

Essential Christianity – 3 - Orthodoxy

While a renewed emphasis on the importance of the gospel is something to applaud, we must beware lest this virtue becomes a vice. An unhealthy under-current is sometimes present in what some mean by gospel-centered. For some, it is an abbreviation for doctrinal minimalism. That is, such people believe that the Christian faith is equivalent to the gospel, making all teaching not essential to the gospel extraneous. They want Christians to be less concerned with doctrinal matters as angelology, eschatology, polity, or cessationism, if such do not touch directly on the gospel. In their view, the gospel alone should become the measuring instrument for doctrinal importance.

I agree that the gospel is a very reliable guide for determining doctrinal weight, to a certain extent. I disagree that the gospel is the center of Christian doctrine from which all else radiates. Rather, the gospel is the boundary that allows one into the Christian faith. The center of the Christian faith is what Jesus said it was: to love God ultimately and supremely (Mk 12:28-29). Consequently, we must mind that our love for the gospel does not become a too-vicious pruning tool on Christian doctrine. Christianity is much more than the gospel.

Christianity is concerned with more than the question of how to become a Christian. It is concerned with what it is to be a Christian. Since all Scripture is given to that end (2 Tim 3:17), Christianity worth conserving, will conserve and pass on all that Scripture teaches. This is the second mark of a conservative Christian church: it will understand, defend, and teach biblical, systematic, historical, and practical Christian theology as comprehensively and cohesively as possible.

By contrast, much in modern Christianity tends to be eclectic and faddish in its approach to Christian teaching. Rare is the shepherd who is not pulled by the tide of clerical opinion in his time, who is not swept up by trends, fashions, and double-barreled buzzwords. Scarce are the pastors not influenced by the personality and celebrity cults in evangelical circles. Uncommon is the kind of independence needed in a faddish age. This causes many a church leader to fall short of the goal of a comprehensive and consistent articulation of Christian doctrine. Too often he's pulled by man-pleasing forces more than the desire to properly harmonize his system of faith. A bit chosen from the hot new book, a bit from Christian Celebrity Conference, a copy-'n-paste from GoodBlog, a deferring reference to Pastor Bigname, and the result is quilt-work of theology that is consistent only in the mind of the pastor (if there).

Now, this is not to say that we must accept our theology in indivisible packages or that we are not responsible to test and examine the theological tradition to which we belong. This we must do. Nevertheless, our goal is to understand and teach Christian doctrine as cohesively and comprehensively as we can. A conservative Christian Methodist must teach his Methodism uniformly and thoroughly. A conservative Christian Presbyterian must set out a Presbyterian understanding of biblical, systematic, historical, and practical theology. A covenant theologian must apply and teach his system of faith as consistently as he is able. Such is the integrity of Christian character; such should be our respect for the Word of God.

Ironically, it is this careful attention to doctrinal detail that will actually promote Christian unity. When differences are properly articulated, conservative Christians will quickly be able to see where fellowship is possible and where it is not. It is when differences are blurred through garbled articulations of doctrine that real tensions may later arise. Feigned unity built upon doctrinal agnosticism will inevitably crumble, or else be held together with the Scotch tape of good intentions.

Christians will not find exact agreement on the whole counsel of God, therefore we must understand how we are to respond to our differences in doctrine. Because many Christians have not understood fellowship, and its corresponding doctrine, separation, they have often failed to conserve the whole counsel of God. This is because of the two extremes in approach towards Christian fellowship.

The one extreme, common to some fundamentalists, is to treat fellowship or separation as an all-or-nothing deal. In other words, someone like this might say “I am either in fellowship with you, or I am separated from you!” With this kind of thinking, separation becomes akin to finding leprosy in a person in Old Testament Israel. Once the separatist discovers some difference in doctrine or practice deemed important by him in another believer, he ‘separates’. This, to him, means that he no longer fellowships with the person he has separated from, on almost any level. To this thinking, the people you fellowship with you are not separated from, and the people you separate from you have no fellowship with.

