

Orthodoxy – 4

A conservative Christian church should engage in the systematic discipleship of believers. Though the previous two suggestions form part of this discipleship, teaching Christian disciples all things that He commanded us (Mt 28:20) entails more than sermons and classes. Biblical discipleship calls for the mentoring relationships of teacher and pupil, master and apprentice, father and son. Paul's description of himself as both a father and a mother to the Thessalonians seems to suggest this (1 Thes 2:7-11). Discipleship involves one Christian seeking the spiritual growth of another. This includes intercession (2 Thes 1:11-12), personal involvement, setting an example (1 Tim 4:12), and verbally instructing. Beyond this, loving supervision needs to occur, consisting of correction (Gal 6:1), encouragement (Heb 3:13), and counseling.

Creating this habit of “apprenticing” other believers in the midst of very individualistic cultures can be difficult. Pastors need to teach on these kinds of discipling relationships. Instructional materials can be written or purchased that may assist one believer in teaching another. Providing opportunities for believers to be together outside of corporate worship can be helpful for increasing these bonds and allowing younger believers to observe mature believers in other settings. Creating a culture of older believers caring for younger believers takes a long time and needs to be continually urged against the spiritual entropy that causes us to think only of our own spiritual progress.

Systematic discipleship allows churches to ground believers in the “grammar” of Christianity, slowly building from the fundamentals all the way up to a detailed systematic theology. Catechism is not a bad word. All Christians should ultimately be involved in catechizing other believers, as part of the Great Commission.

A conservative Christian church should encourage fellowship with other Christians where it exists. Conservative Christianity is truly catholic, for it seeks to conserve what is essentially Christian. Conservative Christianity is not the province of a particular group, denomination, or movement. A Wesleyan can be a conservative Christian. A Reformed Baptist can be a conservative Christian. Conservative Christianity embraces Arminians like Tozer and Wesley and Calvinists like Machen and Edwards. It sees value in Augustine and Novatian, in Fenelon and Guyon, in von Zinzendorf and Warfield. Individual conservatives may disagree with them on points, but it is because of their consistency that we know exactly where those points are. We know how much fellowship we can have with their systems of faith.

Of course, some doctrinal deviations have greater implications for the gospel than others. Some differences cause a greater breach in possible collaboration. Fellowship must be taken where it exists. Pastors can encourage this kind of genuine catholicity by pointing to the great strengths of Christian teachers and ministries past and present that differ from one's own perspective. It can involve varying degrees of targeted collaboration with other Christians, ranging from the lowest levels of informal fellowship, to things like shared pulpits, all the way up to collaborated ministry efforts such as joint church planting. Pointing out where fellowship exists and where it doesn't not only helps believers appreciate the whole body of Christ, it also increases their theological literacy. They come to learn how to weigh doctrinal differences. They come to appreciate the spectrum of theology and how varying doctrinal differences affect Christian life and ministry. Conservative Christianity wishes to conserve the whole counsel of God. Churches that wish to conserve Christianity must resist the tides of doctrinal minimalism and seek to consistently teach the whole Christian faith.

Once again, the two tools we mentioned last week are going to become critical for our pursuit of

orthodoxy.

Discernment is important, not only for the correct interpretation of the Bible, but for weighing the relative importance of those doctrines. This is because not all doctrines are equally important. We know this because Jesus told us the greatest commandment of all is to love God with the whole heart. This means that it is the most important commandment, stemming from the the most important doctrine: Yahweh is God, Yahweh alone. If this is the greatest commandment, then there are others not as great, others of lesser importance. Certainly every doctrine found in the Word is important. But when weighed against each other, some are more important than others. Therefore, believers committed to the whole counsel of God must be able to categorise doctrine as fundamental, secondary and peripheral. They must have a taxonomy of doctrine, and be able to order, arrange and classify teachings according to their importance.

Why is this important? For at least three reasons:

1) It balances our study and teaching. To effectively teach the whole counsel of God and pass it on to others, we must understand how the doctrines of the Word relate to each other, how they fit into the entire system, how each doctrine functions. A teacher who does not have a concept of the relative weight of doctrines will become like a DIY mechanic – pulling bits and pieces out of an engine, tinkering and fiddling, giving the appearance of competence, but ultimately doing more harm than good.

