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Review

*ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

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CLASSICAL PROPOSITIONS FOR POP CHURCHES



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In 1972 I was defrocked by a denomination that had very ambivalent feelings about frocking. Apparently, the Southern Baptist Church, which had licensed me to preach, was not enamored of ecumenism, longhaired low-tithers, praying for the sick, or having their dispensationalism questioned. Thus began my journey in search of what I then called, "Serious Christianity."

I took a long and arduous hike through modern evangelicalism where I met believers who had emasculated the gospel, others who had an uncanny resemblance to New Agers, denominations who were proud of having turned the world over to the devil, and movements that seemed to think that the church was for a previous dispensation. To exacerbate this confusion, there was anti-intellectualism, pietism, escapism, and individualism running rampant—so much so that these qualities could easily be referred to as the "defining attributes" of evangelicalism, not simply minor problems of which we should be aware.

I have no intention of being unduly critical. I am immensely grateful for all the deposits of truth I received from the many denominations in which I ministered. I was, however, looking for a place to “fit in,” a “context for living out the truth of Scriptures,” but I did not find it in these places. It was always a case of having “this” but not “that”: and the “that” was something critical.

While studying for my doctorate, I ran across a little book by Thomas Oden, *After Modernity . . . What?* In it he used the descriptive phrase: *Classical Christianity* (also known as Ecumenical Orthodoxy). He was referring to that epoch during the first one thousand years of the church’s history, which saw the penning of the six ecumenical creeds, the development of canon law, and the crafting of liturgies. My heart cried, “Eureka! I have found where I fit, where I believe the church should be headed, a paradigm on which to build.” The problem was that it had ceased to exist centuries ago! Then, lo and behold, it was revived by Calvin . . . but then, alas, murdered by revivalists.

WHERE TO NOW?

My belief was and is that institutional evangelicalism is dead and will not be revived. I am not going to tell you how I think we can turn all this around, because I believe God has other plans. My burden is to find a model from which we can build for the future, a paradigm that is firmly rooted in first things: the nature of God, the worshipping community, and its mission in a pagan world. Such a paradigm can be found in Classical Christianity.

Classical Christianity developed within a hostile, pagan world. It wrestled with those same things we wrestle with now. It dealt with solutions to the problems we are facing. Classical Christianity emphasized communion with the Triune God and incorporation into the new kingdom, the family of God. It was all about big picture stuff: the doctrines and practices needed to establish the church, invigorate her worship, strengthen her unity, and ignite her witness—the

sorts of things with which we must struggle in our present milieu.

The first millennium focused on the nature of God and the community of Christ. It took apostolic teachings and traditions and sought to develop their implications for all of life. It sought to craft a worship service that would point the worshipper to the God of truth, holiness, and beauty, and to the Son whom he sent to redeem the world, thus placing the believer in a place to be filled with God the Holy Spirit. It created programs to care for the poor and the widowed, established church courts to which even the pagans resorted. Accordingly, it transformed nations.

On a very practical level we must face the fact that, whatever it is modern church-ville is doing for its members, they are not increasing in holiness or in evangelistic effectiveness. Furthermore, the evangelical church is not a city set on a hill or a light to the nations but just another nightclub act in suburbia fighting for its share of the market. What can we do to turn this around? What can we do to reform our local churches so that they are God-glorifying, Bible-directed, Christ-exalting and Spirit-empowered communities of servants/disciples? How can we prepare for effective service in the third millennium?

What I offer here is embryonic. I have no illusions about having arrived at a destination. I am, however, certain that I have arrived at a beginning place, a place from which we can move into the future and meet the challenges and opportunities that it will offer the church of Jesus Christ.

1. ORTHODOXY MUST BE THE CENTRAL FOCUS OF OUR MESSAGE

That which unites must take precedence over what distinguishes. This is not to say that other doctrines are not important or should be ignored, only that *what is central must be central*.

We must go back to the ecumenical creeds: the Apostles’, Nicene, Chalcedon, and Athanasian. We must study them and consider their implications for what we believe and how we

worship and live. We must raise the standard of orthodoxy before our people and be certain that first things are first: that what one believes about the Trinity is more important than what they believe about the gift of tongues; that the dual nature of Christ is seen as an infinitely more important doctrine than, say, the name of your personal guardian angel.

