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*Christian Orthodoxy:
A Layman's Perspective*



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*F*rancis Schaeffer once wrote, "There is nothing so ugly as a Christian Orthodoxy without understanding and without compassion." No one would doubt Schaeffer's allegiance to the doctrines of the Reformed faith and yet his caveat gives me pause when I reflect upon my own dogmatism and zealous teaching in the past, based upon some very strong convictions in matters of election, effectual calling, and eternal security. The "pause," however, in no way alters my convictions but merely the manner in which I now present them.

I shall first discuss my earliest introduction to "correct [*ortho*] opinion [*doxa*]" and then consider the ugliness that I have found being reflected by some members of the Body of Christ. Next I will proceed to a discussion of our Lord's call for compassion among the flock in our dealings with other sheep and finally conclude with some thoughts of my own.

ORTHODOXY AND UNDERSTANDING

I was never a stranger to the Church, at least not in body. For as long as I can remember, my "tent" (2 Corinthians 5:1) was found in some pew or other on the Lord's Day. I was catechized and baptized at the age of twelve. I sang in the choir, attended, and later taught, Sunday school and even rose to

the elected position of elder. Thus for the first thirty-four years of my life I appeared to be, and was in fact, a member of the visible Church. My life was however, within my sin-darkened soul, a profound contradiction. I was what you might call a "practical atheist"; I believed in God but lived as though he didn't exist.

That all changed on June 28, 1970, when through a series of temporally misfortunate, yet eternally fortunate circumstances I was born again; that is, our God who is rich in mercy made me alive when I was dead in my trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:4-5). He made his light shine into my sin-darkened soul so that I could "see" (John 3:3) and have the "knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

From the very moment of my new birth the Lord placed within my heart and mind an intense desire to study and diligently search the Scriptures so that I might "understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:5). That deep passion for truth has continued unabated to this day, and has found a satisfying and comfortable home in the doctrines of Reformed theology.

When I first had my Damascus Road experience, it was considered by many as an unbelievable phenomenon. The news of it began to spread within my hometown, then the county, the state, and beyond. As a result of this miraculous conversion I was asked to tell my faith-story over and over again in every imaginable setting. I was never ashamed to testify about my Lord or to tell of my conversion experience. I appeared in the pulpits of Reformed, Arminian, Holiness, Pentecostal, Regular and General Baptist, various mainline liberal, inner city Black and Roman Catholic churches. I found myself at the gatherings of the recently converted Hippie culture in cow barns where I taught the Word from a "pulpit" made out of a straw bail turned on end, in high school auditoriums and in countryside parks and conference grounds. I was on the speaker's bureau for Christian Business Men's Committee, Full Gospel Businessmen's Association, and Christian Women's Clubs. I spoke at friendly meetings of

Campus Crusade for Christ, Campus Life, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I appeared on the 700 Club (three times) and the PTL Club (two times). I gave witness on local and national radio programs. In other words I fellowshipped and talked with members of Christ's invisible Church wherever his Spirit called me to testify. I saw the diversity of worship style and his worshipers; the uniqueness of the redeemed who have called upon the name of the Lord and have been saved (Romans 10:13).

One overriding and obvious fact came through on each of those wonderful occasions. Wherever I spoke there were always true believers present with whom I shared a kindred spirit. They may have preferred to express their worship of our Triune God differently than I do, but their common goal was much the same as is yours and mine—to worship, obey and love him with body, mind and spirit.

From the very beginning my exposure to biblical teaching was orthodox as I was originally saved through the instrumentality and willingness of a Reformed Presbyterian pastor. This man of God, in the spirit and trembling of Saul's Ananias, was willing to take on this arrogant, reprobate doctor of medicine under the leading and by way of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. It was he who would ultimately enable me to discover my spiritual gift of teaching and who encouraged me to put it into practice. Since that time, in the spirit of the Berean I have been diligent to search out the Scriptures daily to see if what I was being taught was really true (Acts 17:11). For me, those really true things are found within the teachings, the creeds and the confessions of Reformed theology.

