

Orthodoxy and Its Future?

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Do orthodox (theologically conservative) Christians understand their times and the battles they face? Does orthodoxy have a future? As I see it, we are in a critical moment in world history where all our beliefs and values are questioned. Our Canadian culture has declined into a secular abyss. Formal religion is kept at a distance: religion, after all, "is a private affair." An empty religiosity coexists with an open contempt for the Christian heritage of the nation. Christian-bashing seems to be one of the few remaining acceptable forms of discrimination in the twenty-first century. There is a growing acceptance of relativism, which denies the existence of absolutes, and the belief that "the only absolute is that there are no absolutes." Individualism and tolerance are elevated as the highest virtues. But the dark side of secularism is abundantly evident – alienation from nature and community, moral anarchy, and corruption in business and politics. Every form of sexual perversion is promoted by the entertainment media. Marriage, raising children, and family life are constantly under attack. Philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, argues that judging by Western society's moral condition, the new Dark Ages are already upon us. He claims that the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontier; they have already been governing us for quite sometime.

Why do orthodox Christians have such scant influence on public policy, the arts, or the universities? Our most important, influential, and culture shaping institutions and professions no longer accept the Bible as their framework of reference. Instead they are relentlessly hastening the secularization process. Yet for all the talk about secularism and materialism, more and more attention seems to be given to spiritual issues. Postmodern people hunger for spirituality that is meaningful and transforming, a hunger largely the result of the extreme dryness of a secular modern culture. "So long as man remains free," wrote Dostoevsky, "he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship."

My questions are: Do we understand our times? How many take a strong and courageous stand against the spirit of this age as it destroys our Christian heritage and ethos that once shaped North America? Perhaps I am overly pessimistic. However, it seems that the besetting sin of orthodoxy is to insist on tackling foes who have already been beaten, and answering questions the postmodernists are not asking. It does not appear particularly adept in presenting the Gospel as a living reality for the present time. Although in Canada the small conservative Reformed denominations make up only a tiny slice of the Canadian population, it seems that unity among the confessional like-minded for the sake of the Great Commission is apparently not achievable.

Does orthodoxy have a future? I firmly believe it has. Why? Because our God is awesome, the creator and sustainer of the universe, which unimaginable size we are only beginning to discover. And the mind-boggling Biblical truth is that God cares. Although we deserve God's wrath, God deals with us in gracious love and invites us to respond in love. When we are reconciled with God through the redeeming work of Christ, we are no longer our own. Jesus bought us with His precious blood so that we belong to Him. He is now our Master/Owner. The knowledge that we are owned forms character, and this ownership challenges all contenders, including the spirit of our age. This is our comfort in life and death, but it also implies a total commitment to Him, a readiness to be whole-heartedly willing and ready to be

guided and ruled by Him, to please Him, to live for Him and to die for Him.

How can we with the help of God preserve orthodoxy? The apostle Paul wrote to young Timothy "hold fast the pattern of sound words" which he taught (2 Tim. 1:8-14). I take this to mean among other things that the Church must teach and maintain the body of doctrine committed to the Church.

1. The Conservative Principle

The weakened condition of the church is due to her departure from the authority of the Bible. The way to recovery is to go back to the norm and the standard found alone in the Scriptures. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out that the masses of the people are outside the Christian church because they have been given the impression that the Christian church herself no longer believes in the Book as authoritative. Do we still have the confidence that the Bible is the Word of the living God revealed from heaven? One of the greatest lessons the Protestant Reformation has to teach us is that the secret of orthodoxy is going back to the Bible. Scripture is our sole authority in all matters of faith and conduct. We must insist upon a belief in the literal truth and historicity of the miracles in Scripture, and accept its teachings with regards to creation while rejecting the theories of evolution. God will honour fidelity to His Word and bless it. But there is more to orthodoxy than defending the authority of the inerrant Scriptures. Defending the Bible has its place. But this is not enough. I agree with what Charles Spurgeon said about this: "You don't defend a lion, you just let him loose." We can make a difference in our society because God has armed us with His written Word, the Sword of the Spirit. "A firm and unyielding presentation of the truth is the need of our time," wrote Harry Blamires, "and that is exactly what is demanded of the Church."

