

## **Independent versus Corporate Thinking**

### Comparing The Two Perspectives

Before a person can correct a problem they must first understand that the problem exists. Nearly all agree that the Body of Christ is a “spiritual body” composed of individual people around the world, and not just those in corporations and formal organizations. Yet, it is proper organization that allows people to effectively perform major tasks, like preaching the gospel to the entire world, and significantly helping the community.

The problem is that the Body of Christ is extremely fragmented into thousands of small groups. Yes, there are a few larger church organizations, but the reality is that most of the people of God attend Sabbath services in scattered and detached small groups in individual homes. This paper will explore the fundamental reason for this circumstance, and suggest a solution. First it is necessary to explore the concept of “conformity”.

#### **CONFORMITY**

Conformity has an implied question associated with it: “Conformity To What?” Conformity means that there is a list of mental and physical tenets that everyone is expected to agree upon and comply. All groups have either a written or an implied list of conformities. Confusion and inconsistency arises whenever a group fails to write down its most important conformity tenets. For a Church of God, the conformity tenets of each group will sort-out into three main categories like this:

##### Which Foundational Doctrines (that all must agree or they will be asked to leave):

- There is The Creator, His Only Begotten Son Jesus the Messiah, Salvation Only Through Jesus, Jesus' Return, Resurrection To Eternal Life, The future Judgment, Kingdom of God On Earth, . . .

##### Which Presumed Doctrines (that generally most will agree, but not everyone):

- The New Testament Assumes The Old Testament, Peter's and Paul's Writings Do Not Contradict, Gnosticism is Bad, Salvation Is Obtained By Grace and Rewards Are Obtained By Lifestyle, and Lifestyle Is Patterned By Obedience, . . .

##### The Expectations in Religious Practices and Lifestyle (that bind the group):

- Keep the Ten Commandments, Never Get Drunk, practice "The Golden Rule", Keep the Feast Days, Do Not Do Halloween, Christmas, Easter, Eat Only Clean Meats, Dress Modestly, At Least Tithe Something, . . .

You will notice that very few church groups actually structure their list of conformities in this manner. However, when talking about a group's list of expected conformities, what is really being itemized is a list of tenets to which the group is held together, and a list of tenets to which the group is willing to expel people if they do not comply. The point is that a group's real or implied list of conformities becomes that group's structural foundation, and **therefore it is vitally important to understand exactly how the list is both created and enforced.** Two questions become paramount to understand:

“Who is the authority that decides the list of conformities?”

and

“How much deviation is allowed from this list?”

## TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

### Corporate Thinking:

To many it seems obvious that a group will have leaders, and that the leaders will decide the list of conformities. Nearly all church organizations are structured with this premise in mind. For example, most larger church organizations have the equivalent of a board of directors, sometimes called the Council of Elders, which has the duty of establishing and finalizing their group's list of conformities. Such lists of conformity are typically written in the form of a Beliefs Booklet for the group. Anyone wanting to be a member of the group is expected to submit to the group's leaders, and also to conform to their list of mental and physical tenets listed in their Beliefs Booklet. For the purposes of this paper, I will call this type of conformity **“Corporate Thinking”**.

However, notice the language used in the above paragraph. It is purposefully chosen to convey an impression of danger in such an organization. Taking the premise of Corporate Thinking to its extreme means that the members of the group must blindly follow every dictate of their leaders without question, and without personal conscience. Images of Jim Jones and cult-leadership should come to mind. Fortunately, few people want or feel comfortable being in a church group which expects 100% blind obedience to the every whim of their leaders.

The reader is led down this path of thought to ask this vital question:

**“Should a Church of God organization demand 100% compliance to every tenet listed in its Beliefs Booklet?”**

The quick answer seems to be “No”, but consider how many church groups actually operate as if the answer is “Yes”. For many leaders this question does not have a cut-and-dried ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. The paramount question about “who is the authority” has been answered, that is, the leaders are always the final authority. But in pondering this question about demanding less than 100% obedience, the leadership must analyze how much latitude they are willing to allow before they will reprimand a member, or ask him to leave the group. As uncomfortable as this is to discuss, **this is the bottom-line issue every group must eventually ask itself for every single tenet they itemize.**

**Independent Thinking:**

To others it seems obvious that no one should be expected to blindly comply with all tenets of a group's list of conformities. It is not that these people think that a group cannot have leaders, it is more along the thought of "what kind of leaders?" To these people **a leader is not a dictator**, and thus the group's leadership **cannot demand** their obedience to any specific doctrine or expected conformity. In essence this thought process concludes that each individual makes up their own mind as to which mental and physical tenets they will follow. For the purposes of this paper, I will call this type of conformity "**Independent Thinking**".

