

The Homogeneous Unit Principle
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1. What is the **Homogeneous Unit Principle**?

a. The HUP stated:

People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.

This principle states an undeniable fact. Human beings do build barriers around their own societies. More exactly we may say that the ways in which each society lives and speaks, dresses and works, of necessity set it off from other societies. The world's population is a mosaic and each piece has a separate life of its own that seems strange and often unlovely to men and women of other pieces. (McGavran, Understanding (1990), p. 163).

"It takes no great acumen to see that when marked differences of color, stature, income, cleanliness, and education are present, men understand the gospel better when expounded by their own kind of people. They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves. (McGavran, Understanding (1980), p. 227)

b. As Wagner notes: "It should not be interpreted as expounding the ideal way that *Christians* should relate to one another, but the way in which unbelievers become followers of Jesus Christ and responsible members of his church.

The homogeneous unit principle should be regarded as a *penultimate* spiritual dynamic. The *ultimate* is that believers are all one in the body of Christ, and the more this is manifested in a tangible way, the better." (Wagner, Whole Gospel, p. 168)

c. What is a "homogeneous unit"?

i. It is "simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common" (McGavran, Understanding (1990), p. 69)

This chapter describes the obvious fact that people are born into thousands of very different societies, separated from each other by many barriers. It also explores the ways in which the Christian faith, while making all Christians one in Christ Jesus, can be communicated across the barriers, over the ditches, and thus built into the other societies, classes, castes, tongues, and segments of humanity. (Ibid., pp. 164-5)

ii. Kraft further refined this ("An Anthropological Apologetic"):

(1) A homogenous unit is a group of those who effectively function in a common frame of reference

(a) They derive their primary social identity from this HU

(b) The boundaries of the HU are self-perceived, and relate to what is inherent in the group, to its self-defined essence as a group.

(c) It could also refer to a statistically determined unit made up of people having some characteristic in common. If we deal with only one factor, this group may not even be aware of its "identity" (e.g., all the people who use Crest toothpaste), and, based on only one characteristic, people can join or leave these groups without significance to their personal identity. However, the more factors we consider, the more significance will be ascribed when the whole complex is changed.

- (2) We cannot interact effectively with others without a high degree of homogeneity with them. Even on the large scale, "A society, often referred to as a culture, is a homogeneous unit functioning together in terms of a common language and culture" (Ibid., p. 122)
- (3) In human society, homogeneity is a **fact**. The question is not whether it exists, but what our attitude is to be towards it. Kraft notes five possible attitudes:

Name	Description
Melting Pot Attitude	Diversity is bad. We should integrate the diverse HUs into cultural sameness, working for larger and larger HUs in the nation and the church.
Laissez-Faire Attitude	Having many HUs is bad and must be overcome. The way to overcome them, however, is simply to leave them alone and let cultural processes have their way.
Tourist Attitude	Diversity is interesting and quaint. We are not, therefore, to do anything about it except to observe the differences, and, perhaps, to thank God that we are not strange the way they are.
Reactionary Attitude	Glories in the multiplicity of HUs and seeks to preserve them.
Realist Attitude	HUs exist and will always exist. We must, therefore, learn to work in terms of HUs whether or not we approve of everything that HUs are used for.

2. The importance of the HUP to the church growth movement:
- a. The "peoples" framework of the CG movement
 - b. Modern strategies of missions which use the peoples concept:
 - i. Fulfilling the GC by making disciples of all "peoples"
 - ii. The concept of "hidden" peoples
 - c. If true, this is a principle that we will want to harness so that the possibility for the growth of our churches will not be unnecessarily hindered by sociological dynamics. Wagner estimates that 95 to 98% of the world's churches are homogeneous in nature.
 - d. The importance extends around the world. In the US, the concept of "melting pot" has been replaced by that of a "stew", with ethnic pockets still relatively intact, in some cases after many years of contact.
 - e. In terms of integrity of the discipline of church growth, it has been an area that has been loudly criticized and just as loudly defended for over twenty years.
3. What is the real debate?
- a. Wagner states concerning the HUP itself: "It is descriptive, not normative. It is

