What's Happening to Our Youth? – Christians Should Be Concerned

You've probably heard for some time that the youth from our churches have been having a tough time when they make the transition from high school to adulthood, whether that is to college, the workforce or the military. Josh McDowell addressed this in his latest book, *The Last Christian Generation*, where he documented that research indicates that anywhere from 69 to 94 percent of our youth are leaving the church after high school. And few are returning.

Other organizations suggest the figure is between 55 and 88 percent. Either way, the picture isn't good. Our youth are in trouble and we need a vigorous and coordinated response. Recently I attended a meeting of national youth and college ministry leaders to help forge a response to this growing problem. Hosted by the folks at Youth Transition Network, YTN, (www.youthtransitionnetwork.org) some troubling observations emerged.

Many in our youth culture are living double lives. One life is meant to be invisible at church (they know the right behaviors and speak "Christianese" to pass as good kids). In the other life they follow worldly pursuits in secret, away from parents and church leaders among friends who accept them as they are. This is motivated by what YTN director Jeff Schadt calls a triangle of discouragement (see: www.liveabove.com/NewsReadyText.aspx?thispage=1)

One leg of the triangle is the burdensome sense of guilt over their moral failures coupled with a sense of isolation. They don't feel free to talk with anyone about their guilt. Basically they feel like a spiritual failure.

The second leg of the triangle involves what they feel is a disconnect between a gospel of grace and expectations of perfection from parents and church leaders. They're not smart enough, spiritual enough, attractive enough, etc. They just don't feel like they measure up.

The third leg brings all this together in an overall sense of not feeling trusted, believed in or accepted, warts and all. Thats a pretty nasty triumvirate.

Add to this the fact that 93% of graduating high school seniors can't name even one college ministry. Therefore, they mistrust what they don't know and fail to get connected. Most college freshman also feel unprepared for the level of freedom college affords and are frequently overwhelmed by the level and difficulty of work the university expects.

As Josh McDowell also points out, the majority of our graduating youth don't believe Jesus is the one true Son of God, don't believe Jesus rose from the dead, don't believe in Satan and don't believe the Holy Spirit is real.

I learned a lot at this meeting. What struck me the most was the universal reaction from both high school youth leaders and college ministers. They all admitted that the problem was not new, but that they didn't realize how large and universal it was. One college worker asked Jeff Schadt if any of the 800 students he interviewed said anything about being motivated by love. Without hesitation, he said "No!" This only increased my resolve for Probe Ministries to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. Our week-long Mind Games Conference will continue to prepare high school juniors and seniors for the challenge of college—but with a greater emphasis on the available resources and an even bigger helping of trust, acceptance and love.

Check out these additional resources for more information and help in making this critical transition easier and more

fruitful:

• www.youthtransitionnetwork.org: Official site for Youth Transition Network.

• www.liveabove.com offers resources for youth leaders to help their students make the transition and offers help for students in locating a campus ministry and even a Christian roommate.

• college101seminars.com offers informational programs for churches and secular institutions on helping their students make a profitable transition.

• Conversations CDthis information page introduces a tool designed to help navigate the pitfalls of higher learning, construct a biblical worldview, answer life's toughest questions and make great grades. The well-done sections on making better grades hosted by Dr. Walter Bradley are worth their weight in gold.

• www.boundless.org/college contains links for articles designed to help Christians survive and thrive in college (and beyond). "Ask Theophilus" is particularly helpful.

• TrueU.org is a general site for students of faith.

The Emerging Church

Introduction

The church, both local and universal, is always influenced by the culture in which it resides. As a result, churches in

America have gone through changes that correspond to changes in the American culture. Some of the changes are innocuous and are seen as suitable by almost everyone; air conditioning and indoor plumbing come to mind. Other changes can be more controversial such as musical genre, the use of multimedia, and especially preaching styles and content. The challenge for churches is to determine what changes are acceptable and what changes compromise the message of the gospel.

A growing list of influential thinkers and pastors argue that the postmodern era in which we live mandates a significant change in how believers do church. This movement has come to be known as the *emerging church* and has acquired a considerable following as evidenced both by the number of conferences held on the subject and by the numerous Web sites devoted to the issue. The leaders of this movement have written and spoken at length regarding the necessity for change and have enumerated the types of changes that the church needs to make to survive and thrive in the years to come.

The difficulty for outsiders trying to weigh their arguments begins with trying to define the changes that have occurred in our postmodern culture. Postmodernity is horribly difficult to define. Some see it as a loss of modernity's confidence in science and technology; others see it as something much deeper. One emerging church Web site uses a definition written by an English professor at a major university who writes that "Postmodernism . . . doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense."{1}

Postmodernity is primarily an argument or protest against modernist attitudes and truth claims. The emerging church has picked up this protest by rejecting traditional ideas of authority, certainty, and rationality. Instead its emphasis is on what it calls *authenticity*. Feelings and affections matter

more than logic and reason, one's experience more than propositional truth claims, and inclusion more than exclusion.

Brian McLaren is a leader among those who argue that radical change must come to the church or else our culture will deem it irrelevant. He writes, "Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, [and] untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial-strength version of it is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision."{2}

In this article we will consider what is good, what is not so good, and what is dangerous to the gospel of Christ in this church reform movement known as the emerging church.

What's Good About the Emerging Church?

If the emerging church is anything, it's sensitive to the culture around it. Its leaders are thoughtfully engaged in responding to what they believe are dramatic changes in our society. These changes include the rapid increase in ethnic and religious diversity and the arrival of instant local and global communication. At the same time, Western civilization has experienced a dramatic decrease in biblical literacy.

The leadership of the emerging church argues against those who are tempted to respond to these changes by clinging to a narrowly defined church tradition. They believe that idealizing a past era and allowing nostalgia to replace the hard work of contextualizing Christianity for today's realities would be a mistake. Instead, we should discover how best to communicate the gospel to our increasingly postmodern world. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church,* D. A. Carson writes that "this is far more commendable than a cultural conservatism that acts as if the culture with which we are most comfortable (usually the one in which we grew up) is the only culture acceptable to thinking Christians, and perhaps to God himself."{3}

As I noted earlier, a key emphasis of the emerging church is authenticity. It argues that modernity has brought the church an unnecessary and unhealthy desire for absolute theological certainty which has led to an unbalanced focus on the theological propositions held by believers rather than on living an authentic Christian life. It has also led to a lack of humility regarding the limitations of language to communicate the mysteries of God's person and rule. The drive for theological precision has left the church divided and worn out, unable to offer the world a clear picture of the kingdom of God.

The emerging church is responding to what it perceives to be a lack of authenticity in our worship and Christian life in general. They would agree with Carson who writes, "Sermons are filled with clichés. There is little intensity in confession, little joy in absolution, little delight in the gospel, little passion for the truth, little compassion for others, little humility in our evaluations, [and] little love in our dealings with others."{4}

It has also rightly stressed the importance of community. Modernity offered a picture of human nature that highlighted the heroic individual. However, the Bible begins with a relational Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and sets the New Testament believer within the community of the church including all the "one another" admonitions given by its inspired authors.

The world is watching to see this community in action. As Stanley Grenz writes, "Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships."{5}

Concerns About the Emerging Church

Among the many concerns that have been written about the emerging church, we will focus primarily on just two issues. The first is its one-dimensional portrayal of the modern era, usually seen as the time period between the Enlightenment and the late 1900s, and the other is its teaching regarding what we can confidently know as believers.

Some argue that the emerging church uses an incomplete description of the modern era and its impact on the church to build its case. D. A. Carson writes that the movement's "distortion of modernism extends, in the case of some emerging church thinkers, to a distortion of confessional Christianity under modernism."{6} Emerging church leaders paint a picture of the church in the modern era as having given in to the rationalistic excesses of the times. By doing so, they argue, it is guilty of committing the sin of absolutism, leading to an arrogance that resulted in a cold, emotionless orthodoxy. Drained of any passion, the church in the modern era became a shadow of what it should be. Although there are times where this in fact happened, the modern era is far too complex to reduce it, or the manifestation of the church in it, to such a simple portrayal.

Without going into too many of the names and ideas involved, it must be noted that the modern period has not been a monolith of science and reason. From Rousseau to Nietzsche, many have challenged the mechanistic model presented by Enlightenment thinkers and offered a different view of reality and human nature. These ideas also impacted the church during this so called "modern" era. While many sought a more scientific faith and utilized the new tools of science to justify Christianity, others followed the lead of Søren Kierkegaard towards a more existential Christian life.

In its attack against modernism, the emerging church has condemned confessional Christianity as too abstract and

rationalistic. Carefully constructed theologies, and those who build them, are set against a faith comprised of stories, proverbs, and mystery. Often, it is presented as one or the other, no compromise being possible. But is this necessarily the case? C. S. Lewis is one example of a Christian who defended the faith in formal, rational debates, and yet understood the power of story and the imagination.

The Problem of Knowing

This leads us into the second area of concern regarding the emerging church. How much knowledge about God, the human condition and salvation can we confidently possess? This question is directly tied to our concept of revelation. Do we have revealed propositional truth in Scripture, truth that can be understood and communicated, even cross-culturally, or are we limited to the emotions and relationships that only result from a personal encounter with God?

The most important criticism of the emerging church is its application of postmodern epistemology. Epistemology is the part of philosophy that asks, “How do you know that,” or “How do we know anything at all?”. Some in the emerging church movement have endorsed an extreme version of postmodern epistemology that creates an either/or view of knowledge that can be very manipulative.

First, they set the standard for knowing something to be true unreasonably high. They claim that either we know something exhaustively, even omnisciently as God knows it, or else our partial knowledge can only be personal knowledge, more like an opinion rather than something that can be binding on others as well. Even worse, they argue that we have no means of testing to see how close what we think is true actually corresponds with reality itself. Since few of us would claim to have God’s perspective or knowledge on an issue, they argue that we must admit that everything we claim to know is only a very limited

personal perspective on the truth. In addition, what little we think we know is highly impacted, some say completely constructed, by the social group we participate in as individuals.