Evangelicals are ignorant of apostolic traditions and are, therefore, susceptible to the errors already defeated, or at least exposed, by the church fathers.

A small thing is not a small thing when it leads to something great, and it is no small matter to forsake the ancient tradition of the Church which was upheld by all those who were called before us, whose conduct we should observe, and whose faith we should imitate. —JOHN OF DAMASCUS

2. WE MUST WAR AGAINST HERESY

Doctrinal pluralism must be washed out of our people. Tragically, many do not know the difference between heresy and orthodoxy. The attitude among many Christians seems to be, "Orthodoxy is what I believe; heresy is what is contrary to my beliefs." Today, heresy is actually an inoperative notion in churches that prize the idea of every person doing and believing whatever is right in his or her own eyes.

In a theological battle I had with some followers of Kenneth Copeland, a local pastor of good spirit but questionable training asked me why it was really important whether or not Jesus was born again in hell. What sort of gospel is this man going to offer? How well equipped for battle are those persons whom this man pastors?

Play with the doctrine of the Trinity, and you mess with the foundations of civilization. If you do not believe this, I recommend Rushdoony's *Foundations of Social Order*. Fail to saturate church members in doctrines such as the incarnation and the atonement, and they are left naked and defenseless before error and the sorts of over-emphasis that are threatening the unity of the church.

3. THE CHURCH MUST BE STEEPED IN THE WORD

Theology is important because we must speak to him and witness for him in an appropriate manner.

Our worship services should ~~drip~~ with Scriptures. We should read it, sing it, pray it, and hear it taught, as well as eat it every Sunday. We must become intoxicated on his Word.

You cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read you cannot read too carefully, and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, and what you understand well you cannot teach too well, and what you teach well you cannot live too well. —MARTIN LUTHER

Observe the average Christian's decision-making process (just hear from God), listen to their prayers (halting and shallow), consider whom they quote the most (a spiritual guru or the Bible?). The Word of God must regain a central place in our communities, and this will necessitate a rethinking of the psychologies, the political ideologies, and various market forces that, heretofore, have been central.

What is at the center of modern evangelicalism? Whatever the market dictates: 12-step programs, sermons on how to be successful or how to maintain our comfort zones . . . whatever the pollsters tell us is the sexiest message of the moment. With this orientation, we are failing to be the pillar and support of God's truth. We have replaced the rock of orthodoxy with the jell-o of man's desires and agendas.

4. WE MUST STRESS THAT THE CHURCH IS ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC

There is one Head, so there is one body. She is holy because her Head is holy and because her mission is holy. We are catholic because the church is universal: it includes males and females, all races, and all Christians of all times. The church is apostolic because her roots, her very foundation stones, are the teachings of the apostles.

We are the minority. We are outnumbered, outmaneuvered, and outfinanced. Are we rallying the troops? No. We are isolating ourselves into over 25,000 different denominations. When we approach other Christians, do we begin with where we are in agreement or do we immediately zero in on our differences? What is more critical to us: the teachings of the apostles or the newest wiz-bang revelation to come out of Tulsa or Toronto?

On the mission field, missionaries of all denominational stripes work closely together. There's nothing like persecution, loneliness, and overwhelming opportunity to bring brothers together. I believe we shall be witnessing such circumstances here in Babylon, USA in the not-too-distant future.

Do we have a sense of being a part of the catholic church, *One Body, One Faith, One Lord, One God and Father of us all*? The cry seems to be, "That's not good enough! We must be on the cutting edge; join the church-of-what's-happening-now, be one of God's Green Berets. A part of the holy catholic church? How boring, how nondescript, how average." How biblical.

5. RESTORE THE CHURCH AS WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

Being the house of prayer means more than turning our churches into every individual's private prayer closet, which seems to be a very popular paradigm in evangelical circles. We are to be a worshipping community.

- We are not a revival center
- Not a home group meeting in a sanctuary
- Not a franchise for some 12-step program; and
- Not an arm of the Republican or Democratic Party.

Any of these activities can be good, but they are not to define us.

