

Orthopraxy – 6

Two propositions summarize why a conservative Christian church is concerned with meaning: Christians are humans, and Christians live in the world. What is the world? The world Christians live in is a world that is the handiwork of an intelligent Being, filled with all His purposes and designs. What is a human? A human is a creature made in the image of God, who echoes and reflects His Creator in creating things that are likewise meaningful.

The implication of these propositions is that the universe as a whole is meaningful. Meaning permeates everything we experience. As much as the unregenerate use meaninglessness as a cover for their disobedience, they are without excuse. Creation shouts and proclaims that all things have significance, invested by the art and craft of a Designer. A Mind exists behind all the empirical data of the universe, and it is that Mind's purpose, plan, and design that make sense of that data. To live as fully Christian is to desire to understand the meaning of this creation and its creatures. This is necessary for three critical areas: worship, obedience, and ministry.

First, if we are to do all things to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), it presupposes that we understand what it is we are doing. Understanding is a prerequisite of worship (1 Cor 14:15). I cannot do what I do heartily as to the Lord and give thanks to the Lord fully if I do not understand the activity I'm involved in, its place in God's universe, or its overall significance. I cannot give thanks for every good gift that comes from above if I do not understand it, recognize it, or appreciate its significance in the interconnected universe God has made. Understanding the meaning of something allows me to love it rightly (ordinate affection) and use it correctly. The more we understand the world we live in, the better we are able to glorify God in our work, our leisure, and our enjoyment of His world. Furthermore, in the act of worship, we are called to do at least two things that are part of the created order: make music (sing) and use poetry (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16). If nothing else, Christian leaders need to learn something of what these two creations are and how they function.

Second, and related to the first, if we are to obey God and apply His Word, we must understand the world in which we apply it. Every command, precept or principle has to be worked out in a context. Scripture does not supply my contemporary situation for applying its timeless principles. It is up to me to work out what returning my neighbor's straying ox looks like in a 21st century city, how "do not steal" applies to the Internet, or how Leviticus 18 (or 1 Corinthians 6) applies to people who have undergone a sex-change operation. Usually, to make these applications, one needs to learn about the world. Properly applying the truth of Scripture means obtaining truth about the world. No lie about the world can be brought into the service of the truth. If we misconstrue what is true about the world, it will mean we fail to properly apply the truth of Scripture. When we refuse to learn about the world in supposed service to the principle of sola Scriptura, we then ironically keep Scripture locked within its covers and declawed when it comes to the world.

Third, if we are to truly love our God and our neighbor, we must understand who our neighbor is. We cannot rightly love what we do not understand. Therefore, Christians are interested in humanity. To understand humanity means we must be interested in human concerns—that is, the humanities. We want to understand languages, history, economics, government, jurisprudence, poetics, art, music, and philosophy. Scripture is our primary and final source of anthropology, but it is not our exhaustive source. Given the framework that God's Word supplies, we can evaluate human history, law, government, culture, and its artifacts, all of which are external expressions of what humans are internally. We see from all these things that humans are made in the image of God and order their world into systems of meaning.

While those meanings may be warped, sinful or perverse distortions of God's mind, Christians cannot afford to ignore them or dismiss them. These are our neighbors, the ones we are called to reach with the Truth. We must take them seriously, understand them, even if we oppose their ideas. It is a hard sell to say we love the greater good of God and His gospel whom we have not seen when we have nothing but dismissive contempt for our neighbor whom we have seen.

This is not so much about "redeeming culture" as it is about understanding the meaning of what it is to be human. Christians, of all people, should be the most humane. For these reasons, Christians ought to attempt to discover the meaning of the world God made, the people in it, and the things they create.

If pastors are to shepherd churches that desire to understand the meaning of the world and apply it to worship, obedience, and ministry, some shepherds will need to adjust their understanding of their doctrine of Scripture (or their theories of applying Scripture).

