

Orthopathy – 8

Probably the greatest difference between a thoroughly conservative Christian church and more nominally conservative Christian churches will be found in differences over the religious affections. Conservative Christian churches want to conserve a Christian understanding of the religious affections.

In my view, for all the areas in which the modern evangelical church fights against secularization, the matter of the affections is its most outstanding blind spot. Evangelicalism combats the post-modern denial of absolute truth, with its consequent pluralism and incoherent view of “tolerance.” It wrestles against the moral relativism of our time, with its situational ethics and redefinitions of moral good. In other words, most modern Christians largely fight the battle for the *true*, which must be believed, and for the Good, which must be obeyed. They see these as absolutes, transcending immanent reality. However, when it comes to the third transcendental, the *beautiful*, which must be loved, all bets are off. Here the consensus breaks up, and people start muttering about “the eye of the beholder and all that” or “entirely subjective.” Beauty, which is at the heart of this matter of the affections, cannot be an absolute, according to many Christians, even those who consider themselves “conservative evangelicals” or even fundamentalists. In their view, widely differing tastes and preferences among people is proof positive that beauty is purely a matter of individual likes or dislikes. It cannot be a transcendental that exists apart from human opinion. For the conservative, this represents an unambiguously secular view and a vestige of the Enlightenment revisions. The fact that it is found on the lips of professing Christians displays just how profoundly secularized the church has become.

A conservative argues for appropriate and inappropriate affections because he believes affections correspond to something in reality. A certain kind of love ought to be given to a beautiful object. An ugly object deserves a certain kind of response. This is because such things are beautiful or ugly, not merely that they seem that way to different people. The religious affections are expressions of value for the beauty or nature of something. This means that depending on our ability to correctly perceive beauty, our affections may be more or less correct, more or less appropriate. Just as our beliefs can conform or not conform to the *true*, and just as our actions can conform or not conform to the Good, so our affections can conform or not conform to the *beautiful*. This is simply light-years away from how most people think about beauty, love, and the affections.

In contrast to this view of the affections, the secularized Christian sees his “emotions” as having no reference beyond himself. They are just his internal, personalized reactions (or worse, his “brain chemistry”). He cannot imagine that he could have a “wrong” emotion, because he has no category for such a thing. He is too afraid to judge a song or piece of music as ugly and therefore inappropriate for the God of all Beauty. He has lost all grounds to discern between right and wrong expressions of love for God in corporate worship or beyond it. He must tenaciously fight for the True and the Good and tell himself that the Beautiful is a Romans 14 matter.

The battle to recover a right view of beauty and ordinate affection is the toughest battle that conservatives must fight and, as I said before, it is largely an abandoned battleground. Nevertheless, if it is not fought, we lose far more than an argument over which hymns we prefer. We may lose the very way we are to know and love God.

Restoring a right view of the affections may take many years of teaching and instruction. Most Christians exist with very foggy notions of “the emotions” and their relationship to Christianity. Many Christians have either been taught to ignore the affections as irrelevant side-effects of a

mental-volitional form of Christianity, or to place themselves at the whim of every ephemeral “feeling” they experience in their bodies. This is a far cry from a biblical view of the affections, and it will take some work to address.

The first task is to teach on the centrality of the affections to Christianity. This can be done by teaching those Scriptures which make an affective response to God the most important thing, such as Mark 12:28-29, Proverbs 9:10, Psalm 27:4, or Deuteronomy 10:12. Other Scriptures insist that certain affections ought to characterize our lives, such as 1 Corinthians 16:14, Philippians 4:4, and 1 Peter 1:17. The affections are at the heart of worship, service and obedience, therefore we cannot help teaching that these (and many other) affective responses are at the heart of Christianity.

John Piper has written several books that make good arguments for the centrality of the affections, *Desiring God* being the most straightforward apologetic for this view (although I wish he would distinguish between ordinate affection and the inordinate kind). In fact, Piper has simply brought to a modern audience the arguments of several older theologians of the affections, such as Augustine, Anselm, Jonathan Edwards, and C.S. Lewis. Whether we pass on these older works or more recent ones, it is wise to have these books in the hands of our people to allow their arguments to overturn years of wrong thinking about the affections.