The obvious extreme of Independent Thinking is that of anarchy. If everyone can make their own "rules", then there are no "rules". Fortunately, few people want or feel comfortable being in a church group with no rules or agreed conformities. Most Independent Thinking people will concede the need for group leadership, structure, and a list of conformities that form the foundation of the group. The **big difference is** that the Independent Thinking group is not held together because everyone agrees 100% with their group's list of conformities. Most Independent Thinking groups allow a large degree of latitude in both the doctrines and the practices of its membership. **Everyone does not have to agree with everything.**

It is also important to understand that Independent Thinking tends to promote fragmentation in the Body of Christ. People who decide their own list of conformities rarely last very long in organizations that have Corporate Thinking as their underlying premise. Such people, almost by definition, will not yield their own thoughts on a doctrinal topic just because a leader says they have to, and thus, they will eventually be asked to leave.

Further, people who decide their own list of conformities **can rarely form large church organizations**. Again, almost by definition, given any local region the number of Independent Thinking people that just so happen to have the same list of conformities will be few in number. So the most typical scenario for the Independent Thinking people is that they will meet in small groups, known as "Living Room Churches", usually held in a member's house, where the living room and the kitchen become the primary gathering spots for fellowship. The typical size of such groups is about 10, with some few getting as large as about 40. **There are hundreds of such Living Room Churches** in the United States, and many more in other countries.

What is of importance to note is that Living Room Churches do have leaders and structure. **Independent Thinking does not mean that leadership, structure, and financial offerings are absent or avoided.** Nearly all Living Room Churches have at least one leader who is performing the duties as the elder of the group, even though they seldom have a title as such. Even in groups where there is no apparent single person acting as the leader, the group still has leadership by committee, and therefore has a group-structure. Also, most Living Room Churches have their own distinct monetary fund to which its members contribute.

All this is stated to emphasize that these Living Room Churches are composed primarily of Independent Thinking people, **but they are still functioning as church groups** with their own (usually unpublished) lists of conformities, leadership, and structure, **just on a very small scale.**

Why is it important to recognize that even the small Living Room Churches have their own implied list of conformities, leadership, and structure? Because these **Living Room Churches survive even though they allow wide deviation in conformity. Allowing deviation does not mean that a group disintegrates.**

In the typical Living Room Church, **everyone understands that they do not have to agree with the speaker.** The speaker is presenting his best case for this or that doctrine, but, **the speaker understands that the audience does not have to agree with him.** The speaker is not a dictator that forces compliance to his interpretation of scripture. The listeners are expected to think for themselves, and to evaluate the merits of the speaker's arguments. As you should perceive, this is almost the opposite of the Corporate Thinking person's perception of his speaker.

#### **Allowance For Deviation In Conformity**

The most obvious difference between Corporate and Independent Thinking involves how much latitude in conformity the church group will allow. For example: if one Sabbath a speaker says something "really off the wall", **then is he asked to leave, or, is he told no one agrees with him?** The Corporate Thinking group will typically allow almost no deviation, and therefore will conclude that the errant speaker must be reprimanded or asked to leave. However, the Independent Thinking group will typically allow a wide tolerance for deviation, understand that it was "just his opinion", and therefore will not conclude to ask the errant speaker to leave. Still, the Independent Thinking group may conclude to ask the errant speaker not to speak on that topic again.

But understand that the above paragraph is only a generality, and can only be stated within a narrow context. This is because the amount of deviation allowed cannot be discussed unless you first identify the subject, which determines how serious it is. The question must be asked: **"How much deviation will be tolerated on each of the group's doctrinal positions?"**

Both the Corporate Thinking and the Independent Thinking groups **have core doctrines which they will not allow deviation.** For example, an errant speaker preaching that "Jesus is not the Christ" will not be tolerated by any group, and will eventually be asked to leave. **It is not a matter of allowing tolerance and deviation on every doctrine.** Some doctrines are too fundamental to the group.

**But not every doctrine is a core doctrine which must be protected with zero tolerance.** For example, do you really want to take the position that your church group must emphatically dictate the exact length of a woman's dress, as if that were a core doctrine

equal to “Jesus is the Son of God”? **Consider**, are you really going to force woman out of the group because they wear pants to services? Because of tradition and social norms the group may agree that a woman should not wear pants to services, but, is this a core doctrine, or is this better listed as a generalized policy? I pick this example because it is such an extreme case that makes the point.

Each group may decide to list “modesty” as a conformity, and include suggested dress lengths and tie colors as examples. The point is that **such a list of conformities is not in the same rank as a core doctrine**. The exact same point is extended to other subjects, such as prophecies, perceptions, interpretations, and traditions.