The problem is, after some time the pool of people with whom you are actually still in fellowship with grows ever smaller, until it begins to produce a kind of incestuous fellowship with ‘our group’, ultimately breeding a schismatic, if not ultimately heretical, attitude towards Christianity. Eccentricities abound, religious pride seeps in, political in-fighting occurs, territorialism grows and it is safe to say that many such groups end up falling on their own swords while dying for some quirky doctrine far removed from the gospel.

The other extreme, common to ecumenists, is to treat unity as an end in itself, and to regard all instances of separation as disobedient acts of schismatic believers sniping at each other. For the ecumenists, the reason for unity is not defined, except for the unquestioned premise that Christian unity is always more desirable than Christians separating. “If unity is possible on any level, it must be experienced on every level”, they reason. Ecumenists are definitely minimalists when it comes to deciding on what (if anything) Christians must agree on to be in unity, and usually work to artificially create or foster outward forms of unity between Christians of all stripes. The problem with the ecumenist is that because his guiding principle is inclusiveness of fellowship, his restrictions on fellowship grow ever smaller. At some point, he meets people who are outside the boundary line of the gospel itself, while professing to believe some of the things inside the boundary line. Usually, his response is to extend Christian fellowship to them as well. This goes back to the problem of indifferentism. The gospel is demeaned, the Christian faith re-interpreted, and the whole counsel of God loses some of its integrity in the eyes of observers.

Conservative Christians must know that neither of these approaches will succeed in conserving the whole counsel of God. They must instead remember that fellowship and separation are not either-or propositions, and that unity, while crucial, is not to be attained at the expense of the gospel. Fellowship and separation are best understood like two points of the compass. The closer I am to west, the further I am from east. The more fellowship I have with certain Christians, the less separation I have from them. The more I separate from them, the less fellowship I have with them. And here is the point: as a Christian, you never experience complete fellowship or complete separation from another believer. Here is why:

Fellowship is what we hold in common. By definition, two believers, at absolute minimum, have the gospel they believe in common. Even if they agree on nothing else, they have fellowship in the gospel. Extending inwards from the boundary of the Christian faith is the whole counsel of God, with its various doctrines, of varying importance. At the beating heart of Christianity is our loves – loving God supremely, loving what He loves, to the degree He loves them, in the ways He loves

them.

Maximum fellowship includes the whole counsel of God and extends right into the centre of our affections. The more of the whole counsel of God that I hold in common with another believer, the more fellowship I have with him or her.

This is where the taxonomy of doctrine detailed in the last post becomes so important. If you cannot work out the relative importance of doctrines, or see the relative weight of errors in doctrine, you will not be able to know if you hold in common is more or less important.

Following on from this definition of fellowship and separation, we see that depending on how much fellowship actually exists determines how it will be worked out in real life. On the lowest level, I might have minimal fellowship with a believer who has a completely skewed system of theology. But, we can have a cup of coffee together and rejoice in Christ's grace in the gospel. You could say I am separated from him as far as ministry partnerships, church membership, and other such things go. I did not have to engineer such separation: the fellowship simply didn't exist in enough areas to merit those endeavours.

I might meet a charismatic believer who becomes my friend. Our differences are very wide, but it is possible, because of his openness, for us to begin a type of discipleship relationship. He is not yet close to being able to teach in my church, evangelise with me, break bread with me or lead – but where fellowship exists, we take it and grow it.

On a higher level, I might have friend who is a Presbyterian elder. We have fellowship on a number of doctrines, but not on the matter of baptism, nor on certain issues of church polity. We could enjoy each other's company, we will discuss baptism privately, and I might have him preach in my pulpit – but not on the topic of baptism or church polity. We couldn't plant a church together, nor could he be a member of my church (or I of his), nor could he be an elder in my church or vice-versa. On those levels, we practice separation, because of the areas in which fellowship does not exist.