What is our paradigm for Sunday worship? Where do we go to learn how to craft our worship services? What are the parameters? What can we do and what must we not do in a

"church gathering" (1 Corinthians 11:18)? Is Sunday worship optional? Is worship primarily an act or an experience? What do we see as being central to special worship: the pulpit? The Lord's Table? The altar (prayer)? Or is it the music? Do we realize that "all the above" is the correct answer?

The apostles went to the Old Testament, sifted the practices through New Testament revelation and, voila! New Testament worship. The church (Classical Christianity) took what the apostles passed down and carried out the implications of their instructions. For example, the apostles celebrated Pentecost each year; therefore, the church developed a calendar that would annually take her members through the big events of the Christian faith. As with the Old Testament worship service, so with the New Testament. Certain things must be done or acted upon. We must enter into his gates with thanksgiving, his courts with praise. We must pray for those in authority, for the sick, and so forth. We must eat the covenant meal. Worship services were crafted to see to it that we did not forget to do what we were told to do. After all, as one contemporary theologian has correctly noted, "Worship is not a matter of taste but of obedience."

Jesus gives us two options and only two: *Either we are a house of prayer or a den of thieves*. We are either seeking to give him all glory, or we are—however "innocently"—robbing him of his glory, so that we can enthrone our own agendas.

6. REFRAME THE DOCTRINE OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVER

Old Testament priests always operated in unity with other priests under the direct oversight of God and God's representatives. Individualism must not go unchallenged. We have so emphasized individual accountability—every person's responsibility to hear from God—that each believer sees himself or herself as his or her own magisterium, each deciding what is truth and what is not.

American Christians actually believe that a democratic form of government is biblical—until their opinions are

voted against. They then will begin another in a long series of searches for "more spiritual people," i.e., people who agree with them.

Where is any sense for the necessity of stewarding the deposit of faith delivered once and for all to the church? Where is reverence for what the catholic church has held to for century after century? There is very little appreciation for what the Spirit has been saying for two thousand years and how he led the church. There is no idea concerning the corporate nature of the priesthood and of its responsibility to steward truth, not create it. This anarchy must be reigned in by dealing with the root causes.

What the Reformers were saying to the church of their day was that we believers did not have to go through an ordained priest in order to seek God's blessing. All of us are priests, so we should seek out our fellow priests. The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer does not say, "I need no one but Jesus." What it does say is, "I do not need a magician, a special man—'God's anointed'—to pray for me." All believers are special. The doctrine also stressed the necessity of loving one another, serving one another, and caring for one another. The body of Christ was not summed up in the priest but in all priests.

7. RESTORE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY TO ELDERS

When the writer of Hebrews exhorts believers to "obey those who have the authority over you," he is not simply echoing a concept that passed away with the twelve apostles. Elders have been vested with authority in matters of theology, morality, and the welfare of the communities they oversee. We must stop all the knee-jerk reaction to past abuses and get on with defining, training, and releasing our elders to be elders. People must be inspired toward and instructed in their responsibilities to the church and her officers. The local church is the context of truth where we as Christians live out our confessions of faith. Do we love the family of God? Then it will show up here. Must we "submit one to another"? Such submission will demonstrate itself here in the local community.

If we are going to allow elders to be elders, then we must revive the instruments of church covenants and confessions. Exactly what is it to which we are holding people accountable? What do the elders have to maintain as sound doctrine, or else be relieved of their office? To what are members expected to be faithful? Spell it out. Unwritten commitments and confessions are the breeding ground for manipulation, illegal expectations, and anarchy.

8. THE CHURCH MUST RECOMMIT TO APOSTOLIC COMMISSION

We are to go out and make disciples of all nations. How shall we do this? By reaching individuals with the gospel of Jesus Christ, seeing the Holy Spirit regenerate these individuals, and then training these new converts in the teachings of Jesus Christ. However, we no longer live in a nation that is largely Christianized. In fact, we no longer live in a nation that is even friendly to Christianity. We live in Babylon and must begin to think, live, and evangelize accordingly.

In post-apostolic times, when Christians were the minority and were seen as suspicious characters, they opened the eyes and ears of those they wished to reach via works of mercy: e.g., caring for the poor, the widows, and the orphans, and in providing courts where justice was honored. Confrontational evangelism (in-your-face-evangelism) was practiced, but only by a few. The vast majority acted more like "spies" in the midst of an alien culture. Of course, that is what they were. They loved God, led quiet lives, became the best servants, influenced through integrity, and shared their faith when appropriate.