What this viewpoint does is make it impossible for anyone to claim that he or she knows something objectively, and that this objective knowledge is true or valid for everyone everywhere. If knowledge can only be personal knowledge, then the phrase "it might be true for you, but not for me" becomes reality for everyone and for every topic.

There are other ways of thinking about what we know that sets the standard for knowing lower and yet maintains the sense of postmodern humility that is attractive to many.

One suggestion is called the "fusion of horizons" model of knowledge. Just like everyone's view of the horizon is slightly different, everyone's understanding of an event or idea is slightly different because it's filtered through a person's experiences and perspective. For example, let's consider the case of a twenty-first century biblically illiterate person trying to understand Paul's message in Romans.{7} At first, there will be little overlap in how she and Paul understand the world. But what if she read the rest of the Bible, learned Greek, attended Bible studies, and read books about the first century Roman culture? Her understanding will never be exactly the same as Paul's, but slowly she will get closer and closer to his world and develop a clearer picture of what Paul was attempting to communicate. She may choose to disagree with Paul, but she will understand him.

If this were not true, it would make little sense when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand." The strong postmodern view of knowledge leaves us little hope that the knowledge of the gospel can be heard and understood.

Summary

Leaders of the emerging church argue that Christianity must focus more on authenticity and relationships and less on propositional truth or it will become irrelevant and ineffective. But is the focus on relationships and authenticity necessarily antithetical to propositional truth? Other church reform movements in America have worked to renew the church's emphasis on building community and authentic worship without sacrificing truth along the way.

The Jesus People U.S.A. attracted a wide following in the 70's because of their emphasis on relationships, commitment to communal living, and the rejection of what they perceived to be an overly materialistic culture. Although the movement included some fringe ideas, it has become part of the evangelical mainstream over the years and given churches another example of how to impact the culture with biblical truth.

Another significant movement, also driven by the need for authenticity and community, is the Fellowship Bible church movement of the '80s and '90s. Gene Getz's 1975 book *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* gave an argument for grounding the activities of local congregations on the functions of the early church rather than on their forms. His thesis is that while the second chapter of Acts clearly communicates the critical functions of the church, the New Testament allows considerable freedom regarding how those functions are carried out. Getz's attempt to discover the purpose of the church through what he calls the threefold lens of Scripture, history, and culture resulted in a movement that has spanned the globe and helped to shift the focus of local worship towards intimacy within small groups and authentic worship. At the time, his use of various audio/visual tools for teaching from the pulpit and meeting in non-traditional facilities seemed quite radical. But his ultimate goal was for

believers to break away from the calcified forms of doing church and to experience the fellowship and community that can be generated when we take all of the "one-another's" of Scripture seriously.

Another important contributor to this discussion was Francis Schaeffer. His book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* asked us to discern the difference between the functions of the church that are listed in Scripture and the forms that are used in different cultural settings. He wrote, "In a rapidly changing age like ours, an age of total upheaval like ours, to make non-absolutes absolute guarantees both isolation and the death of the institutional, organized church."{8} Schaeffer had a huge impact on the baby boomer generation without sacrificing the truth claims of Scripture.

Hopefully, the emerging church will find a place next to these past reform movements as it gathers attention and matures. However, if it continues to de-emphasize sound doctrine, it will find itself to be irrelevant and ineffective.

Notes

1. Mary Klages, "Postmodernism," University of Colorado, www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html.
2. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), xi.
3. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2005), 49.
4. Ibid., 50.
5. Ibid., 169.
6. Ibid., 60.
7. Ibid., 116.
8. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (InterVarsity Press, 1970), 67.

The Council of Nicea

Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims point to the influence of the Emperor Constantine on the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and argue that the secular government of Rome imposed the doctrine of the Trinity on the Christian church. In reality, church leaders were too resilient for such a simple conclusion, and Constantine's role more complex than is often presented.

This article is also available in Spanish.

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."{1} So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to " . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah's Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in

purpose and in some way still one God.{2} Another writes, “The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible.”{3}

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, “Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son” (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church, nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components of Constantine’s pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

Arius

Let’s look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that Alexander's comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah's Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander's.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This

went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, “Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension.”{4} He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, “Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ.”{5}

Emperor Constantine

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine’s relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he “served their God.”{6} It seems that Constantine’s involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, “My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled

uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . .”{7} This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.

Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine’s active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

Athanasius

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230

church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death."{8} He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief ". . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost." {9}

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this might eventually result in a lowering of Christ's oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church

during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.

Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius. Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished

Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, “Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon,” equating his words with the authority of the church councils.{10} Arians in general “tended to favor direct imperial control of the church.”{11}

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn’t agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine’s influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

Notes

1. Grudem, Wayne, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), p. 104.
2. Blomberg, Craig L., & Robinson, Stephen E., *How Wide the Divide,* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 128.
3. Bruce McConkie in *Mormonism 101* by Bill McKeever & Eric Johnson (Baker Books, 2000), p. 52.
4. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 135.
5. Ibid.
6. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church,* p. 118.
7. Noll, Mark, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity,* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 51.

8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid., 57.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 60.

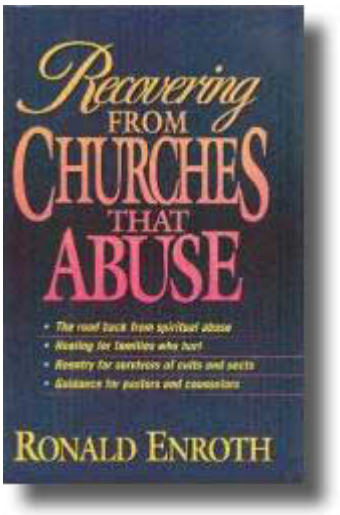
Abusive Churches: Leaving Them Behind – A Biblical Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at positive steps one can take to recover from an abusive church situation. Looking at the problem from a biblical perspective, he considers recovery from abusive churches and abusive leaders. He also looks at how abusive churches can begin the process of changing into an affirming, positive congregation.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Painful Exit Process

In a previous article Abusive Churches, I discussed the characteristics of abusive churches.{1} As a result of the questions and feedback I have received, I felt it might be helpful to share some positive steps to recovery from an abusive church experience.



Leaving an unhealthy church situation can leave some very deep scars. One example of the collateral damage is a very painful exit process. Those who leave an unhealthy church situation suffer isolation, bitterness, embarrassment, grief, and anger. This is coupled with confusion and wondering how God could let this happen. They also chide themselves for getting into such a group and staying in the organization as long as they did.

One man who left an unhealthy situation stated, "I am confused over the emotions I feel. At times, I am glad to have left the organization. I enjoy the new freedoms I have in Christ and relief from the burdens I was carrying for many years. At other times I suffer the pain over the lost years and lost friendships. It's like experiencing a death in the family." The Ryans, who left an abusive situation, state, "Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who you are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God."{2}

Since so much of their identity was based on their status and relationships in the church, many exiting members have difficulty readjusting to daily life in society. Many suffer from what sociologists label "role exit." Their purpose was so connected to the church that many suffer from the anxiety of not knowing where they fit in or what their future will be. They are in a "vacuum." In severe cases, former members were so dependent on the church that they even had to relearn daily tasks like opening and managing their own bank accounts.

Many end up forsaking the church or religion. One ex-member wrote, "I know that when people finally decide on their own to leave, they are so beaten down and confused that they don't know what is true to hold on to versus what is false to discard. Many quit seeking God and give up on the church all

together."{3}

In his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth states that victims of church abuse suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.{4} Many are unable to trust anyone—including God—which complicates the process, since developing healthy relationships is essential to the recovery process.

Although exiting is difficult, recovery is not impossible. There is hope! Keep in mind the healing process is not the same for each person. For some, healing may take years; for others it may happen in a few months. Some will be able to recover through the help of a mature Christian community while others may need professional Christian counseling.

Discerning Good from Abusive

How do we discern a healthy church from an abusive church? Unfortunately, abusive churches can exist in evangelical and mainline denominations. They are not just fringe churches on the outer circle of evangelicalism. Churches that can be labeled "spiritually abusive" range from mildly abusive—churches with sporadic abusive practices—to the severe cases of being manipulative and controlling. Here are some questions that can help show if you are in an unhealthy situation.

First, does the leadership invite dialogue, advice, evaluation, and questions from outside its immediate circle? Authoritarian pastors are threatened by any diverse opinions whether from inside or outside the group. Group members are discouraged from asking hard questions. The rule is, don't ask questions and don't make waves. A healthy pastor welcomes even tough questions, whereas in an unhealthy church disagreement with the pastor is considered disloyalty and is virtually equal to disobeying God. Spiritual language is used to

disguise the manipulation that is going on. Questioners are labeled rebellious, insubordinate, and disruptive to the harmony of the body. Attempts are made to shut them down. The only way to succeed is to go along with the agenda, support the leaders, scorn those who disagree.

Second, is there a system of accountability or does the pastor keep full control? Authoritarian pastors do not desire a system of accountability. They may have a board but it consists of yes-men whom he ultimately selects.

Third, does a member's personality generally become stronger, happier, and more confident as a result of being with the group? The use of guilt, fear, and intimidation is likely to produce members with low self-esteem. Many are beaten down by legalism, while assertiveness is a sign that one is not teachable and therefore not spiritual.

Fourth, are family commitments strengthened? Church obligations are valued more than family ones. Although many may verbally acknowledge the family as a priority, in practice they do not act like it. My colleagues at Probe, Don and Deanne, know of a mother who needed to gain special permission from her church to attend her son's wedding because it conflicted with a church event. The church made her feel guilty because she was choosing family over God. In another case, I know of women who missed their son and daughter's prom night to attend a church meeting which was held twenty minutes from their homes. The mindset is loyalty to God means loyalty to his church. One's spiritual quality is determined by one's allegiance to the church.