On a higher level, I might have a friend who is a dispensationalist Baptist pastor. We have more areas of fellowship between us, and we be able to do all the things mentioned in the previous levels, and furthermore undertake a joint evangelistic outreach. We have enough fellowship to make such targeted collaboration possible and fruitful. However, he does not hold certain views on the regulative principle of worship, and is more pragmatic in some of his ministry philosophies. He probably wouldn't be comfortable in my church, and couldn't be a member, nor be a leader. Our fellowship is quite thorough, but where it does not exist, by implication, we are separated.

On an even higher level is church membership, for to covenant together in church is to agree on fairly specific doctrine, agree with the church's philosophy of ministry, and find great like-mindedness.

On the highest level would be church leadership – the level of agreement needed here is as high as it gets.

Conservative Christians want the whole superstructure of the Christian faith, not just the door. Conservative Christianity wants all inspired Scripture taught and explained for life and godliness. This means teaching doctrine thoroughly and cohesively. I suggest four ways of doing so in a local church.

First, a conservative Christian church needs a pulpit ministry that systematically teaches through Scripture. That requires a particular approach to the study and teaching of the Bible. We might say the conservative approach is exegesis and exposition, the opposite of which is eisegesis and imposition.

Exegesis (from the Greek ἐξηγεῖσθαι ‘to lead out’) is the analysis and explanation of a text, in our case, biblical texts. Exegesis is an approach which believes that God has invested biblical texts with meaning. The meaning was there when the human authors put it down. The meaning was there when the first audience read or heard it. That meaning is unchanged and has applications for listeners and readers today. Therefore, the task of the exegete is to use various tools to bring out of the text its true and original meaning. He does this by understanding the original biblical languages, the historical context of a passage and its immediate context within the book and within the rest of Scripture. Once he knows what it meant, he knows what it still means, for it can never mean what it has never meant. Certainly, he comes to a text with certain pre-understandings: he has a particular systematic theology to which he relates the parts he finds, and he has a particular system of interpretation (hermeneutics) that guides him as he practises exegesis. But hopefully, honest exegesis feeds back into his theology and hermeneutics, reshaping, re-ordering and revising as necessary – cleaning and sharpening the lenses of his interpretive spectacles, if you will.

The result of the process of exegesis is a growing understanding of biblical and systematic doctrine. The person or church interested in exegesis is interested in what the Bible says - all of it. The whole counsel of God, nothing less.

Exegesis is a rigorous task. It requires years of training to do well. It requires more skill to turn this exegesis into an interesting, digestible and memorable sermon. Exegesis should not be boring, because the Word of God is not boring. It requires skill to deliver such a sermon in a rhetorically adept fashion. Even once trained in these skills, it requires a significant investment of time to execute adequately. For that reason, a church interested in exegesis should do its best to free its pastor(s) up to give themselves to this task.

Eisegesis is the opposite of all this. Eisegesis is the inserting of one’s own ideas, beliefs or hobby-horses into the text of Scripture, and disguising such an approach as the preaching of Scripture. It shows no humility before the text of Scripture, but is willing to impose its own ideas upon the text, and ‘make it say what it never said’. A pastor given to eisegesis is not interested in biblical doctrine. He may have certain noble goals for his congregation, he may even sincerely want to see practical holiness in the life of his people. But because he is not practising exegesis, he is not grounding their practice in theology, which means it will certainly dissolve once the agitations of his messages are forgotten. He wants the sheep to follow, but he is not committed to following himself, because he does not submit to the authority of the Bible by preaching its meaning. He does not trust the text of Scripture itself to be able to deliver what God’s people need to love Him properly, and substitutes it for unbalanced topical messages, five point ‘how-to’ messages, cleverly alliterated outlines forced into a text, allegorical ‘new interpretations’, and so on.

Interestingly enough, eisegetical sermons are often very interesting, very moving, and quite memorable. This is usually because the eisegete has no limits on his creativity and imagination (least of all the text of Scripture), and he conjures it all up into an hour’s worth of jokes that amuse, pithy sayings that cause a smile at some home-made wisdom, moving stories that stir people up to pity, maudlin tears or false optimism, or passionate cries that provoke extreme emotion. Moreover, the crowds will come for their hour of titillation.

