

Rubel SHELLY and John O. YORK. *The Jesus Proposal: A Theological Framework for Maintaining the Unity of the Body of Christ*. Siloam Springs, AR: Leafwood Publishers, 2003, 219 pp. \$13.99

In this easy-to-read text, Rubel Shelly and John York propose that the foundation for unity in the body of Christ ought to be one's *relationship* with Christ. This "new" way of understanding unity in the church is contrary to modernity's approach to unity, contend the authors. They argue that modernity's approach to unity is one of "theological agreement, ecclesiological structure, and institutional loyalty," which they say is unbiblical (10). Rather than engaging in theological discussions with other Christians, we should accept anyone who claims to have a *relationship* with Jesus. This is the only "test of fellowship" Christians ought to engage in. Shelly and York believe that this proposal will appeal to the current philosophical milieu, namely, postmodernity. Postmodernity's rejection of "boundaries," or "circles" as the authors refer to them, now makes it easier to tear down doctrinal walls that divide Christians, claim Shelly and York. In effect, the authors attempt to formulate the concept of church unity within a postmodernity mold.

The authors' "Jesus Proposal" begins by blaming philosophical modernity for disunity in the body of Christ. According to Shelly and York, it was modernity's demand for "fixed, rational, and clearly marked boundaries" that divided the church (i.e., brought about numerous denominations) (9). The denominations adopted this modern methodology in their theology (especially during the Reformation), and thus began to exclude those who did not agree about certain matters of doctrine. The authors also claim that this same modern approach was adopted by many in the Restoration Movement, and hence they too began to view other Christian denominations as doctrinally unsound. Ultimately, say the authors, more division resulted.

The authors' suggested cure of the church-gone-modern is for her to give up "attempting to out-argue other philosophical and religious points of view" (19) and to relinquish the goal of being doctrinally sound (31). In fact, Shelly and York are tired of drawing neat "doctrinal circles": they are "far less concerned anymore to draw circles—or lines of any kind—that separate people who love, seek, and confess Jesus Christ" (54). In essence, it no longer matters what one believes about baptism, the Holy Spirit, the Lord's Supper, or any other biblical teaching. The only heresy that exists is to deny the humanity or deity of Jesus (153). In fideistic fashion, the authors want Christians to give up being rational about their faith. "We long to believe in the spiritual, in truth that is above reason," they say (32). According to Shelly and York, it is time to quit using proof-texts for doctrine and establishing theological propositions for unity in the church. Isolation and judgmentalism are out; inclusion and acceptance are in.

Shelly and York's assertion that modernity is to blame for the disunity of the church has some truth to it. Modernism did bring in the idea that man's reasoning is the ultimate authority, and thus it concluded that man could determine truth through reason alone apart from revelation. This made for bad rugged individualism. However, to claim that the church's adoption of modernity's method of establishing boundaries led to the disunity of the church is not a cogent argument. Such an accusation entirely ignores church history. The church from the time of the apostles has set doctrinal boundaries. One has to look only to the letters of 1 Corinthians and Galatians to find numerous examples of Paul rebuking false teachings about the Lord's Supper, baptism, and circumcision, to name a few. Early in the second century Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and others constantly drew doctrinal circles. All these examples are at least 1000 years before modernity came upon the philosophical scene, and the church throughout the

medieval period remained practically “one.” The idea that modernity is to blame for the church’s practice of making theological boundaries is patently false.

An irony is that Shelly and York commit the self-referential incoherence fallacy inherent in postmodern thought. They contend that Christians should no longer make doctrinal “circles,” but they themselves make one by stating such a proposition. Their doctrinal circle is that no one should make doctrinal circles. Furthermore, the authors continuously make other doctrinal circles, including that we ought not to distort the doctrine of grace (45) and that the Bible never speaks against women filling any role (leadership or otherwise) they wish to fill in the church (189). The authors continuously contradict themselves because they make doctrinal circles as well as using “proof-texts” they despise so much. Ultimately, the question is not whether we ought to make doctrinal circles, it is whose doctrinal circles are we going to use? Shelly and York seem to be unaware of this.

Shelly and York’s “Jesus proposal” to accept anyone who claims to have a relationship with Jesus leaves too many pressing questions unanswered. Would Shelly and York contend that the early church should have accepted Marcion, who taught that the God of the Old Testament was different than the one of the New Testament? One would have to answer this in the positive using the “Jesus proposal.” After all, Marcion himself claimed to have a relationship with Jesus. If the church were to accept Shelly and York’s “Jesus proposal” it would lead to the acceptance of heretics. In its current form, the “Jesus proposal” leads to an unbiblical practice.

Another pressing question left unanswered is, What does it mean to have “a relationship with Jesus?” The reader searches in vain for any definitive answer. Shelly and York never once attempt to define what it means to have a relationship with Jesus. The result is that a relationship with Jesus is nothing more than a theological abstraction. This is very dangerous. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and many other cults claim to have a relationship with Jesus. I doubt that Shelly and York would contend that such groups ought to be considered Christian, considering they believe that the only heresy is the denial of Christ’s humanity or deity. But then we are right back to letting Marcion through the church doors.

Although this book contains some elements of truth about modernity’s influence on the church, it proves too much. Many readers will find it difficult to believe that modernity alone is to blame for the disunity of the church. Many will probably end up asking what role sin takes in the disunity of the church. Shelly and York never mention sin, which is very odd for a book claiming to be theology. It seems that they are more focused on blaming theology than anything else. Furthermore, many will probably question the very essence of the “Jesus proposal.” Should the church really accept anyone who claims to have a relationship with Jesus? Many readers will most likely want to know what exactly it means to have a relationship with Jesus. In the final analysis, Shelly and York are proposing for the church to capitulate to post-modern philosophy to maintain unity in the body of Christ. In light of this, it seems that this book will simply be placed on the shelf and forgotten because it cannot be put into practice consistently, just like post-modernity is on its way out because it is an inconsistent and incoherent philosophy.

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