Fifth, does the group encourage independent thinking, developing discernment skills, and creation of new ideas? Abusive churches resort to using pressure to have followers conform, and there is a low tolerance for any kind of difference in belief (of a non-essential nature) and behavior. There is a legalistic emphasis on keeping the rules, and a

need to stay within set boundaries. Unity is defined as conformity. These leaders evaluate all forms of Christian spirituality according to their own prescribed system.

Sixth, is the group preoccupied with maintaining a good public image that does not match the inner circle experience?

Seventh, does the leadership encourage members to foster relations and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving? Abusive churches thrive on tactics that create total dependence on the church while protecting and isolating themselves from the "sinful" world.

Finally, is there a high rate of burnout among the members? In order to gain approval or prove you are a "true disciple," abusive churches require levels of service that are very taxing.

If these are character traits of the group you are attending, you may be in an abusive church and should consider leaving the organization.

Profile of an Abusive Leader

Philip Keller gave us a stern warning in his book, *Predators in Our Pulpits*: "The greatest threat to the church today is not from without but from our own leadership within."{5} Often an abusive church is built around the leader who practices some unhealthy forms of shepherding. Many such leaders come from churches that were abusive or have an unmet need for significance. Many may have begun with noble intentions, but their unresolved personal issues cause them to become dependent on their ministry to meet their needs. In his book, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Ken Blue does an outstanding job identifying unhealthy leadership. Here are a few characteristics of an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders use their position to demand loyalty and submission. Ken Blue states, "I have heard many pastors say to

their congregations, 'Because I am the pastor, you must follow me.' Their demand was not based on truth or the God-directedness of their leadership but on their title. That is a false basis of authority . . . any appeal to authority based on position, title, degree or office is false. The only authority God recognizes and to which we should submit to is truth." {6} Other leaders use titles such as "God's man" or "the Lord's anointed" so that others will treat them with special reverence and keep themselves above accountability that others in the congregation are held to. "If by appealing to position, unique claims or special anointings, leaders succeed in creating a hierarchy in the church, they can more easily control those beneath them. They can also defend themselves against any who might challenge them."{7}

One of the lessons from the Bible is that all men and women are fallible. Therefore, all people, especially leaders, need some form of accountability. Although pastors are called to lead their congregations, they are under the authority of God's Word. When they act in a manner contrary to Scripture they need to be confronted, and improper behavior needs to be corrected. In 2 Samuel 22, the prophet Nathan confronted King David about his sin. In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter, the leader of the Apostles, for not acting in line with the truth. "Paul declared by this action that the truth always outranks position or title in the church. Truth and its authority are not rooted in personality or office. It is derived from the word of God and the truth it proclaims."{8} Blue continues: "Paul taught that the body of Christ is a nonhierarchical living organism."{9}

Instead of feeding and caring for the flock, these pastors feed off the flock and use them to meet their needs for significance. Ken Blue gives an example of a "pastor whose church has not grown numerically in twelve years. Frustrated by his manifest lack of success, he turned to the congregation to meet his need. He has laid on them a building program in

hopes that a new, larger, more attractive facility will draw more people. The congregation has split over this issue. Many have left the church, and those who remain are saddled with the debt."{10}

I know of other pastors who have chastised their staff and congregation when they did not show up at a church function. Many members were busy with family commitments, work, and needed personal time for rest, but were pressured to attend the numerous church events. These leaders saw their success in the numbers that attended their functions and needed their turnout to satisfy their sense of worth.

True spiritual leaders are defined by Christ's example. "Whoever wants to be great among you must become the servant of all" (Matt. 20:26). Christ-like leadership is servanthood.

True leaders gain the loyalty of the sheep because of the quality of their character and their attitude of servanthood. The members freely submit to Christ-like leadership and do not have to be coerced to follow. Good shepherds lighten the load of the sheep while false leaders add to the load on the sheep.

Should you find yourself in such a situation, the first thing to do is pray for the leader. Second, in a loving and graceful way confront the leader, addressing what you see as unhealthy practices in his leadership. It may take a while for your words to sink in, so be patient. However, as in many cases, the leader may get defensive and reject your advice and in turn make accusations against you. In such cases realize you were obedient to God, and now you must let the Lord work on the leader's heart. James 3:1, Ezekiel 34, and other passages bring stern warnings that God will judge shepherds who use the sheep to fulfill their needs and not shepherd God's flock as a steward. It is best to leave the situation and let God deal in His way with the leader and his organization.

The Road to Recovery

As we discussed earlier, exiting an abusive or unhealthy church situation is a very painful process, but recovery and healing is possible. Dr. Ronald Enroth in his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse,* and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith,* provide some very helpful steps to recovery.

When you realize you are in an authoritarian church, it is best to leave and make a complete break. Many members remain, thinking their presence will help change the situation, but this is highly unlikely. In fact, remaining may perpetuate the existence of the organization.

Acknowledge that abuse has taken place. Denying this will only stall the recovery.

Next, develop relationships with mature Christians who will listen to your story and support you in the healing process. In a safe and supporting environment you will be able to share your feelings, experiences, hopes, and struggles. Although it may be difficult, understand that recovery rarely happens in isolation. You must learn to trust again, even if it is in small, tentative stages.

Expect to wrestle with some difficult emotions. Recognize that you will go through a grieving process-grief for lost years, lost friends, and the loss of innocence. You may also feel guilt, shame, and fear. It is natural to feel foolish and experience self-doubt. These are actually healthy emotions that should not be bottled up inside. Regret over poor decisions is a sign of growth, and you will eventually leave those emotions behind. Therefore, it is crucial to find people who will be supportive and help you address hard feelings. For some people, professional Christian counseling is necessary. Seek out a counselor who understands the dynamics of abusive systems and can provide the care and warmth needed.

Renew your walk with God again. Admit that you acquired a distorted picture of Him, and focus on regaining the proper biblical understanding of His attributes and character. Don't give up on the true church despite its imperfections. In fact, I encourage you to visit numerous healthy churches. It is refreshing to see how diverse the body of Christ is, and that there are many different ways to express our love and commitment to Christ.

Then, relax! Enjoy your new-found freedoms. Take time for physical recreation, art, music, and just plain fun. After leaving, ex-members may feel guilty for not serving God in a church but this is incorrect. The Lord knows that we need time to grieve, reflect, and heal from our loss.

Finally, remember forgiveness is crucial to recovery. Forgiveness is often more for the benefit of the one giving it than for the one receiving it. Healing takes time, so be patient with the process you are going through.

Becoming Stronger Through the Experience

Although exiting an abusive church can leave us scarred mentally and emotionally, there is hope for recovery and wholeness. In fact, this fiery process can strengthen our faith and understanding of God and what it means to walk with Him. Here is some counsel that may help you overcome the past experience of spiritual abuse.

One of the ways we can grow from this experience has to do with a proper understanding of God's character. While in an authoritarian organization, our view of God becomes distorted. God becomes viewed as one who loves us because of what we are doing for Him. Anytime we miss a Bible study or fail to win converts, God somehow becomes displeased and we must work harder to regain His approval.

In contrast to this false image, 1 John 4:8 states that "God

is love.” In other words, God accepts us unconditionally. He only asks that we receive the gift of grace He has provided for us, His Son Jesus Christ. Once we receive His Son, our acceptance is never based on our works but on our position as His sons and daughters. For many who have lived under a false image of God, coming to grips with God’s grace and love can be a renewing experience.

Related to this is the addiction to church activities. Many equate business at church with spiritual maturity. However, this business actually keeps us from dealing with the pain and real issues in our lives. Our addiction to religious activity becomes a barrier to an authentic relationship with God.

Another valuable lesson to learn is that our identity is in Christ, not the organization or relationships in the group. Many of us find our significance in our ministry, our church status, the dependence others have on us, or the respect we gain from others we minister to. Once these are taken away, we feel empty, even without purpose. This is an opportune time to realize that our value and self-worth is secure because of our relationship with Christ. This helps us become more dependent on Christ and less on others.

Finally, the Bible teaches that God can bring good out of a bad situation. Romans 8:28 states that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This promise applies even for those who have been spiritually abused. Through the pain and healing process, God can mold us to become more like Him. In Genesis 50, despite all the evil that Joseph’s brothers did to him, he is able to say in the end, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” If we draw closer to God in our time of need, we can be healed and overcome our painful past.

Can Abusive Churches Change?

Those who find themselves in authoritarian churches often remain despite the difficulties because there is an underlying hope that the church can change. Even after they leave they often remain keenly interested in the affairs of the former church because they hope restoration will still occur.

Can abusive churches change? Although with God all things are possible, it is my opinion that it is highly unlikely that this will happen. Although a few have, they are the exceptions.

Why is change in these organizations so difficult? One reason is that change usually begins in the leadership. However, the leadership structure is designed so that the leader has control over the personnel. Although there may be a board, the individuals on the board are ultimately selected by the authoritarian leader. He selects men and women loyal to him, who do not question him, or hold him accountable. Therefore, he insulates himself from dealing with difficult issues or addressing his unhealthy practices.

Dysfunctional leaders also resist change because it is an admission of failure. In order for a genuine change of heart, leaders must first acknowledge a problem and repent. However, a leader who considers himself "God's man" or the spokesman for God will rarely humble himself to confess his shortcomings. Spiritual wholeness and renewal cannot be achieved until unhealthy behavior is recognized and dealt with. Unless this behavior is confronted, the likelihood of real change is diminished.{11}

In most cases, the leadership focuses the blame on others. Those who left the church were not committed, were church hoppers, etc. Stephen Arterburn writes, "Anyone who rebels against the system must be personally attacked so people will think the problem is with the person, not the system."{12} It

is often useless to point out flaws because an abusive church lives in a world of denial. Many of the leaders are themselves deceived. Although sincere in their efforts, they may have no idea their leadership style is unhealthy and harmful. They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers.{13} These leaders often twist Scripture to justify their unhealthy behavior. Most members will go along with this because they assume their pastors know the Bible better than they do.

Lastly, authoritarian churches make every effort to ensure that a good name and image is preserved. Therefore, the leadership often functions in secrecy. Disagreeing members are threatened and told to remain silent or are quietly dismissed.