First, the affections are primary because the heart of our religion is based on an affection: love. The first and greatest commandment is to “... love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30) Thus, we cannot escape the vital nature of the affections, for our Lord Himself has placed them at the very core of our faith. Our greatest responsibility is not only to know something or to do something; it is to love something. Scripture is filled with commands for certain affections: fear, joy, sorrow, zeal, sobriety, and reverence. It’s no surprise that Jonathan Edwards wrote: “True religion, in great part, consists in the affections.”

Second, the primacy of the affections is seen in the fact that Christianity becomes twisted and perverted without them. We can view Christianity in terms of three ‘orthos’: orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthopathy. Orthodoxy is right doctrine. Orthopraxy is right actions or practice – the works or fruit that are evidence of orthodoxy in the heart. Orthopathy is right affection – ordinate affection toward God, self and the world around. Each of these exists in a mutually dependent relationship towards the others. Orthodoxy without orthopraxy is the dead faith James described. Orthodoxy without orthopathy is dead formalism or even legalism. Orthopraxy without orthodoxy is undirected pragmatism or innovation. Orthopraxy without orthopathy is dead Pharisaism and hypocrisy. Orthopathy without orthodoxy is sheer enthusiasm or fanaticism. Orthopathy without orthopraxy is sentimentalism and pure emotionalism.

In fact, it is incorrect to continue to use the term ortho in these instances, for the point is that to lose one is to lose the others. If orthodoxy, orthopraxy or orthopathy go, you no longer have ortho-anything remaining. This means that ordinate affections are not merely dispensable reactions to propositional truths. They are not peripheral, secondary and altogether unimportant subjective responses to orthodoxy. They deal with truth themselves. They deal with affective truth: proportionate responses to the objects or truths considered. The affections are part of a trinity of orthos which lives only if each one is present and proper.

The third reason for the primacy of the affections lies in their power to shape moral judgement, and even overthrow right doctrine. The affections sway our decisions, because as Jonathan Edwards showed, the will never chooses except in the direction of its desires. Therefore, our affections shape

our decisions. We should know this; the Bible tells us that the fear of the Lord (an affection) is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. We know right, when we feel right. Ordinate affections lead to ordinate judgements, tastes and sensibilities. Since so much of life is a matter of taking propositional truth from Scripture, and then using wisdom, taste, judgement and sensibility to apply those principles, it appears that apart from the affections, propositional truth is merely the starting point.

In light of this we see the error of many conservative evangelicals who imagine that expository preaching, a grounding in systematic theology, and an emphasis on propositional truth are enough to produce orthopraxy and orthopathy. They believe the black-and-white nature of propositional truth will surely produce ordinate responses in the will and in the heart. Wrong!

If the heart is being led down the path of inordinate affection, it will pervert the mind, deceive itself, and re-direct the will. Romans 1:18-32 makes this abundantly clear. Charles Hodge, addressing students at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1829, said, “Whenever a change occurs in the religious opinions of a community, it is always preceded by a change in their religious feelings. The natural expression of the feelings of true piety, is the doctrines of the Bible. As long as these feelings are retained, these doctrines will be retained; but should they be lost, the doctrines are either held for form sake or rejected, according to circumstance; and if the feelings again be called into life, the doctrines return as a matter of course.”

If we do not pay close attention to what shapes our affections, we may find that our best attempts to reform Christianity through correct doctrine will fail (has this not already been proved in the last fifty years?). This is not to denigrate orthodox teaching – for it is essential. It is to say that such orthodoxy cannot stand alone.

Fourth, the truest bond of any community is shared affections. Our deepest bonds are our loves, not our opinions. Our truest commonality is when we feel similarly towards things, and value them in the same ways. Sentiment is the true bond of community. Christians find their deepest communion with one another when they gather to commune with Christ. The Lord’s Table and how we administer it is the truest test of our fellowship. Certainly doctrinal statements are a starting point for unity. Granted, collaboration and ministry partnerships require agreement on ministry philosophy and practice. However, apart from shared ordinate affection, long-term fellowship and collaboration become impossible. Striving for Christian unity is grasping for the wind, if we do not love the same things in the same way.

The affections are at the heart of our religion. They are integral to a healthy Christian life. They provide moral judgement to apply the Word of God. They are the ultimate bond of Christian fellowship.