If we do not know the grand design of God's Word, we will never be able to relate the parts to the whole. They will either become an impossibly tangled up mess of facts, or they will become little ends in themselves. Not knowing the relative importance of doctrines to each other leads to two opposite and equally harmful errors: One is the error of minimalism, mentioned in an earlier post. The Christian here decides that the whole counsel of God seems like too much trouble to know, classify or work out, so he will relegate most of it to the place of 'non-issues' and focus only on the gospel and its fundamental doctrines.

The other is the error of specialism, where the person becomes so fond of (or consumed with) a particular doctrine that he weights it far heavier than it deserves, artificially trying to make it more important than it is, magnifying certain teachings out of all proportion, and minimising others. Certainly the Pharisees had become specialists in a certain sense.

Matthew 23:23-24 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

We all know specialists who have magnified apologetics, or eschatology, or spiritual warfare, or spiritual gifts, or evangelism, or Calvinism, or Bible versions, out of all proportion. We have a limited amount of time on this earth to study and to teach. We must determine how much attention we are going to give each doctrine, leaning more heavily on what is most important, 'without leaving the others undone'.

2) It helps us pick our battles. Conservatives battle against false doctrine because it undermines the whole counsel of God. However, because we do not weight all doctrines equally, we do not fight for them equally either. A taxonomy of doctrine leads to the understanding of what to battle, when, and how vigorously. A conservative Christian must be able to see if a false teaching is catastrophic, urgent, isolated, or tolerable. In other words, arising out of a taxonomy of doctrine is a

corresponding taxonomy of militancy toward error. An error can threaten the gospel itself, making it catastrophic to believe it. An error might not threaten the gospel, but so skew the entire system of doctrine as to be a very serious error. An error might not skew the whole system, but be significant enough to present real differences in doctrine and practice. An error might be over a peripheral teaching (say the identity of the sons of God in Genesis 6), one that should not seriously affect fellowship – a ‘tolerable’ error. For each type of error there is a type of response, ranging from the censuring of apostates commanded in 2 John, to the friendly, parrying of ideas about Genesis 6 between two believers.

A conservative Christian can see what an error does to the whole system, where it is heading, and where it may lead. The irony of the minimalists who want to conserve only the fundamentals is that, lacking a holistic view of doctrine, they become unaware of how, very often, errors in secondary doctrines, by implication, deny the fundamental doctrines.

Further, to grow in this mindset is to be able to distinguish between one articulation of a doctrine and another. One man might word his understanding of Calvinism or Arminianism so as to constitute an isolated error. Another articulation could constitute an urgent error. The way a teacher relates the doctrine to the gospel and to the whole system of faith can determine how one must respond to it.

Once again, we have limited time on this earth. We must pick our battles and the ‘hills we will die on’. Conservatives do not fight for a finger if the beating heart is under threat.

Tradition is our other source for helping us in arriving at orthodoxy.

Language and Categories

First, tradition provides us with language and categories in which to conceptualize and systematize doctrines. We might call this the explanatory function of tradition. Through tradition we receive definitions and explanations of terms and relationships, some of which might not otherwise be available to us.

The explanatory function of tradition is clearly seen in our understanding of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity leads us to see God as one in *ousia* but three in *hypostasis*. Discussions of *ousia* and *hypostasis* were part of the intellectual furniture of antiquity. Though there could be disputes, thinking people had at least a general understanding of these terms. They provided ready categories for the explanation of Trinitarian doctrine.

A healthy tradition tends to guard us from error and to direct us toward truth. It offers this protection because previous generations within the tradition have already encountered the alternative explanations of the biblical data. They have already thought through those explanations, and they have had opportunity to observe how the various explanations develop over time. While even the best of traditions is fallible, a healthy tradition conveys to us a fund of wisdom gained through long consideration, comparison, and experience. This wisdom can act as a hedge against error.

We have examined the explanatory and protective functions of tradition. Both of these assume another function. It is also highly beneficial. We might call it the perspectival function of tradition.

As we have seen above, doctrine is more than simply repeating biblical statements. Doctrine

involves the assembling of the biblical data into a coherent picture or model. When we develop doctrines, we must collate the biblical statements and relate them to each other in the correct way. The biblical data is like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and the finished doctrine is the picture that we end up with.

In order to assemble the pieces into the picture, we are usually guided by the picture on the box. The difference is that in theology, we often have multiple pictures. As we assemble the pieces, we are also making choices about which picture we think they match. The closer we get to choosing a picture, the easier we find it to assemble the remaining pieces.

