

Orthopathy – 10

Many of the pastors I have met are unwitting moderns. I should know, for I am also a pastor and a recovering modern. That is, I am someone who believed the lies of scientism: that the way to know reality is by fact-collecting and that humans are capable of being completely objective in their fact-collecting. To put the lie another way, point the microscope, stethoscope, telescope, or some other instrument towards the universe and you will find out a pure, brute fact about what is. If you collect enough of these facts, you might be able to construct a big picture of what is true.

Many spiritual leaders apply something similar to Christian discipleship. In their view, if you collect enough theological facts from the Bible, you will be able to construct the whole picture. Therefore, their aim in ministry is to discover and then supply people with these facts. All else is peripheral, a matter of preference, taste, or, in their words, “subjective.” Luckily for their people, they’re “objective” and deal mostly in supplying objective brute facts.

As I say, I am recovering from my modernism, for it still infects much of what I do. In contrast to modernism, a biblical mindset understands that the truth precedes the facts and that even our understanding of revelation goes through a grid. That is what leads conservative Christian pastors to pay attention to the imagination.

The imagination is that part of us which gives us an intuitive feeling about the nature of imminent reality. It is anterior to our reason. It is our grid, our map of reality to which we refer all the “facts” we encounter. It is built over years and supplied with an aggregate of symbols from our culture(s). Those symbols supply the sense of proportion and measure toward all things. This is what largely shapes a person’s affections toward God, himself, and the world.

The cognitive aspect of the Christian faith cannot be divorced from the affective aspect. Indeed, as we’ve just seen, there is a sense in which they are dependent on one another. This is the feature of the Christian faith that does not seem to be given the attention it requires: how the imagination informs how we feel about the truth. It is our ongoing response to the truth.

We can sing of God in funny limericks or in stately hymns. We can picture the Flood as an amusingly overcrowded boat with cartoonish animals grinning as their heads protrude from the boat, or we can view it as Hieronymous Bosch did, as a terrible judgment upon mankind. We can view Moses’ encounter with God as Dominic Feti did, or as an episode of VeggieTales does. We can compare sin to “Stinky Socks,” as one children’s song does, or to the curse Paul Gerhardt speaks of in his hymn “Extended on a Cursed Tree.” We can use music like Melchior Teschner’s (the hymn tune ST. THEODOLPH, “All Glory, Laud and Honor”), or we can use music that could sub for a soft-drink commercial. We can “theme” the Christian life after treasure hunts, race-car driving, detective-sleuthing, or cowboys and Indians, or use the biblical imagery supplied by the apostles. We build our places of corporate worship to resemble malls, theaters, conference rooms, or sanctuaries. We can dress up the faith in games, fun, material rewards, or in the motives Jesus gave. The list could go on. Whatever you decide about these differing examples, there is little doubt that they illustrate that Christians can and do have contrasting, even opposing, visions of how one should respond to the truths of God’s Word.

What we must not miss is that in these matters we might have total agreement on the content (and perhaps meaning) of the theological facts under discussion. Nevertheless, the form in which we teach them demonstrates how we imagine these truths ought to affect us. This is the difference between the modernist and the Christian: the modernist cannot see how the form of things shapes

the sentiment towards the truth, which can ultimately shape the whole view of truth.

All of these matters are, in a sense, pre-cognitive. They provide a sensibility, a sentiment towards the facts under discussion. If the cognitive tells us who God is, the imaginative tells us what He deserves. If the cognitive supplies us with ideas to be known, the imaginative tells us how we ought to respond to those ideas.

Since Christianity is a religion of worshiping an invisible God, we are heavily reliant on these matters of the imagination to teach us a sensibility toward the truth. Therefore, the pastor who wishes to see affections properly shaped in his people must think carefully about such matters as the poetry in the lyrics of our songs; the music used in worship; the religious artwork we use (in our Sunday School material, for example); the themes or motifs adopted in our children's discipleship; the motives we give for people (young or old) to serve Christ, down to how we design our place for corporate worship.

These are not merely decorative, stylistic matters, they provide precisely the kind of analogies we spoke of previously. Form is formative. If our analogies are not serious, it is likely that the sentiment towards the things of God will not be serious. If the analogies provoke narcissism, it is likely that the sentiment towards worship and discipleship will be narcissistic.

Shaping the affections goes beyond providing facts. It considers carefully the form in which ideas are presented. It considers how the entire worldview and sensibility towards the things of God are shaped by the analogies we give the imagination.