- phenomenological, not theological" (Wagner, Whole Gospel, p. 167).
- b. As Kraft noted (see above) it is not over the fact of homogeneity, it is over the consequences of the observed fact. Robert L. Plaisted agrees: "Now, the homogeneous unit debate in the church has centered less around the *fact* of such cultural diversity than around the *value* assigned to it." (Plaisted, "The Homogeneous Unit Debate", p. 216)
 - c. David Wasdell points out: "The homogeneous unit principle is the pragmatic strategy stemming from observed realities of missionary work, whilst its criticism is theological in basis and the two different methodologies do not engage. In other words, that which is pragmatically defined sustains its pragmatic base in spite of theoretical criticism, since the criticism does nothing to the data upon which the argument rests." (Wasdell, "HUP", p. 1)
 - d. Should we consider renaming the HUP the HUF (Homogeneous Unit Fact)? Since it is an observed fact rather than a principle, this might clear some of the air over the issue. As stated, the HUP simply notes that people like to remain in homogeneous units without stating *why* this is true.
 - e. In addition, the debate does appear to be more academic than practical (Gration, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle", p. 197). Missionaries have long planted churches among homogeneous groups without even knowing the HUP. One major difference is that church planters are now consciously aware of the HUP in a church planting process.
4. Theological considerations: This principle may be true in the sociological sense, but does a sociological principle determine theological truth? What does the Bible have to say?
- a. In the OT, what is the relationship (if any) between the incident at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and the HUP?
 - i. Up to this point in time, mankind had one language (lit. "one lip") and one vocabulary (lit. "single words"), and everyone could understand everyone else.
 - ii. Why the tower? ". . . so that we may **make a name for ourselves** and **not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.**" (v. 4). Out of their insecurity and pride, and possibly their desire to control others, men seek to build a tower ("and especially a tower"; Leupold, Genesis, 1:384) and make a name for themselves (to create a strong, centralized power-base?; Stigers, Genesis, p. 129).
 - iii. "Nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them". God had made people with incredible abilities which can be used for good or bad. Here His concern appears to be with the latter--building such a tower in their pride, there is nothing (including the deepest sin) which will be impossible for them. His concern is not to frustrate mankind's technological capability, but to prevent our skills from being used to the maximum for sinful purposes ("better division than collective apostasy"; Kidner, Genesis, p. 110).
 - iv. God frustrates their efforts. Two major factors might be involved (Stigers, Genesis, p. 129):
 - (1) A "unified" sinful humanity would wreak more havoc (through centralised power and control) than a "nationalised" divided humanity (which distributes power). Thus, "nationalism" actually reduces sin in the world! "It may then be said in general, *nationalism is best for the world in its present state of sin and that to destroy those national boundaries is contrary to God's present will*" (Stigers, Genesis, p. 129; emphasis mine).

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- (2) A "unified" world would have more easily resulted in the untimely destruction of Israel, God's chosen people.
- (3) To general appearances, mankind was already moving in the direction of cultural diversity. It seems that God chose to speed up the process here. May we use this to conclude that God desires separate development (as was done by the DRC in South Africa to theologially justify apartheid)? It seems that the larger framework is that a centrally controlled monoethnic mankind will move in the direction of greater sin, and God is not interested in this. A key question remaining is the impact of Christ's death on our sinful propensities, and how this may change the orientation seen in Genesis 11.
- b. In the NT: How did the early church deal with the problem of ethnocentricity?
- i. Acts 2: All were Jews, but from many different linguistic groups. Was this a homogenous group or not? This group can be viewed either as homogeneous (religiously) or as heterogeneous (linguistically), which is a problem of trying to "prove" the HUP from the biblical evidence (and also a problem with the principle itself, as defining an HU can be extremely difficult).
- ii. Acts 6: Why were the widows of Grecian Jews not being given the food they needed by the Aramaic-speaking community? How would appointing deacons ("waiters on tables") solve the problem? It appears that the HUP is seen in action with the selection of the deacons, who all had Greek names and would be most interested in the plight of the Grecian widows.
- iii. Acts 8 (see also John 4:9): The Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans; how did this affect the early spread of the church in Samaria? Also note that Philip (a Greek name) is the first to go to them.
- iv. Acts 15, Galatians 2 (15:19: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God"): was the question of circumcision of Gentile believers exclusively theological, or did it also include cultural (ethnocentric) aspects? Plaisted notes:
- To paraphrase McGavran in the context of Paul's ministry, first century pagan Greeks found it less difficult to become Christians when they were not forced to cross formidable cultural barriers such as circumcision, dietary regulations, and a Mosaic law code alien to their experience. So Paul insisted that the church should place no barriers between potential converts and the salvation of Christ except those God had already placed there--confession, repentance, faith and baptism. (Plaisted, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle", pp. 228-9)
- v. 1 Corinthians 9:19-22: Paul was willing to act in an appropriate fashion *in order to win people to Christ*.
- (1) Paul exhibited a "willingness to accommodate himself to whatever social setting he found himself in, so as 'to win as many as possible' [i.e., evangelism]. . . . Thus Paul's first concern in such matters is not whether he offends or does not offend--although that too is a concern (10:32)--but whether the gospel itself will get its proper hearing (cf. 10:33)." (Fee, Corinthians, pp. 426-7)
- (2) Paul makes the choice to live within his context freely, and does so in light of the

Gospel. Though on the behavioral level his actions are inconsistent, they follow a higher priority (and integrity) than simple slavish behavioral observance.