For these reasons, it is my opinion that it is best to leave an abusive or unhealthy church. Learn to let go and let God deal with that group. Only He can bring people to repentance. Although painful, leaving an unhealthy church and joining a healthy body of believers will begin the healing process and open new doors of fellowship, worship, and service for you.

Notes

1. Pat Zukeran, "Abusive Churches," 1993, Probe Ministries.
2. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse,* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15..
3. Ronald Enroth, *Recovering From Churches that Abuse,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 26.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Philip Keller, *Predators in our Pulpits,* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1988), 12..
6. Blue, 27-28.
7. Ibid., 29.
8. Ibid., 30.
9. Ibid., 34.
10. Ibid., 65.

11. Enroth, 152.
12. Arteburn, Stephen. *Toxic Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson Publishing, 1991), 260.
13. Blue, 13-14.

The Council of Nicea and the Doctrine of the Trinity

Don Closson argues that Constantine did not impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church, demonstrating the actual role of church leaders and Constantine.

This article is also available in Spanish.

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."{1} So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to " . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah's Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past

with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in purpose and in some way still one God.{2} Another writes, "The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible."{3}

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, "Say not 'Trinity': desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son" (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church, nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components of Constantine's pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

Arius

Let’s look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that Alexander’s comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah’s Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander’s.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different

understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, "Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension."{4} He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, "Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ."{5}

Emperor Constantine

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine's relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he "served their God."{6} It seems that Constantine's involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of

doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, “My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . .”{7} This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.

Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine’s active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

Athanasius

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230 church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death."{8} He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief ". . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost." {9}

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this might eventually result in a lowering of Christ's oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also

removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.

Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius. Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, "Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon," equating his words with the authority of the church councils.{10} Arians in general "tended to favor direct imperial control of the church."{11}

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn't agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine's influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

Notes

1. Grudem, Wayne, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), p. 104.
2. Blomberg, Craig L., & Robinson, Stephen E., *How Wide the Divide,* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 128.
3. Bruce McConkie in *Mormonism 101* by Bill McKeever & Eric Johnson (Baker Books, 2000), p. 52.
4. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 135.
5. Ibid.
6. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church,*

p. 118.
7. Noll, Mark, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity,* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 51.
8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid., 57.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 60.

Eastern Orthodoxy

Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

In a previous article I spoke of the conversation now going on between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics prompted by the culture war. A third tradition is participating in such talks as well, namely, the Eastern Orthodox Church. For many if not most of us, Eastern Orthodoxy is a real mystery. Images of bearded priests and candles, and the sounds of chanting come to mind. They are so far removed from us, it seems. Are we really part of the same church? Such a question would be absolutely preposterous to them, of course, for Orthodox are fond of pointing out that they stand closer to the ancient church than do Catholics or Protestants.

In this article I'd like to introduce you to the Eastern Orthodox Church. I will simply present some of Orthodoxy's history and beliefs as an introduction without offering any critique.{1}

History

Orthodox Christians trace their lineage back to the apostolic church. The apostles, of course, founded only one church. Since the founding of the church there have been three significant divisions. The first occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries when what are known as the Oriental Orthodox churches split off over theological issues. These include the churches in Iran and Iraq, sometimes called the “Nestorian” or “Chaldean” churches. Also included were the Syrian Church of Antioch and the Coptic Church of Egypt. The churches that were left comprise what we know of as the Eastern Orthodox Church. These are the churches that remain in communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.{2}

The next division, typically dated in the eleventh century, was between the Eastern Church and the Western or Roman Catholic Church. Rome was one of the five main centers, or *sees*, of the Church. Although it was the most important of the five, it was different from the others. For example, the Western Church based in Rome used Latin, whereas the Eastern Church used the languages of the people. Rome had more of a legal mindset in its theology, whereas the East was more mystical. In addition, various cultural and political issues set it apart. The barbarian invasions of the fifth century and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire in the West further separated the West from the East.

Such things as these set the stage for division. Two major issues brought it to a head. One was the power of the pope in Rome. The bishops of the Church had long been seen as generally equal; all the bishops had a vote in decisions affecting the whole Church. However, a few wielded more influence than others. The Roman See was at the top. Thus, the pope was considered the first among equals among the bishops of the Orthodox world. However, some of the popes came to desire universal supremacy. For example, Pope Nicholas wrote

in 865 that he had authority “over all the earth, that is, over *every* Church.”{3}

The other theological problem was that of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father. Does He proceed from the Father only or both the Father and the Son? The Nicene Creed originally said that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” A clause was added later by the Church in the West, without the agreement of the other bishops, to make it read, “proceeds from the Father *and from the Son*.” Later I’ll look at this a little more closely. For now we should note the importance of the clause for the unity of the Church.

The clause seems to have originated in Spain and was accepted by Charlemagne as part of the Creed. The seriousness of the matter can be seen in the antagonism it produced between East and West. For example, when the Greeks wouldn’t include the phrase, writers in Charlemagne’s court began accusing them of heresy. For another, in 867, Pope Nicholas’ backing of the inclusion of the *Filioque* clause in opposition to the rest of the Church brought about his excommunication by Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, although communion was later restored.

The East resented its inclusion for two reasons. First, this act revealed the extent of power the Pope was trying to claim in allowing the addition on his own authority. Second, it was thought to be incorrect theologically. (I will return to these later.)

In the eleventh century relations between the East and the West worsened severely. Rome gained new power politically in the West, reviving the belief that it had universal jurisdiction. The Normans gained power in Italy and forced the Greeks there to conform to Latin methods of worship. In retaliation, the patriarch of Constantinople forced the Latin churches there to adopt Greek practices. After a few more events further heightened tensions, on July 16, 1054 some

legates of the pope laid a Bull of Excommunication on the altar of the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. This is the date commonly given for the great schism between the East and the West. It was a landmark occasion, but the end didn't finally come in fact until the early thirteenth century following a few tragic events in the Crusades. Now there was the Roman Church and the Eastern Church, the one headed by the pope, the other headed by the patriarch of Constantinople.

The Godhead

Space does not permit a full description of the theology of the Orthodox Church. Let's touch briefly on its doctrine of God.

The Trinity

The Holy Trinity is of supreme importance in Orthodox theology and life. It "is not a piece of 'high theology' reserved for the professional scholar, but something that has a living, *practical* importance for every Christian." Because we're made in the image of God, we can't understand ourselves if we don't understand this doctrine. God's triune nature also makes clear that He is personal—that He experiences personal communion within the Godhead, and thus can commune with us as well.

The Father

Below I'll speak further about the role of the Father in the Trinity. Here I'll just touch on the Orthodox understanding of the knowability of God. Orthodox believe that God is unknowable to us in His essence for He is so much higher than we are: He is absolutely transcendent. For that reason we can only employ negative language when speaking of Him: we can say what He is *not* in His being, but not what He *is.*

However, God is not cut off from His creation. While God's *essence* is the core of His being and cannot be known, His *energies*, which permeate creation, enable us to experience Him. His energies "are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind."{4}

The Incarnate Son

The whole of the sacramental theology of Orthodoxy is grounded in the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation is so significant that Orthodox believe it would have occurred even if Adam and Eve hadn't fallen into sin. It was an act of love—God sending His Son to commune with us. Because of sin, however, it also became an act of salvation.

Orthodoxy seeks to give proper weight to both Christ's deity and His humanity. One must recall the weight given to the Nicene Creed and its clear declaration of both natures. He is "true God and true man, one person in two natures, without separation and without confusion: a single person, but endowed with two wills and two energies." The divinity of Christ is of utmost importance to Orthodox. "'Behind the veil of Christ's flesh, Christians behold the Triune God' . . . perhaps the most striking feature in the Orthodox approach to the Incarnate Christ [is] an overwhelming sense of His *divine glory.*"{5} He is the face of God for us. This revelation was seen most strikingly in the Transfiguration and the Resurrection.{6} On the other hand, the places where He lived and ministered and the Cross upon which He died are pointers to His humanity, and they are revered highly.

The Holy Spirit

The importance of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church can

hardly be overstated. They believe, in fact, that it is one thing that sets the Eastern Church apart from the Western. Whereas the Western Church put greater emphasis on the power of theological understanding, Orthodox depend more on the activity of the Spirit. St. Seraphim of Sarov said that such things as prayer and fasting and other Christian practices are not the aim of the Christian life. "The true aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God."{7} In the corporate setting, the Spirit is invoked repeatedly in Church worship. On the individual level, believers place themselves under His protection each morning in their prayers.

Earlier I talked about the split in the Church in the eleventh century. One of the key issues was the clause the Western Church added to the Nicene Creed, which said that the Spirit was sent by the Father *and by the Son*. This was called the *Filioque* clause. The Eastern Church rejected this addition because it was inserted without the support of the universal Church and because it was seen as incorrect theologically. For Orthodox theologians, the clause confused the roles of the Father and the Son in the economy of the Trinity. "The distinctive characteristic of the first person of the Trinity is Fatherhood," says Timothy Ware. "He is the source in the Trinity. The distinctive character of the second person is Sonship; . . . [He] has His source and origin in the Father, . . . The distinctive character of the third person is Procession: like the Son, He has His source and origin in the Father; but His relationship to the Father is different from that of the Son, since He is not begotten but from all eternity He *proceeds* from the Father."{8} To the Orthodox, then, to say the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the *Son* is to give those two persons the same function. They point out, too, the scriptural teaching that "the Spirit of truth . . . proceeds from the Father." (Jn. 15:26)

Furthermore, the clause seemed to imply a subordination of the

Spirit to the Son, which could result in a diminution of the Spirit in the Church. But the ministry of the Spirit and the Son are "complementary and reciprocal." "From one point of view," says Ware, "the whole 'aim' of the Incarnation is the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost."{9}

The Church in Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that true belief and worship are maintained by the Orthodox Church. "Orthodoxy claims to be universal—not something exotic and oriental, but simply Christianity," says Orthodox bishop Timothy Ware.{10} They believe that Orthodoxy has maintained the teachings of the apostles and the early Church faithfully through the centuries.

