

Influence

God designed us to have fellowship. Consequently, at all stages of life, men and women usually care very much what others think. We share ideas and experiences as we learn and grow; influencing others and being influenced ourselves. Through influence parents teach their children, decisions are made in the workplace, merchandise is sold to consumers, people are elected into political office, and bills are passed into law. Though influence is basic to all of life, some may believe that only the weak and indecisive are influenced. This prejudice can cause people to underestimate the role of influence.

For example, while parents often warn their children to beware of the dangers in “peer pressure” they may not realize how much they too can be influenced. However, notwithstanding our concerns about bad influence, certainly not all influence is bad.

Churches are also susceptible to the pressures of influence. How does influence work within the church? How does influence affect the church as a whole? In what ways do we as a church influence others? All of these are important questions. This article will focus on how we can be influenced by other schools of Christian thought. Historically, our fellowship has maintained a relative separation from Christians of other communions. Among other reasons, this was done to keep harmful influences at a distance. Today, changes in society have lessened that distance considerably.

Think about the following contrasts. Two generations ago, in a typical European village, there were two, three, maybe four churches in total. Generally, people worked longer hours, led simpler lives and traveled less. It is easy to infer that in such an environment the lines of demarcation between churches were clearer and the opportunities for influence fewer. Today, with a few clicks on the internet, you can quickly access more reading material than you could properly study in six months. Probably no other generation has ever had so many different Bible teachings, good and bad, so easily available.

Influence from other Christian thought not only includes what others understand the Bible to teach, but also about how the church should function. It can prompt us to ponder what expectations we have of our church. What are the preferred ways to conduct worship services or minister to others? In each of these basic areas, we can be influenced by what we observe.

This is evidenced by the many differences that exist in modern Christianity. Trying to understand these differences is difficult. For example, while one might easily distinguish between Roman Catholic / Orthodox churches and Protestantism, it is not easy to understand the differences between the main branches of Protestantism: Lutherans, Reformed and Presbyterians (Calvinist), Baptists and Fundamentalists. Then there are also the Anglican and Episcopalian churches, which see themselves as a middle ground between Catholicism and Protestantism.

Other Christian movements, some older and some more recent, have also been classified. These include, among others, Anabaptism, Methodism, Wesleyan-Arminianism, the Holiness churches, Pentecostalism, and Evangelicalism. Of course, in each of these groups there are significant variations. Additionally, there are many “non-denominational” churches. As if the very number of groups is not confusing enough, further complications arise from inter-denominational ministries and modern movements that cross denominational lines. The latter includes the church growth movement, (“seeker friendly” churches) and the emerging church ideology.

As an individual Christian brotherhood, we have avoided the use of theological labels and have resisted aligning ourselves with other churches. Therefore, the above (oversimplified) summary may seem to be merely academic

and mostly irrelevant. Nevertheless, if we can appreciate how far modern Christianity has departed from John 17:21*, we will better understand the power of influence from other Christian thought.

**That they all may be one, as thou Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*

This above summary also gives us an idea of how many entrenched differences exist within Christianity. Many of the differences are actually disagreements on fundamental Biblical teachings. These many differences must present a very confusing picture to the non-Christian, especially since almost every church group claims to be based on the Bible.

The reality is that almost every church group fits within a particular theological tradition. This term includes both doctrinal understandings and emphases, and the resulting practices that are based on them. As a brotherhood, our theological tradition can be classified as Anabaptism and Arminianism. Therefore, it should not be surprising that other branches of this grouping also hold the more distinctive doctrines found in our 18 point Statement of Faith. However, we should also recognize that our doctrinal position is not held by much of modern Christianity. Most of what is currently popular in Christian circles is markedly different from our Anabaptist heritage.

Easy access to these popular understandings has led some of us to adopt ideas that are different from, and even contrary to, our basic doctrinal thought. These different understandings may be adopted from a variety of sources: web sites, radio ministries, Bible commentaries, internet discussion boards, attendance at seminaries, etc. When competing teachings do take hold, eventually we are forced to resolve the conflict in understandings by rejecting one or the other. Either we will do this or those who follow us will understand the need to do this.

In addition to our personal observations, we must especially consider what the Word of God says about spiritual influence in the last days.

“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils.” 1 Timothy 4:1

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.” 2 Timothy 4:3

“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies...” 2 Peter 2:1

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” 1 John 4:1

Surely, it would be naïve to ignore the obvious import of these warnings. The degree to which we ignore them is the same degree to which the disunity of modern Christianity flourishes among us. Tolerance of division leads to accommodation, which leads to confusion.

These and other Scriptures also remind us that we do not defend distinctive doctrines simply for the sake of being different. Our goal is not to be custodians of a ‘historic’ viewpoint. Instead, we see these distinctive doctrinal points for what they are, the very words of our Lord and His Apostles. They are Part and parcel of what defines an “Apostolic Christian”.

When sound doctrine is compromised, church practice is influenced as well. Spirit-led leadership and biblical church structure make way for popular methods of fueling church growth borrowed from secular business management techniques and concepts. These worldly tools are not needed by the Holy Spirit.

Aside from teachings and methodologies, another area that we should beware of unsound influence is in speech and attitudes. It is not surprising to find criticism, rudeness, attacks on character, among worldly people. This is especially apparent when listening to certain political commentators, talk show hosts, etc. What is appalling is when professing Christians manifest the same arrogance. If biting sarcasm, harsh criticism, belittling others, and struggling for dominance describes us, than John 13:35 does not. When texting, blogging, emailing, posting on discussion boards, MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, making phone calls, discussing church around the dinner table or in the church foyer the Spirit of Christ will always manifest Christ through us, if we are walking in the Spirit.

This is the ultimate answer to our many concerns regarding influence. Walking in the Spirit involves a daily communing with our Lord in humble and fervent prayer, reading His Word with an attitude of devotion and respect, and exercising the love that He has shed abroad in our hearts. It also leads us into a meaningful fellowship with brothers and sisters of like precious faith. To be under the direct influence and supervision of the Holy Spirit is the antidote for harmful spiritual influence.

He leads us into the sweetness of Christ's love, joy, and peace in contrast with the vicious attacks of the critic. He leads us to the old paths of revival, holiness, and consecration, in contrast with success methods adopted from the world. He leads us to the truths stated by our Lord and His Apostles, in contrast with intellectual debates that can twist plain scriptures into warped half-truths.

Historically and practically we can see the effects of influence within Christianity. We cannot dismiss this topic as unimportant, or ignore it as if we are immune to its effects, blindly embracing what is popular. If we walk in the Spirit, He will help us to be aware, to be wise, and to be discerning in these confusing times.