A strange paralysis has come over many evangelical pastors. They are immobilized when it comes to speaking on certain matters that require knowledge acquired outside the Bible. If they need to consult non-biblical sources to apply biblical principles, then somehow the Bible is beholden to the opinions of men. For them, this is mingling iron and clay, inspired revelation and fallible human information. They do not want to "go beyond what is written," and so where the Bible is silent on applications, they do not speak. They do not want to be (rightly or wrongly) associated with "legalism," a term broadly used by many to mean binding men's consciences to applications without biblical warrant. This leaves them voiceless on a plenitude of matters, for Scripture is certainly nothing like the thirty-nine volume Jewish Talmud, which sought to apply the Torah to just about every conceivable event in life (albeit sixth century Jewish life).

There is something in the attitude of such pastors to be commended. First, it is often motivated by a protective attitude toward Scripture. Scripture must always be considered on a higher plane of authority than the judgments and opinions of men. It is natural for every Christian who believes in the inspiration of Scripture to adopt a defensive posture against anything that seems like competition for Scripture's authority.

Second, it is willing to muzzle its own voice. Considering the willingness of some to say in the Lord's name what He has never said, one does appreciate men who consider the warning of James 3:1 before publicly teaching something.

On the other hand, there are also things in that attitude to be censured. First, it is inconsistent. Every pastor makes applications using non-biblical knowledge. The simplest of applications must supply some modicum of knowledge about the world outside the Word for the application to make sense. Preaching against speeding, gambling, drug abuse, or Internet porn requires some knowledge from the world (speeding breaks the law, gambling is a frivolous use of money, drugs destroy and enslave the body, Internet porn provides images of people to lust after). Most often, this information is such common knowledge, or so obvious, that we hardly notice that we obtained it outside the Scriptures. We imagine that we went from Scripture to application with nothing in-between. The inconsistency is seen when the same men who would regard such applications as "clearly taught" by Scripture balk at providing applications where the extra-biblical information required demands a more critical judgment or the opinions of those who have earned the right to hold such opinions.

A second reason for censuring such an attitude is that it is often simply fearful. In an era where sola

Scriptura means avoiding enlisting any human knowledge outside the Bible when preaching or teaching from the Bible and where anyone who makes sermon applications that are specific to contemporary life runs the risk of being called “legalist,” some just want to avoid the controversy and know how to do it. They know where people’s cherished idols are, and they skirt around those issues to avoid the pitch-fork wielding legalist-hunters, the inevitable disgruntled church member, or “the limiting of our Gospel-influence by majoring on minors.”

Sadly, this overreaction to either Roman denials of sola Scriptura or more modern pulpit abuses has not produced a sleek, supple Christianity but an emaciated one that can barely speak to its own generation. A secularized church is both implausible and irrelevant.

Fully Christian churches and those who lead them must recover a right understanding of sola Scriptura. The teaching of sola Scriptura was never meant to limit all of human knowledge to the pages of the Bible. A pastor who accepts the primacy of Scripture does not have to reject information obtained from the world around us. What sola Scriptura means is that all the facts we collect from the world and from unbelievers must be understood and interpreted within the framework that the Bible establishes. Within the “grid” of God’s special revelation, we should not be afraid to allow the facts to speak for themselves.

Conservative Christian pastors are, in so doing, not trying to elevate human opinion or demote Scripture so that they have equal authority. They are seeking to understand the meaning of the world, its inhabitants, and their creations within the framework that God Himself has provided. We can safely listen to unbelieving economists, doctors, lawyers, composers, engineers, critics, scientists, or other people skilled in their fields. We may disagree with them when they interpret some of the facts of their domain of knowledge according to a secular worldview. Being unregenerate, they will not be able to speak cogently on how their expertise could be applied to worship and the service of God. But if they are serious, diligent, and skilled at what they do, they can be valuable sources of knowledge regarding their field of expertise. A pastor need not fear that he is dishonoring Scripture when he consults them or their writings. Rather, he elevates Scripture by making it the final bar of judgment for all human knowledge—even that knowledge he reads from unbelievers who are expert in their fields.