Three Defining Characteristics

Something one notices soon after beginning an investigation of the Orthodox Church is its attempt to let its theology inform its practice in life and in worship.

The Orthodox Church can be described generally under three headings: Trinitarian, Christological, and Pneumatological. Regarding the *Trinity*, beyond simply holding it as a correct understanding of God, the Church attempts to emulate the Trinity in its practices. As the Trinity is both one and many, the Church is thought of as both one and many—unity in diversity. This applies to both individuals and to local churches all taken together. Orthodoxy is made up of a number of independent *autocephalous* churches, as they are called. "Just as in the Trinity the three persons are equal," says Ware, "so in the Church no one bishop can claim to wield absolute power over all the rest; yet, just as in the Trinity the Father enjoys pre-eminence as source and fountainhead of the deity, so within the Church the Pope is 'first among

equals'."{11}

Further, the Orthodox Church is *Christological.* It sees itself as "the extension of the Incarnation, the place where the Incarnation perpetuates itself." It is "the centre and organ of Christ's redeeming work . . . it is nothing else than the continuation and extension of His prophetic, priestly, and kingly power . . . The Church is Christ with us."{12}

Finally, the Church is *Pneumatological*. It is the dwelling place of the Spirit. The Spirit is the source of power in the Church. In addition, He both unites the Church and ensures our diversity. We are separately given the Spirit, but so that we might come together. "Life in the Church does not mean the ironing out of human variety, nor the imposition of a rigid and uniform pattern upon all alike, but the exact opposite. The saints, so far from displaying a drab monotony, have developed the most vivid and distinctive personalities."{13}

Authority in the Church

The Orthodox Church is at once popular and hierarchical. It is popular in the sense that the focus is on the people, and authority resides in the Church, which is the people of God. However, the Church is represented in its leadership, and here one finds a strong hierarchy. Major decisions are made by the bishops with a special place of honor going to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. "Where Rome thinks in terms of the supremacy and the universal jurisdiction of the Pope," says Ware, "Orthodoxy thinks in terms of the five Patriarchs and of the Ecumenical Councils."{14}

While the decisions of bishops are binding in general, it is understood that they aren't infallible. The Church is infallible, but its bishops aren't. As Paul said, the *church* is "the pillar and ground of the truth." (I Tim. 3:15)

For the Orthodox, the Church is the bearer and guardian of truth, which is passed on through *Tradition*. Included in Church Tradition are the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the early centuries, and the writings of the Fathers, the Canons or laws, the Icons—"in fact," says Timothy Ware, "the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages."{15} The Bible forms a *part* of this Tradition; it is seen as a product *of* the Church and derives its authority *from* the Church. "Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, to the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils."{16} As another writer says, "It is neither subordinate nor superior to tradition, not can there be any contradictions between them."{17}

When challenges were made to what had been taught by the Church from the beginning, answers were provided by various councils through the early centuries. The most important was the Council of Nicaea. Thus the Nicene Creed has preeminence, although the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creeds are also used. At these councils important doctrines of the faith were hammered out. Nicaea, for example, dealt with the person of Christ. Was He God or man or both? If both, how did the two natures relate in one person? The determinations of the councils, which were universally accepted, became authoritative for the Church.

The Church Fathers also provided authoritative teaching about Christian doctrine. Sometimes, however, they were in error. It became necessary, then, for the church to distinguish "patristic wheat . . . from patristic chaff."{18}

The Worship of the Church

A close look at the Orthodox Church reveals quickly the

importance of the Church as a whole, as the functioning body of Christ. The priority of the Church in Orthodoxy—not the so-called "invisible" or universal Church, but the visible worshipping community—might seem a bit odd to evangelicals. In evangelicalism the emphasis is more upon the individual's relationship to Christ, whereas in Orthodoxy, the Christian life revolves around the Church as the locus of the ministry of Christ and the Spirit.

The Church is thought of as a reflection of heaven on earth. This belief underlies the elaborate nature of the worship experience. This reflection is seen first of all through *beauty*. A peculiar gift of the Orthodox, it is said, "is this power of perceiving the beauty of the spiritual world, and expressing that celestial beauty in their worship."{19}

The worship service has supreme importance in Orthodoxy; it is more important than doctrine and the disciplines of the Christian life. "Orthodoxy sees human beings above all else as liturgical creatures who are most truly themselves when they glorify God, and who find their perfection and self-fulfillment in worship." The liturgy is the contents of the worship service including the readings, actions, music, and all else involved. Says Timothy Ware: "Into the Holy Liturgy which expresses their faith, the Orthodox peoples have poured their whole religious experience." It is what inspires "their best poetry, art, and music."{20} Further, the liturgy of worship attempts to embrace both worlds—heaven and earth. There is "one altar, one sacrifice, one presence" in both. It is in the Church that God dwells among humans.

Orthodoxy is thoroughly sacramental. Holding that God has graced the physical world through the Incarnation of Christ, Orthodox see the whole of the created order as somehow graced by God and usable for revealing Himself. For the life of the Church there are special sacraments that are channels of God's grace. Through particular physical means, such as through the elements of Communion or the water of Baptism, God extends His

grace in a special way. The sacraments are “effectual signs of grace, ritual acts which both express and bring about a spiritual reality. Just as in the Incarnation the eternal Word of God was united with human nature in Jesus Christ, so in the sacraments spiritual gifts are communicated through tangible realities.”{21}

The Liturgy of worship reaches its highest point in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist creates the unity of the Church; it is “a Eucharistic society, which only realizes its true nature when it celebrates the Supper of the Lord, receiving His Body and Blood in the sacrament.”{22} “It is no coincidence,” says Ware, “that the term ‘Body of Christ’ should mean both the Church and the sacrament.” Where the Eucharist is, the Church is.{23}

There are other sacraments, too, in Orthodoxy, such as baptism, Chrismation (their equivalent roughly of Confirmation), Confession, and marriage. Customarily seven sacraments are listed, although there is no final word on the number. They aren’t all equal in importance; some are more significant than others, Baptism and the Eucharist being the most important. But all serve to convey the grace of Christ to His Church.

The Orthodox concept of the Church is extremely rich. There are aspects of their worship that many Evangelicals would find odd or uncomfortable (such as standing throughout the service) or even objectionable. But the attempt to bring the fullness of the kingdom into the worship service creates a rich and meaningful experience for the participants. Orthodoxy is unabashedly mystical. The worship service works to bring believers closer to a kind of mystical union with God. Here, the believer is to experience the presence of God and through it to eventually partake of the nature of God.

Icons and Deification

Let's look at two beliefs of the Orthodox Church that are quite unusual to evangelicals.

I've already noted the importance of the Incarnation for the sacramental view of Christianity and of the world. It is also important for understanding the Orthodox use of icons. An icon, Timothy Ware tells us, "is not simply a religious picture designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the beholder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to us. Through icons the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world."{24} The use of icons reveals their view of matter, the created order. "God took a material body," says Ware, "thereby proving that matter can be redeemed. . . . God has 'deified' matter, making it 'spirit- bearing'; and if flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then– though in a different way–can wood and paint. The Orthodox doctrine of icons is bound up with the Orthodox belief that the whole of God's creation, material as well as spiritual, is to be redeemed and glorified."{25} Ware says that Nicolas Zernov's comments about the Russian Orthodox view of icons is true for Orthodoxy in general:

> *They were dynamic manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art. The colours and lines of the [icons] were not meant to imitate nature; the artists aimed at demonstrating that men, animals, and plants, and the whole cosmos, could be rescued from their present state of degradation and restored to their proper 'Image.' The [icons] were pledges of the coming victory of a redeemed creation over the fallen one. . . . The artistic perfection of an icon was not only a reflection of the celestial glory–it was a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the Spirit. The icons were part of the transfigured world.{26}*

Orthodox don't worship icons, but rather venerate or reverence them. They are intended to remind the believer of God. Even those without theological training can learn from icons. But icons are more than a convenient teaching tool for Orthodox; they are thought to "safeguard a full and proper doctrine of the Incarnation." The Iconoclasts, it is thought (those who in the Orthodox Church fought *against* the use of icons), fell into a kind of dualism between defiled matter and the spiritual realm. "Regarding matter as a defilement, they wanted a religion freed from all contact with what is material; for they thought that what is spiritual must be non-material. But this is to betray the Incarnation, by allowing no place to Christ's humanity, to His body; it is to forget that our body as well as our soul must by saved and transfigured."{27}

Deification

One of the oddest teachings of Orthodoxy to evangelicals is that of the *deification* of man or *theosis*. The central message of Christianity is the message of redemption in Christ. Orthodox take quite literally the apostle Paul's teachings on *sharing* in the message of redemption. "Christ shared our poverty that we might share the riches of His divinity; 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich, yet for your sake became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich, (2 Corinthians viii, 9). . . . The Greek Fathers took these and similar texts in their literal sense, and dared to speak of humanity's 'deification' (in Greek, *theosis*)." We are "called to become by grace what God is by nature." For this to happen, of course, Christ had to be fully man as well as fully God. "A bridge is formed between God and humanity by the Incarnate Christ who is divine and human at once."{28} Thus, "For Orthodoxy, our salvation and redemption mean our deification."{29}

Underlying the idea of deification or divinization is the fact of our being made in "the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity. . . . Just as the three persons of the Trinity 'dwell' in one another in an unceasing movement of love, so we humans, made in the image of the Trinity, are called to 'dwell' in the Trinitarian God. Christ prays that we may share in the life of the Trinity, in the movement of love which passes between the divine persons; He prays that we may be taken up into the Godhead."{30} Jesus prayed "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." (Jn. 17:21) As Peter wrote: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2 Pet 1:4)

As the *image* of God, we are icons of God. There is a reflection of God in us by nature. However, we *grow* in the *likeness* of God, or "the assimilation to God through virtue." If we make proper use of our ability to have communion with God, "then we will become 'like' God, we will acquire the divine likeness. . . . To acquire the likeness is to be deified, it is to become a 'second god', a 'god by grace'." This is a goal we only acquire by degrees. "However sinful we may be, we never lose the image; but the likeness depends upon our moral choice, upon our 'virtue', and so it is destroyed by sin."{31}

But will we be fully like God ourselves? To understand this doctrine, we must understand the difference between God's essence and His energies. God's essence is the core of His being. His energies are those characteristics by which we experience Him. "They are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world." Through these "God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with humankind." We cannot know His essence, but we can know His energies. Our deification consists in our "union with the divine energies, not the divine essence: the Orthodox Church, while speaking of

deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism." We do not become one being with God. Nor do we become separate gods in our very essence. "We remain creatures while becoming god by grace, as Christ remained God when becoming man by the Incarnation." We are thus created gods.{32}

This deification involves the body, too. We will be transformed as Christ was in the Transfiguration, but the full transformation of our bodies will not come until the Last Day.