- (3) In this context, he specifically deals with food bought in the open market place. He draws the line in the fact that he remains under Christ's law (or legal obligation to Christ; Barrett, Corinthians, p. 212) even when living like a Gentile (e.g., he would hardly murder someone no matter how favorably the culture looked upon it!).
- (4) "This passage has often been looked to for the idea of 'accommodation' in evangelism, that is, of adapting the *message* to the language and perspective of the recipients. Unfortunately, despite the need for that discussion to be carried on, this passage does not speak directly to it. This has to do with how one *lives* or *behaves* among those whom one wishes to evangelize (not, it needs to be added in passing, with social taboos among Christians). What needs to be emphasized is the point expressed clearly by Bornkamm: 'Paul could not modify the gospel itself according to the particular characteristics of his hearers. The whole of his concern is to make clear that the changeless gospel, . . . empowers him to be free to change his stance.'" (Fee, Corinthians, pp. 432-3) Is this HUP thinking on Paul's part?

- c. The whole HUP question reflects a tension between:
 - i. Evangelism (which is the best way to win people to Christ?) and
 - ii. Christian maturity (how can the church say we are unified if we separate on Sunday mornings for worship?)
- d. Is there a difference between "spiritual" and "social" unity?
- e. Are we to distinguish what **is** (which the HUP simply points out) from what **ought to be** (In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, etc.; see discussion in Wagner, Whole Gospel, p. 151) ? If so, how does that apply in this case?

5. Sociological/anthropological considerations:

- a. No one can deny the fact that urban societies are essentially heterogeneous in nature. Each person belongs to a number of identity groups, many of them along the homogeneous lines defined by Church Growth.
- b. The very things that give a group its internal identity also place boundaries around the group and distinguish it from other groups. This is a fact of any multi-ethnic society today.
- c. The HUP is similar to the *homophily* principle in communication (Dynamics, pp. 229-39), which is that we tend to share information with similar persons. One interesting aspect of this is that, "As a result of similarity, information is received more readily and persuasion occurs more frequently" (Ibid., p. 232). One way to measure the amount of homophily by use of the Scale of Perceived Homophily (Dodd, Dynamics, p. 238):

ATTITUDE DIMENSION		
Does not think like me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Thinks like me
Behaves like me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Does not behave like me
Similar to me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Diferent from me
Unlike me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Like me
BACKGROUND DIMENSION		
From social class similar to mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	From social class different from mine
Economic situation different from mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Economic situation like mine
Status like mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Status different from mine
Background different from mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Background similar to mine
VALUE DIMENSION		
Morals unlike mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Morals like mine
Sexual attitudes unlike mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Sexual attitudes like mine
Shares my values	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Doesn't share my values
Treats people as I do	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Doesn't treat people as I do
APPEARANCE DIMENSION		
Looks similar to me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Looks different from me
Different size than I am	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Same size that I am
Appearance like mine	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Appearance unlike mine
Doesn't resemble me	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Resembles me

- d. When McGavran advocates that we seek to avoid placing any unnecessary sociological barriers in front of people who are considering conversion, the scale of homophily can help us consider areas that will be important in their thinking.
6. The implications of the HUP on the growth of a local church:
- a. The possible benefits of a homogeneous congregation or denomination include:
 - i. Sharing of a common worldview (including common patterns of thinking, belief systems, behavioural ethics and norms, non-verbal communication signals, decision-making methodologies, etc.). Of all of these, language is the 'gate-keeper'. If someone does not know the language of the church, he or she will not be interested in working through other issues.
 - ii. Sharing of a common language
 - iii. Sharing of a common history

- iv. Sharing of a common identity (including family roots, music, traditions, geographic origin, etc.)
 - v. All from within the group will feel comfortable; the "climate" will be understandable and culturally relevant.
- b. Possible negative factors of a homogeneous congregation or denomination include:
- i. Ingrowth that does not allow new members from other ethnic groups to join them, possibly preventing some from even coming to Christ.
 - ii. Lack of maturity in learning how to relate to members of other cultures within God's family.
 - iii. "Monocultural myopia": the short-sightedness that comes from having only one cultural perspective (an accusation often made of the missionaries).
 - iv. Forced assimilation of those from a minority HU to the values, culture, and identity of a dominant HU.
- c. Some pragmatic questions
- i. Can a local church made up of one ethnic identity reach a community around it that is of a different ethnic identity?
 - ii. When do we seek to build homogeneity and when do we need to fight ethnocentrism? How can we discern the difference between them?
 - iii. What importance should we give to the development of multi-congregational church buildings (especially relevant in urban areas which have a high degree of heterogeneity)?