Ours is not a particularly reflective age. When a pastor begins speaking of the meaning of the media, devices and technologies that surround us, he may receive something of a puzzled, and probably combative, reaction. Many today are oblivious to the meanings of the things they read, the music they listen to, the films they watch, the technologies they use, or the very words they use. The ambient culture tends to scoff at reflectiveness as impractical philosophizing. The pace of urbanized culture discourages serious consideration of the meaning of things. Further, our lives are populated with media that serve the end of perpetual distraction, with its background noise drowning out the clarity and curiosity that come with silence. A pastor can attempt to cultivate a spirit of reflectiveness in his people through several measures.

First, if he is doing the kind of reading suggested in the last chapter, it is inevitable that his sermons will end up applying Scripture with a broader range of examples. At the same time, those examples will become more incisive and particular, often surprising and awakening parishioners with the meaning of things they had ignored, passed over or simply failed to consider. With these applications, he will be explicitly or implicitly calling for discernment and a careful use of technology, media, and other cultural phenomena. Discernment, or judgment, is only possible when people understand the meaning of the thing or activity under consideration. True discernment comes about by encouraging the examined life. Eventually, parishioners may begin to realize that applying

Scripture takes some work on their part: the work of understanding the world, to apply the Word.

Second, he can preach a series on the importance of discernment. Pastors have to show Christians that discernment is part of godliness, by teaching texts such as Romans 12:1-2, Ephesians 5:8-17, Philippians 1:9-11, Colossians 1:9-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, and Hebrews 5:12-14.

Here, the pastor will have to navigate several roadblocks. First, many think that discernment is limited to matters of Christian doctrine. In fact, at the very least, it is the ability to discern between good and evil (Heb 5:14), to approve what is excellent (Phil 1:10), and to be able to recognise what is true, just, noble, pure, lovely, praiseworthy, commendable, and excellent (Phil 4:8) – and the opposites of these. Judgement can also be thought of as discernment, discrimination, prudence, taste, or more broadly, wisdom.

Second, he will encounter the idea that judging is always wrong. However, judgement is at the very heart of a mature Christian life (Heb 5:14). If you cannot judge good from bad, you will never worship meaningfully, or be protected against profanity. In fact, good judgment is placed side-by-side with a holy and fruitful life. Proud judgmentalism is what is forbidden to us, which is the same as ‘thinking evil’ of another, assuming the worst, or claiming to be able to perfectly read motives.

Third, he will be told that judgment is very much a matter of subjective taste. To this, he can point out that that does not mean such judgments will not be true. Judgements made by subjects can still conform to the good. Are we excused from believing or submitting to what is true simply because someone holds it as a subjective preference?

How then is judgment to be learned? How shall we go about learning judgement?

First, we should commit to living in the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of sound wisdom and discretion. No judgement or discernment will come to irreverent, flippant people. We must determine that we wish to revere God, whatever that might mean.

Second, we should commit ourselves to godliness of life. Discernment comes by reason of use, as we seek to know the difference between good and evil for application to life (Romans 12:1-2, Ephesians 5:8-11, Philippians 1:9-11, Colossians 1:9-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22).

Third, we must embrace the examined life. That is, we must seek a life in which we become thoughtful about the meaning of the various technologies, media, forms, and devices in our lives. We must become thoughtful and contemplative about meaning, if we are to grow in discernment. This is the same as Proverbs’ instructions to pursue knowledge, wisdom and understanding. We are to vigorously pursue an understanding of God, ourselves and the world.

Fourth, we should root ourselves in the genuine Christian tradition, immersing ourselves in it so that it gives us a sense of its discerning judgement by example and exposure.

A bolster to this kind of thinking would be a Sunday School-type class on biblical ethics. A study of gender issues, bio-ethics, war, justice, economics, and other such matters encourages people to consider the meaning of these things in our world, so as to rightly apply the Scriptures.