Several points can be made about the significance of deification. First, it is meant for all believers, not just a few. Second, the process doesn't mean we won't be conscious of sin in our lives. There is a continual repentance in the Christian life. Third, the means of attaining deification aren't extraordinary. They are simple: "go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God 'in spirit and in truth', read the Gospels, follow the commandments."{33} Fourth, it is a social process. The second most important commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. We don't become divinized by ourselves. We realize the divine likeness as we live a common life with other believers such as that of the Trinity. "As the three persons of the Godhead 'dwell' in one another, so we must 'dwell' in our fellow humans."{34} Fifth, deification is very practical. It involves the hands on application of Christian love, such as feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, etc. Sixth, it "presupposes life in the Church, life in the sacraments," for it is here that we commune with God. "Church and sacraments are the means appointed by God whereby we may acquire the sanctifying Spirit and be transformed into the divine likeness."{35}

Evangelicals who are used to emphasizing a rational understanding of doctrine grounded in Scripture might find all this too vague. How can we hold to a doctrine of deification without falling into polytheism or pantheism? Once again we must take note of Orthodox mystical theology. Significant doctrines aren't always clearly parsed and laid out for

understanding. Orthodox have a very “face value” kind of theology: if Scripture says we are gods, then we are gods.

Concluding Remarks

This look at the Eastern Orthodox Church has been necessarily brief and rather surface. I have attempted to provide a simple introduction without adding an Evangelical critique. It is my hope that listeners will seek to learn more about Orthodoxy, both for a better understanding of the history of the Christian church, and to prompt reflection on a different way of thinking about our faith. While we might have serious questions about certain doctrines and practices of Orthodoxy, we can’t help but be enriched by others. The centrality of corporate worship as contrasted with our primary focus on the individual; the importance of beauty grounded in Christian beliefs contrasted with either the austerity of Protestant worship in the past or our present focus on personal tastes in aesthetics; the way fundamental doctrines such as that of the Trinity and the Incarnation weave their way throughout Christian belief and life in contrast to our more pragmatic way of thinking and living; these things and more make a study of the Orthodox Church an enriching experience. Even if one is simply challenged to rethink one’s *own* beliefs, the effort is worthwhile. Furthermore, in the context of the current culture wars it can only help to get to know others in our society who claim Jesus as Lord and seek to live according to the will of the one true God.

Notes

1. The writer has attempted to represent Eastern Orthodoxy by remaining true to its stylistic preferences, such as capitalizing references to the universal church and the particular sacraments (Baptism, Communion, etc.).

2. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New edition, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 4.

3. Ware, 53.

4. Ware, 232.

5. Ware, 225. Quotation from Bishop Theophan the Recluse.

6. “In Orthodox worship and spirituality tremendous emphasis in placed on both these events.” Ware, 226. “The theme of the Resurrection of Christ binds together all theological concepts and realities in eastern Christianity and unites them in a harmonious whole.” O. Rousseau, “Incarnation et anthropologie en orient et en occident,” in Irnikon, vol. xxvi (1953), p. 373, quoted in Ware, 226.

7. Ware, 229-30.

8. Ware, 211.

9. Ware, 229-30.

10. Ware, 8.

11. Ware, 240.

12. Ware, 241.

13. Ware, 242-243.

14. Ware, 239.

15. Ware, 196.

16. Ware, 197.

17. Keith Crim, ed., *The Perennial Dictionary of Religions*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), s.v. “Orthodox Churches” by V. Kesich.

18. Ware, 204.

19. Ware, 265.

20. Ware, 266.

21. Keith Crim, ed. *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), s.v. “Sacraments,” by T.J. Talley.

22. Ware, 13.

23. Ware, 242.

24. Ware, 206.

25. Ware, 33-34.

26. Nicolas Zernov, *The Russians and Their Church* (London, 1945), 107-08, quoted in Ware, 34.

27. Ware, 33.

28. Ware, 20-21.

29. Ware, 231.

30. Ware, 231.

31. Ware, 219.

32. Ware, 232.

33. Ware, 236.

34. Ware, 237.

35. Ware, 237-38.

That They May Be One: Evangelicals and Catholics in Dialogue

What began as a coming together to fight abortion has become a serious dialogue between evangelicals and Catholics. Rick Wade introduces the conversation.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Cultural Crisis and the Plea of Jesus

Sometime in 1983 I began working with the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Chicago. A few times I participated in sidewalk protests in front of abortion clinics. I son realized that many of those I stood with on the sidewalks were Roman Catholics! I even had the opportunity to speak before a group of Catholics once. As I soon learned, Catholics had been fighting abortion for some time before such people as Francis Schaeffer made evangelical Protestants aware of the situation.

Roman Catholicism was a bit of a mystery to me then. There weren't many Catholics in southeast Virginia where I grew up. All I knew was that they had a Pope and they prayed to Mary and they sometimes had little statues in their front yards. The lines were pretty clearly drawn between them and us. Now I was being forced to think about these people and their beliefs, for here we were standing side by side ministering together in the name of Jesus.

Cultural/Moral Decline

At the grassroots level, Christians of varying stripes have found themselves working to stem the tide of immorality together with those they never thought they'd be working with. In the 1980s, abortion was perhaps *the* most visible example of

a gulf that was widening in America. Not only abortion, but illegitimacy, sexual license in its various forms, a skyrocketing divorce rate and other social ills divided those who accepted traditional, Judeo-Christian morality from those who didn't. People began talking about the "culture war." Because our influence has waned, we have found that we no longer have the luxury of casting stones at "those Catholics over there," for we are being forced by our cultural circumstances to work at protecting a mutually held set of values.

In the book *Evangelicals and Catholics: Toward a Common Mission,* Chuck Colson reviews the social/ethical shift in America.{2} With the loss of confidence in our ability to know universal, objective truth, we have turned to the subjective and practical. Getting things done is what counts. Power has replaced reason as the primary tool for change. Liberal politics determines the readings offered in literature courses in colleges. Radical multiculturalism has skewed representations of the West to make us *the* source of oppression for the rest of the world. "Just as the loss of truth leads to the loss of cultural integrity," says Colson, "so the loss of cultural integrity results in the disintegration of common moral order and its expression in political consensus."{3} Individual choice trumps the common good; each has his or her own rules. Abortion is a choice. The practice of homosexuality is a choice. Self-expression is the essence of freedom, regardless of how it affects others. And on it goes.

One of the ironic consequences of this potentially is the loss of the freedom we so desperately seek. This is because there must be some order in society. If everyone goes in different directions, the government will have to step in to establish order. What are Christians to do? Evangelicals are strong in the area of evangelism. Is there more that can be done on the cultural level?

The Grassroots Response

Back to the sidewalks of Chicago. “In front of abortion clinics,” says Colson, “Catholics join hands with Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians to pray and sing hymns. Side by side they pass out pamphlets and urge incoming women to spare their babies.” This new coming together extends to other areas as well. Colson continues:

> Both evangelicals and Catholics are offended by the blasphemy, violence, and sexual promiscuity endorsed by both the artistic elite and the popular culture in America today. On university campuses, evangelical students whose Christian faith comes under frequent assault often find Catholic professors to be their only allies. Evangelicals cheer as a Catholic nun, having devoted her life to serving the poor in the name of Christ, boldly confronts the president of the United States over his pro-abortion policies. Thousands of Catholic young people join the True Love Waits movement, in which teenagers pledge to save sex for marriage, a program that originated with Baptists.{4}

This has provided the groundwork for what is being called the “new ecumenism,” a recent upsurge in interest in finding common cause with others who believe in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God. Having seen this new grassroots unity in the cause of Christian morality, scholars and pastors are meeting together to see where the different traditions of Christians agree and disagree with each other, with a view to presenting a united front in the culture war.

Jesus’ Prayer

Speaking of His church, Jesus asked the Father, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent

me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:21-23 ESV) In addition to the culture war, Christians have as a motive for unity the prayer of Jesus. Division in the Church is like a body divided: how will it work as a unit to accomplish its tasks? Jesus was not talking about unity at any price, but we can't let that idea prevent us from seeking it where it is legitimate in *God's* eyes.

The New Ecumenism

The cultural shift and the prayer of Jesus have led thinkers in the different Christian traditions to come together to see what can be done to promote the cause of unity. A conversation which began in earnest with the participants of Evangelicals and Catholics Together in the mid-'90s has branched out resulting in magazines, books and conferences devoted to this issue. In fact, in November 2001, I attended a conference called "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," which included Evangelicals, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers.{5}

Participants in these discussions refer to themselves as "traditional" Christians. By "traditional" they mean those who "are freely bound by a normative tradition that is the bearer of truth," in the words of Richard John Neuhaus.{6} Traditional Christians trace their heritage back to the apostles, rather than adopting as ultimately authoritative the ideas of modern scholarship. They accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and the great creeds of the early centuries as summaries of authentic apostolic teaching. They agree on such things as the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and salvation through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God. Because of their acceptance of such fundamental truths, it is often noted that a traditional Evangelical has more in common with a traditional Catholic than with a liberal Protestant who denies the deity of Christ and other fundamental Christian truths.