Having said all of that, I would now like to move on to one layman's perspective of the "ugliness" that I have observed within the Church; some of it having reflected back at me as I have looked intently into the mirror of the Word and have seen the ugly nature of my own face (James 1:23-24) when dealing with those of different theological persuasions.

UGLY DUCKLINGS IN THE CHURCH

When Jesus told his followers to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16), he did not intend for us to be venomous vipers inflicting backbites and springing forth attacking one another in the spirit of self defense. After all, our initial introduction to a serpent (Genesis 3:1) was accompanied by the explanation that it was the craftiest of all God's creatures and, oh, what harm that viper inflicted upon the whole of humanity. Instead of being peacemaking doves we all too often appear to the outsider as ugly ducklings.

My primary encounter with the mindset and ugliness of separatism and legalism occurred in the very church where I had been nurtured as an embryonic believer. Five years following my miraculous awakening to the Truth, I found myself earnestly involved in an area-wide Crusade of the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA), with Leighton Ford as the itinerant evangelist. For one year prior to the actual crusade, preparations were made under the guidance of an advance team that had been dispatched to our town by the BGEA.

I was honored to be designated as the chairman of the Operation Andrew committee. Our responsibility was to encourage the cooperation and participation of local churches, both evangelical and mainline, in the valiant efforts of the crusade officials to attract attendees. I appeared in many pulpits of varying denominations during the year preceding the coming of Leighton Ford to the Mahoning Valley; a region in the midst of a gradually dwindling steel manufacturing industry of northeast Ohio. In each of those congregations I received a warm welcome.

The ugly experience came during a meeting of the session of my local Reformed Presbyterian church. I was one of six elders, including the pastor, who met to discuss our involvement in the forthcoming crusade. The meeting became one of heated debate; one against five. I was told in no uncertain terms that the BGEA was not in accord with our Reformed doctrines. Furthermore, even more inappropriate was the

invitation to the local Roman Catholic bishop to sit on the platform with Dr. Ford on a particular evening. This was totally unacceptable and indicated an "apostate" spirit that our congregation should avoid. The vote was obviously five-to-one to disassociate our church with the crusade. My response was to disassociate my family from that congregation and find another more peace-loving environment in which to serve and worship our God. As an aside, I now know several members of the elect of God who were brought to saving faith on that particular evening having attended specifically because their bishop had encouraged them to come.

Since those early days I have seen, and sadly and ashamedly been a party to, the backbiting and bickering over doctrinal issues that continue today in our "one holy catholic Church." I have seen churches split and the flock scattered over issues that bear no resemblance whatsoever to anything that could be regarded as having any eternal consequence. I have noticed and been the recipient of legalistic attacks and restrictions that make the designation "fundamentalist" become a pejorative adjective rather than an appellation of which I am proud.

I am both a fundamentalist, in the sense of J. Gresham Machen's original definition (i.e., biblical fundamentals), and as Reformed in my faith as Augustine, Spurgeon, and Calvin; and those two identifying marks are quite evident to all who know me. However, when I am remembered for my stand for true-truth I also want to be recalled as having possessed a serpentine wisdom and as being a dove-like peacemaker. I would hope that I am not viewed as an ugly duckling in the continuing fellowship of believers.

WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING AND COMPASSION

The apostle Peter, a once ferocious and impetuous leopard who had obviously changed his "spots," instructed us as follows: "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with *gentleness* and *respect*" (1 Peter 3:15, emphasis mine). Peter had obviously learned a vital lesson from his Lord, for in his former life Peter

had been neither gentle nor respectful when dealing with the opposition (John 18:10). If we, in the spirit of the old Peter, use the "sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6:17) to cut off the spiritual ears of those who ask us questions, they will remain deaf to the truth. If we amputate their spiritual hearing devices by way of our mean spiritedness, dogmatic attitudes, and disrespect, they will never hear us, and having not heard they will not believe.