He can teach the doctrine of vocation. Gene Veith has done helpful work on this doctrine. This important teaching, recovered largely by Luther, insists on the truths of 1 Corinthians 7:18-24, which is that every person has a calling. I spent many years in a church where the pulpit teaching seemed to suggest that the only two God-pleasing career options for a Christian are pastor and

missionary (or the wives thereof). By contrast, Scripture makes it clear that God calls people to various stations in life for His glory. While pastor and missionary are honorable callings, the world needs Christians who are plumbers, lawyers, composers, horticulturalists, soldiers, farmers, nurses, and mechanics. Christians are needed in these vocations, not merely so that they can witness to others in those professions. It is because God is glorified by the industrious and creative work of men. Christians ought to excel at learning the meaning of a section of God's world and bring Him glory through their useful and valuable work. Here the pastor also has the opportunity to learn from his members as they explain meanings discovered from their particular callings. Against this biblical view, people are encouraged by their culture to simply "get a job" to have enough money to spend on their pleasures. While one's income may not always coincide with one's calling, this approach generally pushes out any real pursuit of meaning. Pastors can resist this mindlessness in the Christians they teach by encouraging them to value their callings, learn within them, and excel at them.

He can also teach the doctrine of true leisure. Partner to an unbiblical view of vocation is an unbiblical view of leisure. Leisure is seen by the world as respite from "the job" and essentially an opportunity to "goof off" or "veg out." This kind of idleness has the paradoxical effect of filling the soul with an empty boredom, which requires more distraction to satiate it. Josef Pieper argues that the real point of leisure is freedom from the constraints of servile work, to be able to reflect on ultimate ends. Leisure involves a passivity that considers the meaning and value of things as they are in themselves and not merely for their function. This requires stepping outside our routine to look upon the world as a gift from God. This ultimately depends on worship and the act of corporate worship.

This happens to be close to the biblical idea of sabbatical rest. For God's Old and New Testament people, there exists the principle of coming apart from the world of servile work to worship, meditate, and ponder. This has implications for how we use the Lord's Day (and how we teach people to use it). If the Lord's Day services are a brief pause in an otherwise secular use of leisure, we have missed the point entirely. If Sundays contain nothing of reflection, contemplation, and meditation but are filled with the usual distractions (albeit punctuated by a service or two) then God's people are not resting in the way He intended. If Sunday is a chance for Christians to do what unbelievers mean when they speak of "unwinding," then we ought not to be surprised when Christians do not develop in their ability to perceive meanings. There is certainly nothing wrong with hobbies, games, or distractions in their place. But the aim of leisure is not mere distraction; it exists for the reflection that makes sense of life.

I have occasionally pointed people to Tozer's thoughts on simplicity and solitude:

The need for solitude and quietness was never greater than it is today. What the world will do about it is their problem. Apparently the masses want it the way it is and the majority of Christians are so completely conformed to this present age that they, too, want things the way they are. They may be annoyed a bit by the clamor and by the goldfish bowl existence they live, but apparently they are not annoyed enough to do anything about it. However, there are a few of God's children who have had enough. They want to relearn the ways of solitude and simplicity and gain the infinite riches of the interior life. They want to discover the blessedness of what Dr. Max Reich called "spiritual aloneness." To such I offer a brief paragraph of counsel.

Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom (for a while I retreated to the furnace room for want of a better place). Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelops you. Deliberately

tune out the unpleasant sounds and come out of your closet determined not to hear them. Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it. Stop trying to compete with others. Give yourself to God and then be what and who you are without regard to what others think. Reduce your interests to a few. Don't try to know what will be of no service to you. Avoid the digest type of mind—short bits of unrelated facts, cute stories and bright sayings. Learn to pray inwardly every moment. After a while you can do this even while you work. Practice candor, childlike honesty, humility. Pray for a single eye. Read less, but read more of what is important to your inner life. Never let your mind remain scattered for very long. Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. Practice spiritual concentration.

All the above is contingent upon a right relation to God through Christ and daily meditation on the Scriptures. Lacking these, nothing will help us; granted these, the discipline recommended will go far to neutralize the evil effects of externalism and to make us acquainted with God and our own souls.

Orthopraxy has another dimension – the local church. We'll consider that next week.