the church. As much as we may cringe at the secondary convictions held by a fellow believer, they are no less part of our own identity. In this way, because of Christ through the Holy Spirit, believers in the body of Christ are inseparable.

What is at stake if we refuse to work or fellowship with part of the body of Christ for the sake of preserving good doctrine as we see it? At least in part, it is the sacrifice of a primary doctrine, the unity of the

body. Unity is not merely a theological conclusion we agree on. It also requires action— fellowship, common work, disagreements, arguments, and finding the higher purpose in Christ. In so doing we continue to persevere. The very act of striving for unity with people we disagree with is deeply biblical, as the process honors the Lord and points us toward the future. It proclaims that Christ has woven us together, that He is sufficient, that all brothers and sisters in Christ are part of our own identity and will continue to be so as we live together with the Lord for all eternity.

A Path Forward

Most CP teams in interdenominational organizations have members from multiple church backgrounds and denominations. There are a couple of ways to deal with the issue of secondary theological issues on a team. The first way is simply to not talk about those issues. Avoidance can be a way to keep team harmony for a while.

The rubber really meets the road, however, when people start coming to faith. Say, for example, two teammates are discipling a new believer. These two teammates each hold a differing conviction on baptism (one believes in baptism by immersion of believers only, the other believes in sprinkling or pouring for the new believer and their children). Both stances are permissible in their organization. In this case, what should they teach the new believer about baptism, and who should decide the mode of baptism when the time comes to do it? Avoidance, if a team sees people come to the Lord, will lead to confusion and eventual disagreement. It is not an effective CPM strategy.

The potentially harder road, at least at first, is to talk about secondary theological issues as a team rather than ignoring them or acting as if they do not exist. Talking about these issues with new potential teammates is also key, as it sets expectations with them from the beginning. But how a team has this conversation is crucial.

Starting The Conversation on Team

Having the conversation about secondary issues on a CP team can be a very sensitive topic for many of us. With potential recruits, sharing one's own secondary convictions and asking for theirs is a conversation that may require more trust than is present when a person is looking for a team to join.

Rather than asking what a recruit or teammate thinks about specific secondary theological issues, another approach is to ask the question, "Would you have a problem working on a team with someone if they held a differing conviction about any of the following secondary issues:

- prophecy
- speaking in tongues
- baptism (believer baptism by immersion only, sprinkling believers and children of believers)
- predestination
- church-planting philosophy (DMM, Proclamation, etc.)
- spiritual warfare (generational sins, curses, demonization of believers)
- women in Christian leadership positions over men
- women preaching, teaching men
- covenant theology, dispensationalism
- eschatology
- something else?

If the answer is "no," then the conversation is straightforward from there. Teammates can agree to disagree, while still honoring one another in the team and outside of it. Those secondary theological conversations are no longer off limits, nor are they considered unimportant. The team leader has laid a foundation of trust that encourages unity, listening, consideration of differing views, and humility. When uniformity is not necessary, the need for agreement is no longer necessary. No one needs to feel that they must hide their personal convictions either, even to

a new believer. That said, the team must agree to not condemn other teammates or their convictions to the new believers or other teammates. Above all, they agree to point those new brothers and sisters in Christ to the word, encouraging them to ask the Lord for help by his Holy Spirit.

If there is a “yes” in the answer to the question above (meaning a person would take issue working with someone who has a different conviction to their own), then it is an opportunity to unpack that in an additional conversation. After adequate discussion, a firm “yes” may indicate that the person is not a good fit for the team or, potentially, the organization.

Putting the Onus Back on God

In looking for a path forward, it’s also useful to remember the end goal: the churches we are hoping to see planted by God’s grace. Let us return to that second question: how will the churches we are planting form convictions about these secondary issues? The answer to this question has bearing on how a CP team approaches the conversation.

If members of a CP team do not fully agree with one another or the local church on these secondary issues, then how does the team counsel new believers? Again, one of the solutions is simply to integrate the new believers into a local denomination (if present). But as previously discussed, that is likely to introduce significant culture-laden problems. Is there another option?

Whether you are the church planter, a local Christian, or a new believer from a UPG, we are all on a spiritual journey of knowing God more and being transformed increasingly into the likeness of his Son, Jesus (Rom. 12:2). The process for every Christian should have the same elements present: the word, the Holy Spirit, and the body of Christ. Pointing the new believers to God’s word and exhorting them to ask the Holy Spirit to help them as they wrestle with these secondary issues is a simple and God-honoring alternative to forced uniformity. In doing so the

church planter models Christ-like humility, as they too ask the Lord—by the help of his Holy Spirit—to better understand his word as they study it, consider church traditions, use reason, and consider personal experiences that influence their understanding.

The freedom to wrestle with what the Bible says on these secondary topics is a gift for new believers of the CPM, as the process (not just the outcome) reinforces that the Lord is their ultimate leader, that the Holy Spirit wants to speak to them, that God's word is our authoritative guide, and that church traditions and our own experiences are important but not the ultimate authority. In this way, the church planter can model Paul's observation:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Cor. 2:12-13, ESV)

There is certainly a responsibility of the church planter and the local church to teach God's word to new believers. In the same breath, may the way we teach be from the Spirit and not from human wisdom.

In this whole process, there is a common ground of core truths that the body of Christ can agree upon: the sufficiency of God, His word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. New believers must develop these spiritual muscles, as they are crucial to the health and growth of the new church plant.