The second, harder task goes hand-in-hand with the first. To restore a right view of the religious affections, we must teach that they are more than what most people think of when they think of emotions. Many people view emotions as an internal stirring, with no referential character beyond the self. Undoubtedly they will point to causes for their emotions outside themselves, but they do not see their emotions as corresponding (or failing to correspond) to anything beyond their own mind. It’s “just how they feel about it.” This is much closer to what Jonathan Edwards called the “animal spirits.” In fact, Edwards is one of our most helpful guides here. Edwards saw the affections as the inclination of the soul, that is, the direction that the will chooses because of what it knows and loves. Its knowledge, and its loves combine to lead man to his choices, for good or ill. Edwards wanted neither heat without light, not light without heat, but a rightly enlightened

understanding, and a heart that relished God's beauty.

The word "emotion" is a relatively new word, and its current connotations have emerged from a secular worldview. For a time spanning the ancient Greeks, Romans, and early Christian era into the eighteenth century, men spoke of the affections and the passions, not of the emotions. The Greeks spoke of the passions: the feelings that emerged from the "gut" or *koilia*. These were described as the impulsive, sensual and even animalistic urges and appetites. Amongst these might be lust, envy, cowardice, rage, hilarity, gluttony, laziness, revelry, and so on. For them, these were to be governed very strictly, and for later Christians – many of them mortified altogether. They also spoke of the affections that emerged from the chest, or *steithos*, and the affections that emerged from the spleen, or *splanchna*. For them, these were the noble and gracious feelings which produced nobility, courage, honour, reverence, joy, mercy, kindness, patience. The Greeks taught that the passions always won over the intellect in any contest, unless the intellect was supported by the affections. To put it another way: a man's affections guide his mind's decisions, a truth that the Bible teaches (Prov 9:10).

This understanding of differences of feelings prevailed for centuries. Certainly not all used the terms identically, but there was general agreement that the affections were to be differentiated from the passions, and that Christians in particular should seek to mortify 'passions' and 'inordinate affection' (Colossians 3:5 [note the 17th century terminology coming out in the KJV]), while pursuing affections set on things above (Col 3:2). Jonathan Edwards' magisterial work "Religious Affection" brought a kind of cohesiveness to the discussion. For him, the affections were the inclinations of a person towards objects of desire. The type of object determined the type of desire. A man is moved in his will by his affections, which operate through a renewed mind. The passions, for Edwards, were the more impulsive and less governed feelings.

What the Greeks, Romans, and pre-modern Christians had in common was the belief that the affections corresponded to something in reality. There was a proper affection for each object, experience or person. In other words, affections had to do with truth. Something true in the universe, a fixed absolute, called for a corresponding affection in the human being. Truth, goodness and beauty merited approving affections. To pre-modern thinkers, fixed absolutes called for appropriate affections. Affections could be fitting – ordinate – , or unfitting – inordinate. To put it another way, your affections were true or false.

With the coming of the Enlightenment, secular philosophers sought to undermine any scheme which spoke of intrinsic truth, goodness or beauty. Therefore, their attack on the Christian view of the affections began. They sought to redefine the affections as merely biological, and purely subjective. William James (1842-1910) was especially destructive in this regard. If there is nothing true (in the absolute sense) in the universe, there can be no true affections corresponding to that truth. If there is nothing beautiful (in the absolute sense) in the universe, there can be no corresponding affections approving of that beauty. If there is nothing good (in the absolute sense) in the universe, there can be no feelings within a human that correspond to that goodness. In this scheme of thought, the affections are simply the internal psychological stirrings of human animals as they view a meaningless universe through their personalised worldview-lenses. Today, this is what people think of when they think of emotions. Sadly, many Christians are included in that number.

While evangelicals believe in absolute truth, most have not grasped the idea of affective truth: that our affections are truthful or untruthful responses to God's universe. Questions of the use of music and art in worship will never be settled until Christians reach consensus on this point: that there is

such a thing as ordinate affections.

Perhaps a helpful way of explaining the affections is to point out that the affections are, in some ways, expressions of love and value. Psalm 29:1-2 describes worship as the ascription of glory due to God. In other words, God's nature in reality demands, deserves, and calls for a particular kind of response. God, because of who He is, deserves a certain kind of treasuring or honoring or valuing, and such a response is payable by all His creatures. Whether the affections are those of joy, fear, exultation, thanksgiving, or reverent awe, we are called to present a worship-response (which is always an exercise of the affections) that gives God what is due to Him.