Some preachers today seem convinced they must appeal to people by meeting their "felt needs" rather than by giving them the Word of God which actually meets their needs. Others claim that theology does not matter, that what matters is experience. Consequently, this kind of thinking marginalizes theology in the life of the church. No wonder there is such shocking lack of knowledge concerning the great system of truth revealed in Scripture. The people in the pew get "milk" only and never get to taste the meat of the Word. But doctrine does matter. The clear exposition of doctrine must be a major concern for the Church. There is a dire need for doctrinal clarity! Harry Blamires aptly said, "To turn back on all doctrinal clarity is not only a sin; it is a sin against clarity. For Christian charity itself demands the preservation for posterity of the faith, in all its illuminating richness, which past generations have handed to us."

2. The Prophetic Principle

The conservative principle includes contending for and the proclamation of "the faith that was once and for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). We may not seek controversy, but we cannot always avoid it. Sometimes pastors are told that they must always be positive, don't be controversial, don't offend anyone, focus on the congregation's needs. But the Scriptures tell us that pastors who are always well spoken of by everybody are in a spiritually dangerous position. "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you." They did not speak well of the Old Testament prophets and of our Lord. A Church uncompromisingly committed to God's Word is to exercise her prophetic voice – "to speak the word of the Lord." In the name of her righteous

God she confronts the issues of our time, exercises her voice with action, speaking on behalf of persons who have no voice. She addresses social injustice, a consequence of a greater source of evil – man's rebellion against God. The Gospel is both timeless and timely. My grandchildren may ask me one day, "did anyone protest the spirit of the age? Did anyone protect life from conception to natural death? Were Christian voices heard in defense of the defenseless?" Soul searching questions! Scripture is abundantly clear. We have a prophetic responsibility. We may not be silent.

3. The Samaritan Principle

The prophetic ministry is more than words. The Gospel has practical implications for all of life. The Lord also calls us to engage in hands-on ministry. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, our Lord showed that it is not an option for Christians. We readily speak about loving our neighbour. But love means much more than teaching sexual abstinence to teenagers, it means reaching out to those suffering with HIV and touching them in the same way Jesus touched lepers in His day. We must do more than simply saying that pre-marital sex, abortion, or assisted suicide are wrong; action is called for to meet the social, economic, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs that incline people to such practices in the first place. For example, a Christian-operated hospice to care for the dying and a place of refuge for pregnant women who need to escape the pressure to abort their unborn babies are essentials.

History teaches that the practical application of love was the most potent single cause of the young church's success. The pagan comment, "See how they love one another" was not irony. Christian love expressed itself in care for the poor, for widows and orphans, in visits to fellow believers in prison or condemned to the living death of labour in the mines.

4. The Mission Principle

We accept that the mission of the Church is found in the Great Commission, as Jesus' words to His disciples in Matthew 28: 19-20 are called. We confess that Jesus Christ is the only way to God the Father (John 14:6). We teach the need for spiritual rebirth, faith, and conversion. We believe there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned (cf. Lord's Day 31). One of our favourite hymns is:

I love to tell the story,
'tis pleasant to repeat
what seems, each time I tell it,
more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story,
for some have never heard,
the message of salvation
from God's own holy Word.

If this is so, why are so few orthodox Christians supportive of missions? Do we have a burden for the lost outside of Christ? Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asked in a 1945 radio address: "Who can claim that he feels a burden for lost souls in this country and in foreign countries as our

fathers did? How many of us truly mourn and cry out when we look at the state of the world? Do we think at all about the work of rescuing the world, or do we just satisfy ourselves by 'carrying on the cause' and keeping things going?" The questions Jones raised then can be raised today. Are we concerned for the eternal welfare of everyone around us? Are we filled with concern for family members, friends and co-workers who don't know the Saviour? Are we willing to overlook differences shaped by history rather than Scripture in an effort to engage the world with the Gospel? The apostle Paul said that "we are God's fellow workers" (1 Cor. 3:9). Many times I have been asked whether the small conservative Reformed churches with the same confessions will unite. Humanly speaking, I don't see it happening any time soon or at all. But the Holy Spirit can bring about a revival and a genuine longing to join hands for the sake of the Gospel of the Kingdom. Are we willing to resolve to overcome hostility, resentment or misunderstandings so we can be clear witnesses? Do we take seriously our Lord's prayer for believers, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23)? The orthodox who "love to tell the story" should be much more willing to work together as churches, individuals, and Christian organizations.