Shaping the affections of parishioners feels like trying to make your children grow taller. There are some factors completely out of your control. There are some things they do which can help or hinder the process. There are a few things you can do to encourage healthy growth.

A pastor who wishes to see ordinate affection shaped in his church members is able to do a limited number of things. You cannot re-grow a Christian culture. You cannot recover the sensibilities of our Christian forefathers and transplant them into the hearts of modern Christians. You cannot make people love what they do not love. You cannot do in your church, in a few years, what is meant to be done through culture over centuries.

Even so, you can pay attention to the five matters mentioned earlier. You can become aware of how the moral imagination functions and do your best to help the formation of a Christian imagination in your people. What follows is a somewhat eclectic set of practical suggestions to this end. Perhaps the most helpful article I've come across to help busy Christians to understand how the imagination informs all else is A.W. Tozer's "Why We Must Think Rightly About God." It is the first chapter in *The Knowledge of the Holy*, and I've sometimes used it as a mini-study or discussion.

As preachers, we need to spend far more time considering how analogical language is to shape our preaching. C.S. Lewis wrote:

"Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was "terrible," describe it so that we'll be terrified. Don't say it was "delightful": make us say "delightful" when we've read the description."

You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers, "Please will you do my job for me."

Lewis' words bring the point home: we cop out when we keep announcing, "God is awesome! God is, like, totally, amazing!" It is the job of the writer, and in this case, the speaker, to so fire the imagination that the affections of awe and amazement are raised in contemplating God. When we take the imagination seriously, we will spend as much time, and probably more, on exposition as we do on exegesis. Our word pictures, analogies, illustrations and overall rhetorical form ought to move the heart to feel rightly about God. Jack Hughes' book "Expository Preaching With Word Pictures" considers how Thomas Watson did this effectively. Warren Wiersbe's "Preaching and Teaching with Imagination", considers how the imagination is used throughout Scripture and how preachers can pay attention to this. Finally, from time to time we all need to read a master like Spurgeon, to drink in sermons baroque in their imagery.

We need to think carefully about the imagery and the language used in the hymns we sing. Is it trite? Is it helpful? Do the songs employ vacuous clichés? Are they nothing more than rhyming doctrinal statements set to music? Assuming we are choosing superior hymns, we need to take the time to point out the imagery and why it is useful. There will probably need to be some polemic work done from time to time, pointing out why the imagery or language in certain hymns or songs is trivial, shallow, sentimental, or merely functional. If your church uses printed hymnals, if it is within your power, choose one which has a minimum of shallow hymns, for the average church-goer does not suspect that hymnals contain both good and bad.

The same is true of the music we use in our worship services or encourage as music helpful for ordinate affection. Abraham Kaplan helps us here:

"In a fully aesthetic experience, feeling is deepened, given new content and meaning. Till then, we did not know what it was we felt; one could say that the feeling was not truly ours. It is in this sense that art provides us with feeling: it makes us aware of something that comes to be only in the intense and structured experience of the awareness. We become selves as we come to self-consciousness, no longer unthinking creatures of feeling but men whose emotions are meaningful to us. But popular art provides no such mirror of the mind, or if we do find our feelings dimly reflected in it, we cannot pass through the looking glass to confront our hidden selves. We are caught up on the surface, and our feelings remain superficial and deficient, as unreal as their reflections. The shades with which the world of popular art is peopled seem to us substantial when we ourselves are still only fictitious characters. Superficial, affected, spurious-this is the dictionary meaning of sentimental. So far as feeling goes, it is sentimentality that is most distinctive of popular art."

There are authors and poets who represent a Christian imagination, and their books are accessible to most. Authors like C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, and Flannery O'Connor come to mind. While we do not need to produce "approved books" lists, some pastoral guidance can be helpful in nudging parishioners towards some of the classics and away from popular literature or television, which does exactly what Kaplan describes. This is particularly important for children, whose imaginations are hungry and being shaped. George MacDonald's defense of fairy tales in his chapter "The Fantastic Imagination" can be very helpful for people to see what part these play in shaping a Christian imagination.

Perhaps many church-goers will be unable to make sense of poets like John Donne or George Herbert (at least initially). However, they could probably benefit from reading Frederick Faber or a collection of hymns by Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley. A.W. Tozer did the church a favor in collecting a modest, but extremely helpful, set of Christian poetry in his book, "The Christian Book of Mystical Verse". This is probably a must-have for your church library.