### **Contrasting Corporate and Independent Thinking**

It is not a matter that one type of thinking is right or wrong. It is that both types of thinking are destructive if taken to their extreme, and yet both types are very constructive if managed properly. The point is that **a well balanced church group will try to govern using both types of thinking, at the same time. It's a matter of balance.**

However, just stating the obvious does not really help to explain how these two schools of thought can coexist. **There is far more depth to this** than just talking about allowing latitude in conformity. By contrasting the two schools of thought, using a specific example, a composite picture can be formed which will help in **explaining this depth**.

### **How Would Each School of Thought Handle “The Passover Controversy”**

A doctrinal issue arises within the church group which seems very serious. One segment of the membership wants to keep the Passover on “this day” by doing “these rituals”, while another segment of the membership wants to keep Passover on “another day” by doing “some other rituals”. **How can a church group survive such a divisive situation?**

To the Corporate Thinking group such a division cannot be tolerated. How can the leadership perform the Passover-conformity-tenet on differing days with differing symbols? One segment or the other must be in error, and therefore must be sinning. **Unity is lost, so one of the two segments of the membership must be asked to leave**. This is typically called a “church-split”, by the Independent Thinking groups.

To the Independent Thinking group, such a division **should be tolerated so that each person can follow their own conscience**. There is no “fixed rule” which demands that the entire leadership must enforce a single Passover ceremony. Some leaders may serve one segment by conducting their Passover celebration, while the other leaders serve the other members by conducting the other Passover celebration. Thus, the Independent Thinking group can survive such a division, allowing two or more separate Passover ceremonies, even on differing days and with differing symbols.

**The membership is free to decide which ceremony they will attend**. Unity is lost on the level of which day is the Passover, **but unity is not lost on the level that understands the**

**Passover should be kept.** In this situation, no one is accused of sinning, and no one is asked to leave. Instead, **everyone is asked to allow the others to make their own independent choices** as to which ceremony to attend. This is typically called “confusion”, by the Corporate Thinking groups.

### **Understanding The Depth, Getting To The Root of “Conformity”**

Now consider more closely, what are really the foundational thoughts of the two points of view, Corporate and Independent Thinking. You may be thinking that it is a matter of how each looks at “**unity**”. But no. Keeping “unity” is a group goal, it is not a thinking process. At the root, the thought process behind it is: **how each school of thought is looking at “conscience”**.

The reason why a member will voluntarily choose to comply with a group’s tenets of conformity, is to achieve two primary personal goals:

- 1) is to stay in good-standing within the group, and
- 2) is to fulfill their perceived duties towards God.

For example, each member will keep the Passover:

- 1) because they are part of the group, and
- 2) because in their heart they think they should.

**Both of these personal goals directly affects a person’s conscience.** A member will feel guilty if they lose good-standing, and a member will feel guilty if they fail to worship God as they think they should.

Now, **re-think the Passover Controversy again**, but this time from the point of view of **how it affects conscience**.

The Corporate Thinking group is thinking about the group’s conscience, and considers **the individual conscience to be clean when the group’s conscience is clean**. In contrast, the Independent Thinking group is not as concerned about the group’s conscience, and instead considers **the individual’s conscience to be clean only as the individual decides**.

Before anyone quickly judges one school of thought to be superior to the other, consider that there are clear examples of God upholding both group conscience and individual conscience in the Bible. We can easily remember examples of individual conscience scriptures. But here are a few examples of group conscience, just to refresh the memory:

- One man steals a golden artifact and the entire congregation of Israel is considered defiled, and the group is punished by God until the group is cleansed.
- Once a year, one man enters the Holy of Holies and performs rituals, so that the entire congregation (group) of Israel is cleansed, and deemed guiltless.
- In 1-Corinthians 5, one man defiles himself, and yet the entire congregation is said to have fallen from purity. The group’s conscience is to be preserved by asking the offending member to leave.

The point is that **both types of conscience exist and are to be clean**, at least from God's point of view. There are times and situations in which the group must uphold its own honor, its own integrity, and its own group conscience, even over the individual's conscience. And there are times in which this needs to be reversed. This is not a moot point. This is a foundational realization. **Both types of conscience needs to be considered by the church group and its leadership, when it makes decisions about enforcing conformity.**

Why is it important to understand that a church group needs to consider both the group's conscience and the individual's conscience? Because every tenet of conformity that is listed (or implied) in the group's (printed or unprinted) Beliefs Booklet, has an implied "**level of enforcement**" associated with it. If your group's Beliefs Booklet lists 100 tenets of conformity, then your leadership has at least 100 implied levels-of-enforcement to define. If the group expects conformity to something listed, and then is confronted with the realization that a member is not conforming, then what is the group going to do about it? The answer to this question becomes the "level of enforcement" for that tenet, and the penalty for non-conformance. In answering this question the leadership needs to consider many aspects, **but the two primary concerns are the violation of the group's conscience versus the violation of the individual's conscience.**

**Stating this in a very sobering manner:** Which group leader wants to make an enforcement decision, in which he forces a member to comply, but in so doing, the individual member's own personal conscience is so damaged, that the leader falls under the scriptural condemnation: "**It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea**" (Luke 17:1-4), than to cast an offense towards the least of God's children?