5. The Holiness principle

The Gospel has radical life-changing implications. As new creatures in Christ we are defined by Him and His ways, not by our own, nor by our culture's. We are encouraged to count the cost for the sake of Biblical truth, to self-sacrifice joyfully in loving obedience to God even to the point of death. Living orthodoxy is more than holding to true doctrines, it does not stop at that. It has no patience with shallow believism. It puts a great emphasis on the study of the Bible, personal and corporate prayer. It stresses holiness, which is the outworking of Christian love, faith, and obedience toward God. "Holiness," said Richard Baxter (1615-91), "is nothing else but the habitual and predominant devotion and dedication of the soul, and body, and life, and all that we have to God; and esteeming, and loving, and serving, and seeking him, before all the pleasures and prosperity of the flesh." Baxter encouraged the cultivation of the Christian virtues of love, honesty, kindness, and gentleness. "Living and dying," he said, "let it be your care and business to do good."

When orthodoxy seeks recovery of the Gospel of the Kingdom that animated the early Church, it will have a future. The early Christians lived as they preached. Sacrifice rather than self-fulfilment marked their lifestyle. It was their pursuit of holiness, their godly way of life, that made a lasting impression. For example, the uncompromising condemnation of every form of unchastity, and Paul's teaching that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, had their effects in a new attitude towards women, in a recovery of the sanctity of family life, and in the creation of a society based on mutual respect.

Living orthodoxy calls for daily conversion, a term often used by our Reformed forbearers. We are involved in a constant spiritual battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. And all the while we strive for perfection "with all the saints." We cannot fight the battle on our own. We are placed in a community of faith and are responsible for one another. The author of Hebrews says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24f.).

6. The Church as Alternative Principle

The church will make a difference when she holds fast to the Word of God, maintains confessional integrity, obeys the prophetic and mission mandate, puts her faith into practice, and engages our culture with the Gospel of the Kingdom. But are we making a difference in our communities? In *The Church as Alternative Community*, Professor D. J. Bosch charged, "Instead of turning the world upside down, we keep it neatly in position so that nobody might be caught off-balance. Instead of causing people to stare in amazement at the newness and sparkle of our community life, we irritate and bore them. Instead of drawing people to us, we repel them." A provocative and thought provoking statement!

What is the church? The New Testament paints the church as an intimate fellowship of believers with an eternal perspective. The Heidelberg Catechism confesses that the church is "a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith," and as its living members we are to use our gifts "readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members" (Lord's Day 21).

A living church then is a supporting, joyful, hopeful, caring, and nurturing community, where members know each other, and let their elders, deacons, and pastor know when someone is sick or has a special need. It is without class barriers, colour barriers, or economic barriers. It speaks with love about those with whom we differ. Dr. Francis Schaeffer, who had witnessed painful wranglings in churches, warned against unloving confrontations. He said, "Don't just divide into ugly parties. If you do, the world will see an ugliness which will turn it off. Your children will see the ugliness, and you will lose some of your sons and daughters. They will hear such harsh things from lips against men who they know have been your friends that they will turn away from you." Are we ready to join hands to live what we confess about the Church? We have to go against the cultural flow to become a genuine community. So many modern cultural trends are stacked against the formation of a genuine Christian community. To develop a community which practices Biblical principles is very difficult in our hyper-individualist society. It takes a lot of prayer, work, time, sacrifice, and commitment. But in such a community we learn the real meaning of love. Marva Dawn remarked, "In fact, sometimes (perhaps always?) God seems to put us in a community together with people whom we don't like so that we learn the real meaning of agape – that intelligent – purposeful love directed toward another's need which comes first from God and then flows through us to our neighbour."

Conclusion

Does orthodoxy have a future? Yes. Why? Because the church is not ours but the Lord's. The church is not a human institution. She is the bride of Christ. The church is not temporal but eternal. We are not alone in the midst of cultural warfare and doctrinal confusion. Our Lord watches over us. He won't forsake His church, bought with His own precious blood. He will lead her through the battle to victory. "Do not be afraid, little flock," Jesus said, "for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Our God is awesome. He can do mighty wonders, also in church life. But we may not be complacent. May the Lord give the grace to be obedient to His Word without question and to go forward with Him without

hesitation. And let us also plead for forgiveness for the sins committed in church life, claiming the promise that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses the broken hearted from all sin.

O make thy church, dear Saviour
A lamp of burnished gold,
To bear before the nations
Thy true light of old,
O teach thy wand'ring pilgrims
By this dear path to trace,
Till, clouds and darkness ended,
They see thee face to face.

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