One of the advantages of a tradition is that it selects a picture for us to use as a starting point. This is a tremendous advantage. When we begin learning a doctrine, we are usually not aware of all the possible pictures. If we had to start by discovering all of the possible pictures, and then trying to fit the pieces into each one, the process would be interminably slow. We could know very few doctrines during a single lifetime.

Because previous generations have already examined the options and chosen a superior picture, we have a starting point from which to work. We have a tremendous advantage if we are able to see how the pieces can be fitted together to form this particular picture. Of course, some of the pieces will not fit neatly. In virtually every case, some of the data needs to be explained. As we become familiar with our tradition and with the options that it prioritizes, we will discover the data that does not seem to fit as well. We will (or at least should) become curious about how different traditions fit those pieces into their pictures—and how they handle the pieces that seem not to fit their pictures as well. Every picture and every tradition will be dogged by the problem of pieces that do not seem to fit.

By teaching us a preferred doctrinal option, our tradition actually places us in a superior position to examine other options. Because we know our own tradition—including its weaknesses—we have a better standpoint from which to evaluate alternative traditions. We may even decide that one of the other traditions offers a picture into which the pieces fit better, and we may choose to embrace that tradition. A thorough knowledge of our own tradition is the best possible preparation for making an informed conversion to a different tradition.

One of the marks of doctrinal immaturity, however, is the tendency to become too quickly discouraged by the apparent inconsistencies of one's own tradition, and too quickly impressed by the apparent consistencies of another. Before we abandon our tradition (whatever it may be) for some other, we owe it to ourselves, to our forebears, and to the truth itself to acquaint ourselves with the inconsistencies of any new option that we may be exploring. It is easy to be impressed with the evidence that neatly fits an alternative doctrinal theory. We ought not to choose that theory, however, until we know about the data that does not fit it as well—and assuredly some data will not.

Every tradition is ultimately corrigible to Scripture. Because each tradition is a very human phenomenon, it will be mistaken at some point. Every tradition, however, can be corrected by a right appeal to the Bible. As we grow in our doctrinal knowledge and theological skill, we will find ourselves correcting our tradition and perhaps even leaving it for another. When we do, we ought to feel some sense of indebtedness to the old tradition, for if it had not brought us so far, we would not be in a position to correct or reject it.

Our tradition gives us a place to stand, a point from which to begin the theological task. It launches

us upon a trajectory, and by placing us in motion it imparts to us the ability to steer ourselves. Even people who reject their tradition will nevertheless themselves against it. They could not have attained the ability to criticize their tradition had it not provided them a place from which to begin.

Second, we must understand doctrinal turning points. In the progress of Christian thought, there is often a point at which controversy causes a particular doctrine to be carefully defined by Christians. Chalcedon was a turning point for Christology. The Athanasian Creed was a turning point for Trinitarianism. Luther was a turning point for justification by faith. Calvin was a turning point for the atonement of Christ. These turning points mark off important distinctions we must make in evaluating tradition.

The writings on a particular theme or doctrine before the turning point must be judged differently from those written after it. Often, before the turning point, a doctrine is assumed, or it has not come under the careful scrutiny it will in later times. After the turning point, dissident views are self-consciously so. When Irenaeus offers us the recapitulation view of the atonement, or when Anselm offers his satisfaction view, these are not necessarily denials of orthodox Christianity. There is truth in them, though penal substitutionary atonement is at the very heart of the doctrine of atonement.

When Calvin articulates penal substitution, we have reached a turning point. Writings after the sixteenth century that attempt to use other theories of the atonement to deny penal substitution are now in a very different category to the writings of the early church Fathers that emphasize other aspects of the atonement. The Council of Trent is a denial; Origen not necessarily so.

In teaching how to evaluate tradition, we must teach that a fair judgment of tradition must consider these turning points. Critics of inerrancy who claim such a concept is absent from church history misunderstand that the doctrinal turning point for inerrancy was the 19th century, perhaps captured in the Chicago Statement a century later. Similar situations prevail for certain other doctrines. We often fail to grant the necessary charity to writers before the turning point (or perhaps, the necessary severity to writers after it).

We can conduct a study of some of the better-known creeds, confessions, or catechisms. Not only would such a study increase the doctrinal literacy within the church, it is also enormously helpful in connecting Christians with their doctrinal heritage. The use of creeds in corporate worship may not be acceptable to everyone, but this practice certainly underlines the Christian doctrinal tradition.