



Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

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You Respond

I've appreciated the thoughtful responses I've received from my e-mail letters. I'll be sharing some of them with you in this newsletter. Your comments are welcome, please e-mail us!

president@biblical.edu

Dave,
I believe you are right on the mark about Spiritual Formation. It seems to me the great depth of Christian spiritual practice was acknowledged and honored by the likes of Calvin and Luther, but soon was held in suspicion and then rejected by many Protestants thereafter--especially Calvin's followers and the Anabaptists. Not exactly throwing out the baby with the bathwater (they DID hold onto the Lord!), but maybe throwing out the good water with the bad?

Dave Robinson
St. Matthew's Episcopal
Maple Glen, PA

Hello Dave,
Thanks for the letters on Missional Theology. . . . Imagine my surprise to

The Missional Congregation-Part 3

In recent issues of this journal I began to answer the question, what might a congregation look like that is committed to incarnating the reconciling mission of Jesus? In this and the next edition I want to consider:

Generous-Joyful Orthodoxy

Now the first requirement for this discussion is to check all guns at the door! Otherwise we are going to have trouble with the generous-joyful part, right? Our task is not made any easier by the fact that Brian McLaren used the term "generous orthodoxy" as a title for one of his books, and some people felt it was generous, but not too orthodox. So in reaction they got very orthodox but offered a very *ungenerous* reading of what McLaren was trying to say.

Orthodoxy

Perhaps we should start by discussing "orthodoxy" (right opinion, right belief). It seems like a relatively simple idea until, like many simple ideas, you actually begin to think about it. Orthodoxy suggests a measure, a standard, by which to evaluate our beliefs.

But what is the standard? Is it scripture? Well, yes, but that affirmation needs to be thought about too. The problem is that Christians differ over the interpretation of the Bible. So whose interpretation should prevail in defining the shape of orthodoxy? And at what level of detail? Does orthodoxy require a particular interpretation of baptism, or sanctification, or the millennium, or regeneration? I have two friends who are highly respected conservative, evangelical biblical scholars, for instance, who both claim that Scripture "demands" a particular view of the role of women in ministry. The problem is, these two scholars hold opposite views on this question. Or perhaps the standard of orthodoxy is scripture read through a particular creedal formulation that summarizes the essential truths of the Bible. But here we face the question, which theological tradition gets to define what counts as essential? Baptists, Presbyterian-Reformed, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox, Anabaptist? You get the idea--this is more challenging the further we go.

Without thinking that I can give a precise answer, let me suggest a few ideas that have been personally helpful. First, I like C.S. Lewis's image of

learn that it is really not new after all. It embodies things I have thought and tried to practice for a long time. Also what Paul did with the Athenians. It seems to me that the Lord works slowly in my life and I suspect in many implementation is still going on. Working in a secular environment throughout my lifetime has brought my beliefs into sharp contrast to the general thinking.

Blessings,
Jim Greeley
Former Biblical Seminary
Board Member

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"mere Christianity" as a great hall lined with doors that open into other rooms. The other rooms in his image are the specific confessional communities that make up the mosaic that is the universal church. The hallway comprises those Christian truths that are assumed for entrance into any of the particular side rooms--the Trinitarian nature of God, the incarnation of the Son of God, and the atonement among others. **So orthodoxy is more what unites Christians rather than separates them.**

Another idea that has been helpful to me is the so-called Vincentian canon (formulated by the fifth century theologian Vincent of Lerins) which defines orthodoxy as that which has been believed "*everywhere, always, and by all.*" Historically, of course, one can quibble with this principle, because there is very little that has actually commanded absolute unanimity. But there is an attractive notion here of what Thomas Oden has called "consensual belief"--those teachings that have received the broadest support in the history of the church. He writes: "Orthodoxy itself is nothing more or less than the ancient consensual tradition of Spirit-guided discernment of scripture. . . . There is no way to validate the orthodox tradition, according to its own self-understanding, without constant reference to canonical scripture." *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy* (HarperCollins, 2003), p. 31.

The last suggestion I would make is that a broadly recognized confessional statement like the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed give us a good start at defining what it means to be orthodox. We could have a fruitful discussion on whether all elements in these formulations are essential or whether other points actually need to be added, but their general Trinitarian shape and content are a powerful summary of the faith rooted in scripture and shared by most believers through the centuries.

So in broad brush strokes I think this gives us a basic notion of orthodoxy. **It is a commitment to the faith of the church universal in contrast to the distinctive views of particular theological traditions or the opinions of private persons.** And it is a concern for essential matters as opposed to secondary or peripheral teachings. As such orthodoxy establishes boundaries that protect the people of God from embracing interpretations that would ultimately subvert the gospel.

Thus, as Oden points out, the study of heresy is intimately related to the study of orthodoxy. "Heresy is what orthodoxy is *not*. Reflection on heresy is thus a necessary boundary-making function, indispensable to the worshipping community" (p. 131). Heresy does exist and needs to be identified. But obviously, without a balanced understanding of orthodoxy, we will either find it impossible to define heresy--the problem of liberalism--or we will use it as a label that creates unnecessary division among the people of God--the problem of *combative orthodoxy*.

Combative orthodoxy

Orthodoxy focuses on the broad consensus of truth which unites the people of God. It recognizes that clarity in theological formulation decreases the farther we move from the center of orthodoxy, and that as we do so theological opinions and scriptural interpretations will become increasingly diverse. This is the simple reality of church history--diversity is our heritage, and this is not bad. The fact is, however, that the church

has not done well with diversity. **Rather than recognize the oneness of the body of Christ and our unity with believers who share the common center, we have focused on points of difference.** In conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism we have frequently accentuated these differences far out of proportion to their importance.

If you want an instructive (but depressing) exercise, try googling some of the major names in the evangelical world together with the word "heretic." See how many people get labeled as heretics (including Billy Graham!). Spend a little time in the Christian blog world just to get the flavor of what passes as concern for the truth and spiritual discernment. Here you find nastiness raised to an art form, gossip proclaimed as gospel, and slander masquerading as zeal for God.

John Frame, professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, has traced the pathology of combative Christianity within the conservative Reformed tradition following the death of J. Gresham Machen in 1937. He delineates twenty-one different "family disputes" that surfaced among Machen's theological heirs in the following seven decades. Frame's analysis is that "The Machen movement was born in the controversy over liberal theology. . . . But it is arguable that once the Machenites found themselves in a 'true Presbyterian church' they were unable to moderate their martial impulses. Being in a church without liberals to fight, they turned on one another." (You can read the entire article here: http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2003Machen.htm)

Such infighting is not unique to the Reformed tradition. The "Conservative Resurgence" in the Southern Baptist Convention which began in the late 1970s removed "liberals" and "moderates" from the seminaries and governing bodies of the denomination. Unfortunately peace has not returned to the convention, and labeling and exclusion continue around debates on Calvinism, the role of women in ministry, the legitimacy of "private prayer language," etc. Are Southern Baptists doomed to follow the same pattern as their Presbyterian cousins?

How then is the church to achieve balance? How do we guard against heresy without becoming "heresy-hunters"? How do we "*contend* for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3, NIV) without becoming *contentious*? Think about that until next time when we will continue the discussion of generous-joyful orthodoxy.