No, this warning is not stated to suggest that the group leadership never enforces its tenets of conformity. But, it is stated **to emphasize the gravity to which enforcement decisions should be viewed.** Perhaps it may be better to have the Beliefs Booklet only list ten core tenets of conformity, and let everything else be categorized as commonly held doctrinal preferences and lifestyle guidelines.

### **Re-think Your List of Conformities**

Regardless if you find yourself a member of a Corporate Thinking or an Independent Thinking group, **it is paramount that you review your list of conformities.** Reevaluate each sentence from the point of view of enforcement, conscience, and how much tolerance will be allowed. It may be discovered that many tenets and doctrinal positions are really just "**commonly-held-beliefs**" and "**lifestyle guidelines**", **and are not the group's core doctrines having zero tolerance.** In essence, the leadership will be admitting that some members may openly express differing opinions on the less essential doctrines of the group. The leadership will be admitting that some members may follow their own conscience in how they decide to practice some aspects of the group's observances, such as the Passover.

For example: sentences like "Jesus is the Son of God" should be listed as a core doctrine allowing zero deviation by the membership. But, sentences like "most members believe

that Jesus had short red curly hair” is listed in a manner which allows 100% deviation by the membership. After all, **do you really care that every single member agrees** that Jesus had red curly hair? Is a member asked to leave if they think His hair was black? I pick an extreme example only to ensure making the point.

During this reevaluation process the group’s leadership needs to ask questions like these:

“Do we really care that a member **might disagree with us on this?**”

“Do we really intend that a member is asked to leave, **if they have a different interpretation of this?**”

“If a member in good conscience thinks otherwise, **are we really going to force them to conform anyway?**”

In asking these questions the leadership will quickly identify the many sentences within their (printed or unprinted) Beliefs Booklet that need to be clarified.

### **Uniting the Corporate Thinking and the Independent Thinking Groups**

The fragmentation within the Body of Christ can be reduced. Consider that when two groups approach each other with the goal of wanting to fellowship together, and perhaps combine their talents and enterprises, that what is really happening is that the two groups **are comparing their lists of tenets of conformity**. Almost by definition conflicts will be discovered. If not, then they are really the same group anyway. But being two different groups, then some differences in the lists of conformities will be discovered. **This should be expected, not avoided.**

When you hear something like: “we are gathered here in spite of our doctrinal differences”, recognize that those saying this do not understand what is going on.

The question is not: “Do we all agree with each other on everything?” because almost by definition everyone agreeing about everything **is impossible to expect**. **Of course there will be doctrinal differences!** We choose to gather together **knowing and expecting that we have doctrinal differences.**

The question is: **“Do we agree that the differences discovered are within the realm of allowable tolerance and deviation, so that we can still engage in cooperative efforts between us?”** Admittedly, sometimes the answer to this question will be “No”. But in many cases both groups will find that **they can “live with” their discovered differences**, and get along just fine during some cooperative activities, like combined Holy Day services and Super Sabbaths.



### Conclusion

When each church group within the Body of Christ understands that not every tenet of conformity should be treated as if it were a core doctrine, **when each group understands that enforcement needs to consider both the group's conscience and the individual's conscience**, and when each group understands that allowing latitude and diversity is not always an evil that must be avoided; then each group can understand how it can **cooperate with other groups, engage in larger projects, even form Communities**, and thereby make the whole Body of Christ ever stronger.

There is more:

Groups are not held together because of agreement on Doctrinal-head-knowledge. Groups are held together by emotion and fellowship. No Group or Community can hold together without its members having a genuine commitment, and a deep concern for each other. The Community should be seen to be engaged in living loving and gracious life-styles, **as each helps the others in daily concerns**. The self must be willing to deny itself, in order to provide and ensure the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the others. **Loving each other is not just a feeling**. **Love is a selfless commitment to provide service, protection, and nourishment to the others in the community, day by day.**

In Service To The Brethren,  
Wayne L. Atchison, an Elder in the Body of the Messiah

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