In the time of the Reformation, people could "hear" the message of Luther and Calvin, because they were, to some degree, a God-fearing people. At least they were inculcated with a form of Christian culture. The Reformation grew out of the milieu of the medieval church. Today, we are no longer "growing out of" anything that is even remotely biblical. We must face this fact, or we will be preaching into a vacuum.

The modern audience is not familiar with concepts of law, justice, or atonement. They are not even familiar with the Bible. When we appeal to them with these ideas they simply stare out into the dark. Look at our audience. Are they searching for justification? Yes, but not in terms with which we are familiar. What they are searching for is to belong, to be connected to a small family, to discover a safe place from the horrors of a disintegrating culture. In other words, they are looking for reconciliation and restoration. They want a father and a family. Our message and methodologies must speak to these real-life situations.

As we reach out to the world, we must cease supporting mission projects that were developed with a mind-set and theology that is foreign to the needs of our times. Why do we still send money to projects that encourage perpetual dependency on American support? Why do we support men and women who are declaring a message that is the antithesis of the one to which we adhere? Why do we support ministries that cannot seem to get it through their heads that Ozzie and Harriet are dead? That crusades, gospel-tract blitzes, and Shakespearean English do not change nations?

9. CREATE COLLEGIUMS OF ELDERS

I realize that some ministers have a support system in place . . . technically speaking. The problem is that most ministers do not have one that works. Seeking to be an authentic, biblically based pastor is one of the hardest, most painful jobs in America today. Such men are in for unbelievable heartache and, therefore, need the counsel, strength, gifts, and wisdom of other like-minded men.

I often use the picture of the Knights of the Round Table to help explain what I am envisioning here. What elders need is a roundtable of like-minded and like-missioned men who give mutual support through the strengths of their gifts and life. Certainly, everyone must be committed to their path, whether or not they have the support of others. However, such isolation is neither ideal nor safe.

Such extra-local elders could help with the screening of ordinands, serve as counsel in time of conflicts, and “be there” to help pastor the pastor. Pastors often find themselves isolated and need to be tied into a larger family of ministers. Whether or not this configuration of men—this roundtable—has ecclesiastical authority over those involved is a question for each association to answer for itself.

10. SCHISM MUST BE AS HATED AS HERESY

He shall also judge those who give rise to schisms, who are destitute of the love of God, and who look to their own special advantage rather than to the unity of the Church; and who for trifling reasons . . . cut in pieces and divide the great and glorious body of Christ, and so far as in them lies, destroy it—men who prate peace while they give rise to war, and do in truth strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.33.7)

Pharisaical self-righteousness, gossip and slander, ministers who disregard the discipline of other churches without grounds for doing so, hyper-reformists who go around ostensibly ripping out tares while in reality destroying wheat and other such wrong-headed people must be marked before our congregations. People must be warned of such behavior. Of course, those who do warn their flocks will be accused of divisiveness. However, we must not be dissuaded by foolish mush heads. The church is not a club; it is the body of Christ. Touch it and you are touching Jesus. Factiousness is no small sin; it fractures the body of Christ.

I believe it is necessary to constantly remind ourselves that there is no such thing as a wheat field without tares. Perfectionism is not a biblical concept. Paul referred to the infamous Corinthians as saints. We must stay away from an overzealous commitment to turning the church into boot camps filled with Green Berets for Jesus.

One of the sins of youthful ministers (I know first hand!) is to think that they can speak the words and change will

occur instantaneously—or at least in their lifetime. This is a dangerous mentality that can frustrate a substantial amount of progress. Jesus did not see a full-blown church in his earthly life. What he did see was his disciples scatter when the going got tough! Paul was executed before he could evaluate the fruit of his labor.

People who seek to bring in utopia or the millennium always end up either practicing some form of tyranny or succumbing to cynicism.

This nation needs to see authentic Christianity—communities of believers that declare and demonstrate: “This is the Way of the Lord.” The church must be disenculturated and take its place as a city set on a hill. We must disentangle ourselves from modern church-o-rama and offer the nation the real thing: *Classical Christianity*.

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