20th Century Ecumenical Movement

For some of our older readers the word *ecumenical* probably brings to mind the movement of the 20th century spearheaded by the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, which took a decidedly unbiblical turn in the mid 1960s. I can remember hearing people in my church speak of it is very disparaging tones. Is this new ecumenism like the old one?

Participants take great pains to distinguish the new ecumenism from the old one. The latter began in 1910 in Edinburgh for the purpose of bringing Protestants together, primarily for missions.{7} At first its aims were admirable. After World War II, however, the focus shifted to the social and political. In 1966 at theWorld Conference on Church and Society the shift became public. "Thereafter the ideological radicals increased," says theologian Tom Oden. The movement took a turn "toward revolutionary rhetoric, social engineering, and regulatory politics."{8} It tried to form alliances around the "edges" of Christian life and belief, so to speak. In other words, it was interested in what the Church's role was in the world on the social and political level. Orthodox doctrine became expendable when inconvenient. Today that movement is floundering, and some predict it won't last much longer.

The New/Old Ecumenism

The new ecumenism, on the other hand, rejects the demands of modernity, which seeks to supplant ancient apostolic truth with its own wisdom, and instead allows apostolic truth to become modernity's critic. Oden says that, "We cannot rightly confess the unity of the church without re-grounding that unity in the apostolic teaching that was hammered out on the anvil of martyrdom and defined by the early conciliar process, when heresies were rejected and the ancient orthodox consensus defined."{9}

The new ecumenists look to Scripture and to the early ecumenical creeds like the Apostles Creed as definitive of Christian doctrine. With all their differences they look to a core of beliefs held historically upon which they all agree. From this basis they then discuss their differences and consider what they together might do to influence their society with the Christian worldview.

In this day of postmodern relativism and constructivism, it would be easy to see this discussion as another example of picking and choosing one's truths; or putting together beliefs we find suited to our tastes with no regard for whether they're really *true.* This isn't the attitude being brought to this subject; the new ecumenism insists on the primacy of truth. This means that discussions can be rather intense, for the participants don't feel the freedom to manipulate doctrine in order to reach consensus. At the "Christian Unity" conference speakers stated boldly where they believed their tradition was correct and others incorrect, and they expected the same boldness from others. There was no rancor, but neither was there any waffling. I overheard one Catholic congratulate Al Mohler, a Baptist, on his talk in which Mohler made it clear that, according to evangelical theology, Rome was simply wrong. "May your tribe increase!" the Catholic priest said. Not because he himself didn't care about theological distinctions or was trying to work out some kind of postmodern mixing and matching of beliefs. No, it was because he appreciated the fact that Mohler was willing to stand firm on what he believes to be true. This attitude is necessary not only to maintain theological integrity within the Church but is essential if we wish to give our culture something it doesn't already have.

This is the spirit, says Tom Oden, a Methodist theologian, of the earliest ecumenism—that of the early Church—which produced the great creeds of the faith. Oden provides a nice summary of the differences between the two ecumenisms. Whereas the old

ecumenism of the 20th C. distrusted the ancient ecumenism, the new one embraces it. The old one accommodated modernism uncritically, whereas the new is critical of the failed ideas of modernism. The former was utopian, the latter realistic. The former sought negotiated unity, whereas the latter is based on truth. The former was politics-driven the latter is Spirit-led.{10}

Meetings and Documents

How did this movement shift from abortion mill sidewalks to the conference rooms of Christian scholars? In the early ’90s, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus began leading a series of discussions between Evangelical and Catholic scholars which produced in 1994 a document titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.”{11} In the introductory section one finds this statement summarizing their fundamental conviction:

> As Christ is one, so the Christian mission is one. That one mission can be and should be advanced in diverse ways. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission. There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ. We together pray for the fulfillment of the prayer of Our lord: “May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (John 17)

Based upon this conviction they go on to discuss agreements, disagreements, and hopes for the future. Participants in the discussion included such Evangelicals as Kent Hill, Richard Land, and John White. Such notables as J.I. Packer,{12} Nathan Hatch, Thomas Oden, Pat Robertson, Richard Mouw, and Os Guinness endorsed the document.

This document was followed in 1998 by one titled “The Gift of Salvation,” which discusses the issues of justification and baptism and others related to salvation. The level of agreement indicated drew some strong criticisms from some Evangelical scholars,{13} the main source of contention being the doctrine of justification, a central issue in the Reformation. Critics didn’t find the line as clearly drawn as they would like. Is justification purely *forensic*? In other words, is it simply a matter of God declaring us righteous apart from anything whatsoever we do (the Protestant view)? Or is it *intrinsic*, in other words, a matter of God working something *in* us which becomes part of our justification(the Catholic view)? To put it another way, is it purely external or internal? Or is it both?{14}

In May, 1995, the Fellowship of St. James and Rose Hill College sponsored a series of talks between evangelical Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics with a view to doing much the same as Evangelicals and Catholics Together except that Orthodox Christians were involved.{15} Participants included Richard John Neuhaus, Harold O.J. Brown, Patrick Henry Reardon, Peter Kreeft, J.I. Packer, and Kallistos Ware. As James Cutsinger writes, the purpose was “to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scripture and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age.”{16} An important theme of this conference, as with ECT, was truth. Says Neuhaus: “The new ecumenism, as reflected also in ECT, is adamant that truth and unity must not be pitted against one another, that the only unity we seek is unity in the truth, and the only truth we acknowledge is the truth by which we are united.”{17}

Two Projects

There are two projects guiding this discussion which sometimes overlap but often don’t. The first is the culture war. Some

are convinced that there cannot be full communion between the traditions because our doctrinal differences are too significant, so we should stick to doing battle with our culture over the moral issues of the day. After all, this is where the conversation began. Here, it is the broader Christian worldview which is important, not so much detailed questions about justification and baptism and so on. What these scholars hope to do is make us aware of our commonalities so we feel free to minister together in certain arenas, and then to rally each other to the cause of presenting a Christian view in matters of social and cultural importance today

The second project is shaped by Jesus' prayer that we be united. Having seen that we *do* believe some things in common, as evidenced by the fight against abortion, the next step is to dig more deeply and see if we can find a more fundamental unity. The focus here is on theological agreements and disagreements. The beliefs of all involved come under scrutiny. Some scholars will be satisfied with discovering and clarifying beliefs held in common. Others state boldly that the goal can be none other than full communion between traditions if not the joining of all into one.

Impulse of the Holy Spirit

Participants are convinced that this is a move of the Holy Spirit. How else could those who have battled for so long and who are so convinced of the truth of their own tradition be willing to discuss these matters with the real hope of being drawn closer together? Theologian Tom Oden says this: "What is happening? God is awakening in grass roots Christianity a ground swell of longing for classic ecumenical teaching in all communions. There are innumerable lay embodiments of this unity."{18} There is a new longing to go back to our roots to rediscover our historical identity in the face of a world that leaves identity up for grabs. Could it be that the Spirit is indeed working to bring the church closer together in our day?

Theological Agreements and Disagreements

As noted previously, those who participate in the new ecumenism refer to themselves as "traditional Christians." They look to the early church to rediscover their roots. They hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds and others of the early ecumenical creeds.

J.I. Packer provides a helpful summary of the doctrines traditional Christians hold. They are:

- The canonical Scriptures as the repository and channel of Christ-centered divine revelation.
- The triune God as sovereign in creation , providence and grace.
- Faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the one mediator between God and man.
- Seeing Christians as a family of forgiven sinners . . . empowered for godliness by the Holy Spirit.
- Seeing the church as a single supernatural society.
- The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion "as necessities of obedience, gestures of worship and means of communion with God in Christ."
- The practice of prayer, obedience, love and service.
- Dealing appropriately with the personal reality of evil.
- Expecting death and final judgment to lead into the endless joy of heaven."{19}

Because Roman Catholicism is such an unknown to many evangelicals, it is just assumed by many that its teachings are all radically different from our own. The list of doctrines just given, however, proves how close we are on central issues. In fact, the well-respected Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said this in the context of his battles with liberalism:

> How great is the common heritage that unites the Roman Catholic Church, with it maintenance of the authority of

> Scripture and with it acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own church.{20}

With all this in common, however, we must recognize our differences as well since they are significant. Roman Catholics believe the church magisterium is the ultimately authoritative voice for the church since it is the church that has been made the pillar and ground of the truth. At the very head, of course, is the Pope who is believed to be the successor of Peter. Protestants emphasize the priesthood of the believer for whom Scripture is the final authority. Catholics believe the grace of God unto salvation is mediated through baptism while Protestants see baptism more as symbolic than as efficacious. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her and the saints. Evangelicals see Mary as a woman born in sin who committed sin herself, but who was specially blessed by God.{21}

Probably the most important difference between Catholics and Protestants is over the matter of how a person is accepted before God. What does it *mean* to be justified? *How* is one justified? This was the whole issue of the Reformation for Martin Luther, according to Michael Horton.{22} If one's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is deficient, does it matter what else one believes? The answer to this will be determined by what one's goals are in seeking unity. Are we working on the project of ecclesial unity? Or are we concerned mostly with the culture war? Our disagreements are more significant for the former than for the latter.

What is the significance of our differences? The significance will relate to our goals for coming together. The big question in the new ecumenism is in what areas can we come together? In

theology and then in cultural involvement? Or just in cultural involvement? Some are working hard to see where we agree and disagree theologically, even to the point of examining their own tradition to be certain they have it correct (at least, as they see it). Others believe that while we share many fundamental doctrinal beliefs, the divisions can't be overcome without actually becoming one visible church. Cultural involvement—cultural cobelligerency it has been called—becomes the focus of our unity.

Some readers might have a question nagging at them about now. That is this: If Catholics have a deficient understanding of the process of salvation, as we think they do, can they even *be* Christians? Shouldn't we be evangelizing them rather than working with them?