In this approach, a CP team is free to disagree on secondary convictions. It is even fine to share with the new believers that there are different opinions on secondary convictions among believers (they will find out sooner or later). It models to them that the team keeps the main thing the main thing (those primary convictions), and that unity in the body of Christ can be found even when uniformity of conviction on

secondary issues cannot be achieved. It is a God-honoring process that exalts the Lord, and not any particular brand of church, be it local (on the field) or foreign (from the CP team).

Hypotheticals Versus Reality: Examples from the Field

It is worth noting that many of the theoretical disagreements CP teams have over secondary convictions do not actually result in controversy as things eventually play out on the field. On one CP team we led, there were teammates who had very divergent convictions about CP strategy as well as the mode of baptism. In one sense these views were irreconcilable, as some of the convictions held among the team members fell on opposite ends of the spectrum.

Had we gone our separate ways due to those conflicting convictions, it is likely the CP team would have fallen apart, and the unreached people group we were ministering among would have become unengaged, with no known believers. That would have been a win for the enemy, and a loss for the Kingdom.

Instead, we agreed to disagree, to honor one another in the process, and to stay unified for the sake of God's mission to this unreached tribe. By God's grace, we participated in the first family from this tribe coming to Christ. As it turns out, the theoretical CP strategy impasses did not prove to be an issue in reality, as the Lord had His own way of calling this family to himself that did not fit neatly into any of our methodological approaches.

When it was time for us to baptize the new family, we had already agreed as a team to present both convictions, and to leave the decision to them. I imagine you also would have liked to have such theological complexities explained to you so that you could make your own decision according to your understanding of the word and the Lord's leading, if you had been in this family's shoes.

So, what we anticipated would have been two very contentious issues that perhaps were reason enough to go our separate ways early on, turned out to be non-issues in practice. Each one of those teammates wound up ministering to this new believing family in unique ways. In short, it was better to work together than to separate over those differences of conviction. I am convinced the Lord was honored in the process.

On another team we led, I was discipling a new believer with help from three other workers, two from different organizations. While we were not on the same team, we all agreed to keep the main thing the main thing, to encourage this new believer in his understanding of the word, to be bold in his faith, and to rely on the Holy Spirit and the word in times of decision and crisis. Again, the mode of baptism was a secondary issue that we church planters had differing convictions on. As best we could, we presented our different perspectives. He chose one mode of baptism. As he led others to the Lord, he also presented both modes and shared as best he could the differences with the new believers. As it turned out, he wound up baptizing most of these people by a different mode than he was baptized. There were also people from different religious backgrounds that came to the Lord and worshipped together.

What we lost in theological uniformity we gained in abundance through our unity. The discipling we provided as a group was far superior to just one of us doing it alone. The bond that was created amongst us church planters is also one of the greatest gifts I have received from the Lord in ministry to date. In my estimation, the new church and the workers were all better for it.

Conclusion

It is always easier in the short-term to ask people to agree to a particular view that is already clearly spelled out. While this approach may work in a denominational organization, it has some important downsides for an interdenominational organization seeking to mobilize people from the international body of Christ to difficult places.

The benefits of a multi-denominational team can far outweigh the messiness. New believers are challenged to seek the word for answers and to rely on God to speak to them, building those spiritual muscles in the process.

There is also a benefit for the CP team members themselves. Assuming we all want to continue to grow and learn from one another, having teammates from other denominations inevitably gives us windows into views of Scripture and the body of Christ that our own individual experience never has. It is an invaluable gift from the Lord to the CP worker to be theologically stretched and grown in the process of planting His church among the unreached.

In my own life I have been ministered to by believers from very different faith and cultural backgrounds to my own. These experiences have grown my theological understanding of several secondary issues because the church background in which I grew up was comparatively theologically underdeveloped. My understanding of spiritual warfare, for example, was massively influenced by people from Pentecostal backgrounds from places like Brazil, Ghana, the United States, and the United Kingdom. While I have not become a Pentecostal myself, I have learned lessons from those believers that the faith tradition I grew up in could not teach me. These brothers and sisters also greatly blessed me in the process!

When it comes to discipling a new church, the process of allowing them to form their own secondary theological convictions is very messy. Sinful, finite humans, even with the help of God's word and the Holy Spirit, will inevitably come to decisions and convictions that we CP workers may disapprove of. And yet this is the patient process of sanctification that the Lord endures with each one of us every day.

Take a moment to reflect on your own faith journey. What do you understand better about God's word today than when you first came to

the field? What convictions do you now hold that may be a bit different than the faith traditions you grew up in or the church that sent you out?

The Lord does not condemn us for misunderstanding parts of his word the first or second time around. He is patient, wanting to reveal himself further to us. Inevitably our own sin and limited life experience impedes our understanding of his word. Only by his grace does he grow us in our understanding of him over the years as we gain more life experiences and greater understanding of who we are and embrace the process of becoming more like Jesus. God's word is living, active, and perfect. We are also living and active, but imperfect! May we give grace to new believers as they work out their salvation with fear and trembling, just as we have received that grace, from the Lord and others.

Perhaps most of all, embracing unity in diversity glorifies God in the process. Even though the body of Christ is not unified by total agreement on secondary issues, it is still united by Jesus. Despite differences of conviction on important secondary issues, the Church can agree that the King is worthy of our partnership with those we disagree with for the sake of His Bride whom He is calling from among the unreached.

Questions for Conversation

- What theological backgrounds are represented on your team and in your context?
- Do you agree with Mr. Hope's proposal for embracing theological diversity on secondary convictions on church-planting teams?
- How can we engage in healthy conversation on secondary convictions with those we disagree with?