Too often our concerted efforts to be proven right are viewed by others as attempts to appear self-righteous. We are seen as argumentative troublemakers, not peacemakers. We desire to be viewed as wise by the unlearned but often produce the opposite opinion. In our attempts to bring people to a saving knowledge of Christ we trample the "field white unto harvest" like a herd of raging bulls. The words of James are instructive on this point: "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then *peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit*. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:17-18, emphasis mine).

When the smoke has cleared from the battlefields of our uncivil wars, and the spectators (Hebrews 12:1) up on the hills are viewing the spiritually dead bodies strewn over the theological terrain of doctrinal conquest, one has to wonder what they are thinking of all this combat? We are supposed to be putting on the full armor of God to do battle with the enemy of our souls (Ephesians 6:10-18) not to engage each other in a contest over orthodoxy.

We need to be respectful of those whose spiritual upbringing has either been vacant, vacuous, or vile. When a person has been trained in a culture or religious environment diametrically opposed to ours it is an onerous and challenging task to bring them into line with the absolute truth of God's Word. It takes patience, persistence, tenacity, and much prayer to help them climb out of their pit of deception into the light of God's love.

The fruit of the Spirit is, among other manifestations, "love, patience, kindness, gentleness and self control." I fail to see these displayed in many of the inter-relationships of

believers today. Whether it is over the issue of Arminianism vs. Reformed theology (AKA five-point Calvinism), the chaos within the charismatic movement, the issues raised over the ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together) debates, the most recent flap over the TNIV Bible translation, or style of worship—those five aspects of spiritual fruit are not remotely evident.

The apostle Paul has urged all believers to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). Then Paul says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). What was Jesus' attitude? Here are just a few of his admonitions:

- "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). There is much to be learned within the whole body of Christ about this "new commandment." Our love is all too often conditioned on total capitulation.
- "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:4). Jesus had much to say about judgmental attitudes and this passage represents one of the less caustic. He is the Judge of all the earth, and he has called us to be fruitful, not fruit inspectors.
- "You nullify the Word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:6). There are many "do nots" within the various Christian fellowships that have more to do with local church or denominational tradition than biblical imperatives. Most legalism is more of a traditional than a theological nature; more of a personal persuasion than a biblical imperative.
- "Whoever is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:50). Commenting on this passage Matthew Henry said, "We need not lose any of our friends, while we have so few,

and so many enemies. Those may be faithful followers of Christ, and as such, may be accepted by him, though they do not follow with us." Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18). He never intended that we as members of his flock should express hatred toward each other. As we approach the return of Christ our friends will be fewer in number and we had better hold tightly to the ones we have.

- "May they be brought into complete unity that the world may know that you have sent me" (John 17:23). This intercessory prayer was offered on the night before Jesus would consummate his earthly mission by dying on the cross of Calvary for the sins of his sheep. Our agreement, our unity, our singleness of purpose and our oneness as a body of believers was foremost in his mind and high on the agenda of his priestly role. When he uttered one of those seven last statements, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), I wonder if he also had the post-Reformation Church in mind and the numerous schisms that have eventuated since Luther first nailed his ninety-nine theses to that Wittenberg door. As long as we continue to argue over the less crucial doctrinal issues, the final apologetic, our unity "that the world may know" will never be adequately articulated.

There have been many great men of God who have not necessarily strictly, or even closely, followed the sound biblical dictates of the Reformed faith but who in spite of that have contributed greatly to the Kingdom of God. I think of that great and brilliant Roman Catholic apologist, the late G. K. Chesterton who wrote his own testimony and titled it, *Orthodoxy*, in spite of the fact that he was undoubtedly an Arminian. If anyone doubts the genuine nature of this man's faith in Christ might I suggest that he read both of the following books? *Orthodoxy* (Harold Shaw Publishers: Wheaton, Illinois, 1994)

and *The Prophet of Orthodoxy* (Fount Paperbacks: Harper Collins, 1997). Chesterton was truly skilled in the art of verbal expression. When discussing the topic of "Minimal errors of reasoning," or in the context of his essay "Correct Opinion," he penned this profound thought: "If a line be not perfectly directed toward a point, it will actually move further away as it moves closer to it."