When described this way, the affections are more than butterflies in the stomach or sweaty palms, they are the means by which humans express value or worth. Sometimes, the affections choose against a particular emotional feeling, such as our Lord did in the Garden. Our affections express and describe the nature of what we are encountering (or think we are encountering) and what it is worth. Consequently, one can devalue, overvalue, or correctly value the object of our affections, depending on which affections are present and how those affections are expressed. This is an oversimplification, I grant, but it is a start towards getting people to see their affective responses as expressions of how they view the worth and nature of the object they are responding to.

Consider the difference between saying "I was emotional" and "I was affected". The second statement calls for the response, "By what?", whereas the first does not. The affections correspond to objects in reality, the emotions may be nothing more than relative states of mind.

Perhaps the most helpful book for explaining this concept is *The Abolition of Man* by C.S. Lewis. Some kind of discussion or mini-study of this book would be very helpful to help crystallize the view of affections corresponding to the beauty or value of things in reality.

Distinguishing Between Affections

If the affections are our hearts' expressions of value or response to the nature and worth of what we encounter, then it is possible for those affections to correspond or fail to correspond. When a magistrate enters the court, a corresponding—or appropriate—response is to stand out of respect. To break out into screeching, hysterical laughter would not correspond to the office of a magistrate or the occasion. This would be inappropriate.

Our goal as leaders is to persuade people that the Bible is filled with examples of ordinate (appropriate) and inordinate (inappropriate) affections. When teaching through the Scripture, these can be pointed out, and questions for reflection can be asked. For example:

- ≡ What kind of joy was taking place in Exodus 32:6, 17-19? How is this different to David's joy in 1 Samuel 6:14?
- ≡ What sort of fear is encouraged in Proverbs 8:13? How is this different to the fear of 1 John 4:18?
- ≡ What kind of anger did Jesus display in John 2:14-16? How is this different to Ephesians 4:30-31 anger?
- ≡ Paul contrasts two kinds of sorrow in 2 Corinthians 7:10. How are they different, and why?
- ≡ Contrast the kind of love the Pharisees had with the kind of love that Jesus had in John

12:43. How are these loves different?

- ≡ How did Paul want the love of the Philippians to grow, as recorded in his prayer in 1:9-11? Why or how would this result in “approving the things that are excellent”?
- ≡ Explain the difference between revelry (Rom 13:13) and rejoicing (Phil 4:4).
- ≡ Explain the difference between sober worship and sombre worship.

Another helpful start to this discussion is C.S. Lewis’ “The Four Loves”. Here the reader is introduced to the idea that there are at least four kinds of love, loves which differ in nature, degree and object. I would recommend including this book in a church library, at least as a conversation starter. Beyond that, tackling Jonathan Edwards’ “Religious Affections” will also help explain the difference between appropriate and inappropriate affection.

As communicators, pastors would do well to work on finding the right word for the right affection. What kind of joy? It could be flippant, hilarious, jolly, amused, playful, satisfied, exuberant, raucous, exultant, relieved, triumphant, or many other kinds. What kind of fear? It could be horror, terror, despair, dread, timidity, panic, trepidation, intimidation, awe, caution, sobriety, reverence, or many other kinds. Our goal is not merely to be experts in synonyms but to find precisely the right nuance of affection. For this is the very point we are trying to make: there are kinds of joy that are appropriate for some situations in life but inappropriate for worship. There are some kinds of love appropriate for some situations in life but inappropriate for worship. Once again, the object determines the nature of our response, and the response can correspond or fail to do so.

And here is why we believe this to be essential to healthy Christianity: in the long run, inordinate affection is not only an incorrect response, it ultimately leads to idolatry. To respond to God with the kind of love you give a soft toy is not only an egregious error in itself, it ultimately leads to imagining God in just that way. It cannot be otherwise; the Christian who imagines God as dreadful, majestic, and beautiful does not express that view of God with nursery rhymes and cutesy songs. The Christian who keeps speaking to God like an intimate lover cannot help imagining Him that way. To put it another way, ordinate affection is essential to knowing the truth. When people love the wrong things, or love the right things wrongly, it begins a process of warping their understanding and perceptions. This is clearly seen in Romans 1:18-32, where the choice to love creature rather than Creator resulted in increasing foolishness. We end up becoming like whatever we worship (Ps 115:8).

Positively speaking, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of knowledge (Prov 9:10, 1:7). When we love God ordinally and express it in obedience, the result is increasing knowledge (John 7:17) and discernment (Heb 5:14). This is why the matter of ordinate affection is essential to Christianity. This is why churches that want to conserve Christianity care to conserve it.