We could speak of architecture, ritual, and ceremony, but it is beyond the scope of our discussion. Suffice it to reiterate that a pastor eager to see ordinate affection growing in his people must give thought to these things. He is responsible to inform his people that the imagination is shaped by a multitude of things and that Christians have a responsibility to nourish theirs with what is excellent so as to be without blame on the day of Christ (Phil 1:9-10).

For all of this to be any more than an odd set of prejudices, the meaning of these things has to be explained. The meaning of the poetry, the literature, the music, the painting or sculpture, the architecture, or the technology has to be made clear. We must understand form and explain how form communicates meaning. Indeed, we must become interested in the meaning of all things if we are to rightly shape the affections and rightly apply the Scriptures. This leads to the sixth mark of a conservative Christian church: a conservative Christian church is committed to understanding the meaning of the world, so as to rightly understand worship, affections, and the correct application of biblical principles.

Fourth, a pastor can become aware of how form shapes meaning. Christians' affections are greatly shaped by the moral imagination. The moral imagination is largely shaped by the meaning of the various media it encounters. This meaning is largely contained in the form of such things. If a pastor is serious about meaning, then he must be serious about form.

Form, in its simplest sense, is shape. Everything in life, whether you're thinking of a horse or a cake, an essay or a minuet, a sonnet or a computer program, has shape. The shape of a thing is essential to your understanding of it. When it comes particularly to those areas that affect the moral imagination and therefore shape the affections, form is central to our understanding of meaning. To despise or neglect form is to be dismissive of meaning altogether.

Whether it be architecture, poetry, music, belletristic literature, the plastic arts, or theater, these all communicate ideas. The form of these things is the way that the idea is communicated, restated, developed, contrasted, and explained. When we are largely unaware of the forms that the composer, poet, author, or architect is using, we miss much of the meaning of what is being communicated.

This returns us to our earlier exhortation for pastors to invest time in understanding the meaning of music, poetry, literature, architecture, or the plastic arts. The best place to go is to those authors who spend time explaining the forms and their functions. Once aware of the forms used in those areas which shape the moral imagination, the pastor can do several things.

First, he can seek to use those forms that convey the truths of Christianity without trivializing, sentimentalizing, or otherwise falsifying them. He can seek forms that are consonant with Christian worship and affections by understanding those forms. For the sake of space, let's restrict our examples to form within poetry. A pastor may know what a hymn set to iambic tetrameter will achieve as opposed to one set to anapestic meter. As he grows in his own understanding of form, he will seek to use forms that do not demean or trivialize the truth of God. He will also try to avoid the error of those who do not understand form: mixing forms which clash. To sing one hymn set to the serious iambic pentameter of a sonnet, followed by a hymn set to the comical amphibrachic meter of a limerick is to create cognitive dissonance in one's people and collapse distinctions that ought to be clear. Instead of sharpening the moral imagination, this ends up putting opposing ideas into one blender and feeds people the pulpy mush as "balanced worship." When leaders unwittingly mix forms, discernment becomes nigh impossible for the average church attender.

Second, given his role as something of an intermediary between experts and laypeople, a pastor

should seek to use forms that do not demean the truth and yet are not indecipherable. Given the bankrupt state of our culture, this is a difficult task. If the pastor defaults to forms that are immediately accessible or popular to his people, he is probably enlisting forms that mislead and rob by their banality and ephemeral nature. On the other hand, that musically simple form—the metrical hymn—is regarded by many today as “high” and “too deep”! Woe to us!

Here the pastor has to walk a difficult line of exposure, explanation, and repetition. There is little point in feeding the appetite for banal or sentimental forms. Such appetites only strengthen with each concession. Rather, people must be exposed to forms that are excellent (Phil 1:9-11). Such forms may need to be explained and then the whole process repeated. In doing so, the pastor will have to balance accessibility and elevation. All Christians need exposure to forms that better capture the truth, and yet all Christians need a point of entry.

It may be helpful to run the occasional class on form, particularly for those cultural phenomena that affect worship: music and poetry. A study of a helpful book or perhaps a lecture series from one of the companies mentioned previously might be helpful. Realistically, a pastor can do only so much. Teaching forms and their meanings is what a culture is supposed to do. Nevertheless, when your culture is apostate, some catch-ups will be necessary. This is an uphill battle. Everyone is confronted by idols they have come to cherish and must give up. How are pastors to encourage this process?

First, we should make our prejudices explicit. If we like something, or dislike something, we should own that to be true.

Second, we should ask why we like what we like or dislike what we dislike. If we do not have reasons, we ought to seek them. Understanding why we love something is part of the way to learning what it means, and learning about our own hearts.