I also recall that one of the most profound and prolific Anglican thinkers of the early twentieth century, C. S. Lewis, was also at the very least a semi-Pelagian. Who in our day has drawn the attention of the reflective thinker more frequently and consistently than this fine English professor? Many a skeptic has been brought to the foot of the cross through the soundness of Lewis' cerebral and spiritual convictions as presented in *Mere Christianity*.

Finally, who would question the dedication to the cause of Christ and to servanthood of Dr. Billy Graham, in spite of his Finneyite methods? What person in our time has touched the lives and hearts of as many world leaders and dignitaries for Christ as has this man? Who among us has discussed Christ with the likes of Winston Churchill or Dwight David Eisenhower? I had never considered the impact that this twentieth-century evangelist has had until I read his autobiography, *Just as I Am*.

None of these great persons would be considered totally orthodox by the standards set by the Reformed five-point Calvinists of our number. But what do you suppose God thinks of their contributions to his overriding plan and purpose; the winning of the predestined, foreknown elect into his sheepfold?

CONCLUSION

There is within the many surgical subspecialties that which is called orthopedics. That word has somewhat lost its original meaning, which was literally to correct or straighten (*orthos*), the bones or deformities of a child (*paidos*). That specialty initially dealt with the clubbed foot and other congenital twisted skeletal maladies. In straightening out these aber-

rations the orthopedic surgeon routinely applied braces, which, worn at night, gradually brought the bent part back into conformity with the more normal position. This had to be done with great care and patience so as not to inflict pain in the process of correcting the child's deformity. The same reasoning applies to the straightening of teeth with the aide of braces by an orthodontist.

Most Christians in our day do not hold to the orthodox beliefs of the first-century church ala Paul, the fourth-century church ala Augustine or the sixteenth-century church ala Luther and Calvin. Thus we teachers of the Word who are in sympathy with these great reformers have a job to do in "straightening out" the twisted theology of our twenty-first-century brothers and sisters. But like the orthopedist and the orthodontist we must be patient and caring, loving and kind, gentle and respectful when applying the braces of truth or we will inflict great pain and distress; so great a pain that they might even run from the Great Physician who wants to bring total healing to their troubled and misled souls. I know of people who actually avoided the care of a physician for years because of a bad experience that they had in a pediatrician's office as a child. If babes in Christ raised in non-orthodox Christian fellowships are exposed to abrupt methods of correction where their twisted theology is concerned we may lose the chance to realign their disjointed view of Christianity. We should therefore heed the admonition of Peter to do this delicate task of *orthos* with gentleness and respect.

As a reminder to myself to be patient, kind, gentle, and respectful of others in my Bible classes, I have placed the following quotation, which is prudent advice for all who instruct others in the Word of God, in the front fly-leaf of my Bible: "We do not attain heaven by scoring one-hundred percent in theology. If every person who was muddle-headed in one or another area of truth was thereby deprived of heaven, that place would be very confined."

I am not certain of the identity of the author of that sage counsel, but I am certain that he would agree that when it comes to pleasing the ears of God we should be more con-

cerned with *doxology* than with *orthodoxy* and that, "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). We must obey the new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you."

Make no mistake about it—orthodoxy is just as necessary to Christianity as orthopedics is to medicine and orthodontics is to dentistry. But Christian teachers must learn something from the physicians and dentists about the process of straightening the twists so that the corrections will have a beautiful outcome without the infliction of undue pain. *Soli Deo Gloria*

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