Many an exegete looks at his small church, compares it to the mega-church built on eisegesis and wonders if he isn't beating a dead horse.

Conservative Christians must resist the temptation to turn to such techniques, even at the risk of being 'small' or characterised as 'boring'. Exegesis is hard to do. It is even harder to do well. But it is the only hope of the church knowing and preserving the whole counsel of God, which is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness.

I am very thankful for those who have written extensively on expository preaching or modeled it with their ministries. Gratifying too, is the renewed emphasis on biblical theology and the need to teach it from the pulpit. These are heartening trends, and it is unlikely that church reform will begin anywhere but in churches committed to this kind of teaching. A systematic, ongoing teaching of texts in context is a certain way to teach the whole counsel of God. Good expository preaching will include a mixture of biblical, systematic and practical theology mixed into one meal. Topical sermons are valid forms of instruction, insofar as they are expository preaching with a multiplicity of texts.

No substitute exists for the consistent preaching of God's Word.

Second, a conservative Christian church should encourage theological education among its members, beginning with its leaders. Theological education goes beyond the scope of a pulpit ministry and seeks to catechize Christians in a broad understanding of Christian doctrine. This is never more needed than now, in our day of doctrinal minimalism.

One sees the effects of poor theological education in a theological volatility among church leaders. I have seen more than one young pastor abandon theological positions he has barely understood and I have been guilty of similar impulsiveness myself at times. For example, it has become popular to abandon dispensationalism. One wonders, of those that do, how many had read someone like Alva McClain before doing so? Have those who oppose Arminianism ever read an Arminian like Roger Olson defend it? Not thirty years ago, Calvinism was hardly popular, but today it has a healthy following. This is partly through the excellent pulpit ministries of some modern Calvinists, but it may also be partly because we Christians are influenced by what is popular.

My point is not to defend or attack any of these positions or to impugn the motives of any whose theological position changes. All of us change somewhere. I respect the man who changes theological traditions if he fully understands what he is leaving and what he is embracing. Nor is it my intention to disparage genuine resurgences of neglected doctrines. My goal is merely to show how fickle our theological convictions seem to have become of late. It does not seem to take what it used to for a man to change from cessationism to continuationism, to convince a man of theonomic postmillennialism, to persuade a man of bus ministry or orchestras, or whatever the case may be.

Where true, this phenomenon resembles Paul's description of immaturity in Ephesians 4:14. This kind of doctrinal volatility is partly remedied with sound theological education. A theological education worth its name must ground a man in exegetical skills, views of biblical theology, exposure to various systematic theologies, an understanding of the historical development of doctrine, and even a grounding in dialectical and philosophical concerns. The pastor who is privileged to have had such an education must do his best to develop something similar in his church. Though the pulpit ministry will teach much of what is needed, it is almost certain that it cannot achieve the level of theological literacy needed by itself.

To create a thorough and comprehensive understanding of Christian doctrine, the pulpit ministry will need to be supplemented with some kind of evening classes, adult Sunday School courses, or other formats where more specialized skills such as hermeneutics, exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, and historical theology can be taught. Whatever the format, the presence of such classes can do wonders for theological literacy in a church. A pastor would do well to harvest the burgeoning resources in print or online and build something of a theological reference multimedia library with recommended texts, lectures, and sermons. Seminaries exist partly because, at some point, churches stopped doing this. That is not to say that a local church, particularly a newer, smaller one, will always have within itself the resources to do this. Even so, in an era of doctrinal fast-food, every church should strive to be a place where a wholesome, comprehensive view of the Christian faith is taught.

This is important for another reason. The theologically literate are better able to judge the relative importance of doctrines to one another. Armed with such knowledge, they are able to judge how serious the differences are between themselves and other Christians and how much collaboration is possible. The current tribalism in Western Christianity is a symptom of doctrinally illiterate Christians frantically trying to identify us and them in terms of associations, alliances, groups, denominations, colleges, conferences, and coalitions, instead of careful comparisons of doctrine and the implications thereof. Christian catholicity is greatly aided by theological literacy.