Third, we need to compare what we currently like, or dislike, with some standard of what is good, or true, or beautiful. What I like does not become good by virtue of my liking it; rather, I must learn to love what is good. What I dislike may not necessarily be bad; rather, my sinful heart may dislike things that are true. We should not defend our preferences because they are familiar; we should learn to like something because it really is good, and then make the good familiar. Sanctification is all about unlearning some loves, and learning new ones.

Tradition:

When I am in a foreign country, people ask me where I am from, because my accent is different to theirs. They do not get asked that question, unless they board a plane and travel to another country. When we leave our own culture, and dwell in another one, we notice how different we are. We see that ‘they do things differently’. We begin to notice our own customs, ways, attitudes, speech, mannerisms, saying, expectations, likes and dislikes, which formerly we took for granted. Only once you have some distance between you and your culture can you begin to understand it.

We can never properly understand the culture of modern Western Christianity from within. We are too deeply engaged. We are embedded in it, and are not be able to spot its innovations, improvisations, or impiety, except where it seems particularly outrageous to us. But if we were to spend time with the saints of old, we would be confronted with affections quite different to many of ours. We would notice some of their prayers, hymns, attitudes, aspirations, and disciplines are quite different from ours. By ‘living’ with these dead saints through their writings, we would be exposed

to examples of ordinate affection. We would be confronted with ways of thinking and feeling and acting towards God, the world and humanity, which would contrast with our own. Furthermore, we would connect with a heritage which is the church's birthright, albeit one sold by various Esau-like leaders for their pragmatic mess of pottage.

We may make the mistake of brushing ancient Christian culture off as 'too serious', or 'melancholy', or as 'Roman Catholic-and-therefore-irrelevant'. This would be a great error. Possibly the only way a modern Christian can be shaken out of the complacency of modern Christianity is to be exposed to the example of Christians now gone. To read Christians before Charles Finney is to enter into a Christian culture which we both like and do not like, for it elevates us and intimidates us simultaneously. Their use of language sounds strange to us. Their writings appear obscure. They do not deal with what we think is 'relevant'. They call for disciplines that seem harsh. But to dismiss them would be to remain prisoners of our own modern Christian culture.

If, in fact, our modern Christian culture is riddled with inordinate affection, to remain bound to it is a horrible fate. As the saying goes, "He who knows only his own generation remains forever a child". There is something quite conceited and egocentric about members of a 2000-year old institution who have no interest in its past, and a near-obsession with its present. To listen only to contemporary Christian leaders, to read only contemporary Christian authors, to sing only "contemporary Christian music", to follow only contemporary models of ministry is a kind of narcissism. We are so in love with our generation, so convinced that we are the furthest point on the scale of Christian piety, so enamoured with novelty, so impressed with 'progress', and so convinced of the inherent merit of contemporaneity, that we dismiss a study of the church triumphant as merely the 'subject' of Church History. We are convinced that our piety is ordinate, our prayers are humble, our worship is reverent, our liturgies are pleasing to God. How do we know? Because the big churches we admire all do it that way. And so the dog chases its tail.

First, any ostensibly Christian writing must be judged for its allegiance to the biblical gospel. Just as we would not recognize a contemporary writing as Christian if the author denied the gospel, so we cannot recognize writings from the past as Christian if they do the same. That is not to say that such writings become useless to us. It simply means we would not accord them status as genuine parts of the Christian tradition. We would read them with the same interest we might read the modern commentaries by critical or liberal scholars. Of course, in judging the ancients according to this test, we will not expect them to articulate the gospel precisely as contemporary evangelicals do. Perhaps that is a good thing. Instead, we will look for confession of the fundamentals of the faith: the triune God; the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ; the death and resurrection of Christ for sinners; His ascension and return; the need for salvation by grace through faith; the existence of the church; the reality of judgment and resurrection after death. These essential doctrines were defended in the earliest creeds, and orthodox Christianity has always affirmed them.

Third, we must look for catholicity and enduring value. If a particular hymn, prayer, treatise, or book has tended to find favor with Christians across the ages, it probably represents something permanent and enduring. It will more than likely continue to speak to Christians today. Ironically, these are probably easier to spot in today's Christianity than ever before. Given the modern intoxication with novelty, works which still remain on the fringes of Christian consciousness are likely those with just such enduring value. To keep its head above the deluge of contemporary Christian writing, a work needs the buoyancy of its catholicity and timelessness.

Evangelical – orthodoxy, orthopraxy, orthopathy.

Right thinking about God / Correct worship of God