Surely there are individuals in the Catholic Church who have no reason to hope for heaven. But the same is true in Evangelical churches. Although of course we want to understand correctly and teach accurately the truth about justification, we must remember that we come to Christ through faith in Him, not on the basis of the correctness of our detailed doctrine of justification. How many new (genuine) converts in *any* tradition can explain justification? J.I. Packer chastises those who believe the mercy of God "rests on persons who are notionally correct."{23} Having read some Catholic expositions of Scripture and devotional writing—even by the Pope himself—it is hard to believe I'm reading the words of the anti-Christ (something Protestants have been known to call the Pope) or that these writers aren't Christians at all. Again, this isn't to diminish the rightful significance of the doctrine of justification, but to seek a proper understanding of the importance of one's understanding of the doctrine before one can be saved.

There is no doubt that there are Christians in the Roman Catholic Church as assuredly as there are *non*-Christians in Evangelical churches. We should be about the task of

evangelism everywhere. As with everyone our testimony should be clear to Catholics around us. If they indicate that they don't know Christ then we tell them how they can know him. What we dare not do is have the attitude, "Well, he's Catholic so he can't be saved."

Options for Unity

I see three possible frameworks for unity. One is unity on the social/cultural/political level. In these areas we can bring conservative religious thinking to bear on the issues of the day. I think this is what Peter Kreeft is calling for in an article titled "Ecumenical Jihad," in which he broadens the circle enough to include Jews and Muslims.{24}

The second option is full, ecclesial unity. The focus here is on Jesus' prayer for unity. As Christ is one, we are to be one. This goes beyond cooperation in the public square; this is a call for one Church—one visible institution. Neuhaus says we *are* one church, we just aren't acting like it. One writer points out that this kind of unity "is a 'costly act' involving the death and rebirth of existing confessional churches."{25} Catholic theologian Avery Dulles believes that such full unity might be legitimate between groups that have a common heritage, such as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. "But that goal is neither realistic nor desirable for communities as widely separated as evangelicals and Catholics. For the present and the foreseeable future the two will continue to constitute distinct religious families."{26} The stresses such a union would create would be too much.

A third possibility is a middle way between the first two. It involves the recognition of a mutually held Christian worldview with an acknowledgement and acceptance of our differences, and with a view to peace between traditions and teamwork in the culture war. Here, theology is important; evangelicals share something with Catholics that they don't with, say, Muslims who are morally conservative. These could

stand with Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of Holland in the late 19th century who said,

> Now, in this conflict [against liberalism] Rome is not an antagonist, but stands on our side, inasmuch as she recognizes and maintains the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Cross as an atoning sacrifice, the scriptures as the Word of God, and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, let me ask if Romish theologians take up the sword to do valiant and skillful battle against the same tendency that we ourselves mean to fight to death, is it not the part of wisdom to accept the valuable help of their elucidation?{27}

Kuyper here was dealing with liberal theology. But the principle holds for the present context. If Kuyper could look to the Catholic Church for support in theological matters to some extent against liberal Protestants, surely we can join with them in speaking to and standing against a culture of practical atheism.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has proposed a two-prong strategy for achieving church unity. The first task is complete, visible unity as called for in the "Decree on Ecumenism." Full unity, however, can only come about by a special work of the Holy Spirit. "The second task . . . is to pursue intermediate goals." He says:

> It should be clear that we do not create unity, no more than we bring about righteousness by means of our works, but that on the other hand we should not sit around twiddling our thumbs. Here it would therefore be a question of continually learning afresh from the other as other while respecting his or her otherness.{28}
>
> Avery Dulles says that the heterogeneous community of Catholics and evangelicals still has much to do together. "They can join in their fundamental witness to Christ and the gospel. They can affirm together their acceptance of the apostolic faith enshrined in the creeds and dogmas of the

> early Church. . . . They can jointly protest against the false and debilitating creeds of militant secularism. In all these ways they can savor and deepen the unity that is already theirs in Christ."{29}

Dulles offers some advice on what to do in this interim period.{30} I'll let them stand without comment:

- Seek to correct misunderstandings about the other tradition.
- Be surprised at the graciousness of God, who continues to bestow his favors even upon those whose faith comes to expression in ways that we may consider faulty.
- Respect each other's freedom and integrity.
- Instead of following the path of reduction to some common denominator, the parties should pursue an ecumenism of mutual enrichment, asking how much they can give to, and receive from, one another.
- Rejoice at the very significant bonds of faith and practice that already unite us, notwithstanding our differences. (Reading the same Scriptures, confessing the same Triune God and Jesus as true God and true man, etc.)
- We can engage in joint witness in our social action.
- Pray for the work of the Spirit in restoring unity, and rest in knowing it has to be His work and not ours.

Protesting Voices

Not all Evangelical scholars and church leaders are in favor of the Roman Catholic/Evangelical dialogue, at least with the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Such well-known representatives as R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Michael Horton, and D. James Kennedy have taken issue with important parts of this document.

The basis of the *ECT* dialogue was the conviction that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in

Christ."{31} It was upon this foundation that the two groups came together to consider a Christian response to current social issues. But some question whether such a sweeping statement is correct. Are we really "brothers and sisters in Christ"?

MacArthur presents the central concerns in an article in the journal of The Master's Seminary, of which he is president. He believes "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" was so concerned about social issues that it downplayed and compromised key doctrines.

The fundamental issue is the matter of justification. Are we saved by faith plus works, or by faith alone? Is justification *imputed* or *infused* (Are we *declared* righteous or are we *made* righteous?)? The Council of Trent, convened by the Roman Church in the late 16th century, anathematized those who believe "that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace" (*Trent,* sess. 7, canon 8)."{32} *Trent* also made plain that justification is obtained through the sacrament of baptism (*Trent,* sess. 6, chap. 7).{33} Furthermore, the Roman Church holds that justification is an ongoing process by which we are *made* righteous, not a declaration that we *are* righteous. MacArthur contends that this constitutes a different gospel.

R.C. Sproul says this: "The question in the sixteenth century remains in dispute. Is justification by faith alone a necessary and essential element of the gospel? Must a church confess *sola fide* in order to be a true church? Or can a church reject or condemn justification by faith alone and still be a true church? The Reformers certainly did not think so. Apparently the framers and signers of ECT think otherwise."{34}

MacArthur insists that, even though we might all be able to recite the Apostles' Creed together, if we differ on the core matter of the Gospel we're talking about different religions

altogether. If Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism are different religions, how can we claim to be "brothers and sisters in Christ"?{35}

Thus, there are some who believe the dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to be a misbegotten venture. However, even among those who take a strong position on the Reformation view of justification, there are some who still see some value in finding common cause with Catholics on social matters. For example, a statement signed by John Armstrong, the late James Montgomery Boice, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul among others—who also signed "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification—says this: "The extent of the creedal consensus that binds orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together warrants the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have every reason to join minds, hearts, and hands when Christian values and behavioral patterns are at stake." This doesn't preclude, however, the priority of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.{36}

The Importance of the Issue

There are several reasons why the current conversations between Evangelicals and Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox as well) are important. First is simply the reaffirmation of what we believe. In this day of skepticism about the possibility of knowing what is true at all, and the practice of many of picking and choosing beliefs according to their practical functionality, it is good to think carefully through what we believe and why. A woman I know told me she doesn't concern herself with all those denominational differences. "I just love Jesus," she said. "Just give me Jesus." One gets the sense from all that is taught us in Scripture that *Jesus* wants us to have more, meaning a more fleshed-out understanding of God and His ways. As we review our likenesses and differences

with Roman Catholics we're forced to come to a deeper understanding of our own beliefs.

We also have Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays fervently for unity in his body. Was he serious? Is it good enough to simply say "Well, the Roman Church differs in its doctrine of justification so they can't be Christians," and turn away from them? Or to keep a distance from them because they believe differently on some things? While not giving up our own convictions, isn't it worthwhile taking the time to be sure about our own beliefs and those of others before saying Jesus' prayer doesn't apply?

J.I. Packer says this: "However much historic splits may have been justified as the only way to preserve faith, wisdom and spiritual life intact at a particular time, continuing them in complacency and without unease is unwarrantable."{37} A simple recognition of the common ground upon which we stand would be a step forward in answering Jesus' prayer. The debates which will follow as our differences are once again made clear can further us in our theological understanding and our kingdom connectedness.

Of course, the culture war which brought about this discussion in the first place is another good reason for coming together. Discovering our similarities in moral understanding will open doors of cooperative ministry and witness in society. Chuck Colson believes that the only solution to the current cultural crisis "is a recultivation of conscience."{38} How can the conscience be recultivated? "At root, every issue that divides the American people," Colson says, "is religious in essence."{39} It will take a recultivation of the knowledge of God to bring about change. Sharing the same basic worldview, we can speak together in the public square on the issues of the day.

Finally, consider what we can learn from one another. Evangelicals can profit from the deep theological and

philosophical study of Catholic scholars, while Catholics can learn from Evangelicals about in-depth Bible study. Evangelicals can learn from Catholics what it is to be a community of believers since, for them, the Church has the emphasis over the individual. Catholics, on the other hand, can learn from Evangelicals what it means to have a personal walk with Christ.

In sum, there are important, legitimate discussions or debates which must be held in the Church over theological issues. But such discussions can only be held if we are talking to each other. We are obligated to our Lord to seek the unity for which He prayed. This isn't a unity of convenience, but a unity based upon truth. If one studies the issues closely and determines that our differences are too great to permit any coming together on the ecclesial level, at least one should see the value of joining together on the cultural level—of speaking the truth about the one true God who sent his only Son to redeem mankind, and who has revealed his moral standard in nature and Scripture, a standard which will be ignored to our destruction.

Notes

1. The Evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogue is a serious matter. Although this article isn't presented as a critique, it was thought that the lack of a protesting voice in the original article might imply this writer's (and Probe's) full endorsement of the dialogue, or even an implicit endorsement of ecclesial unity. A conversation that brings into question the central issue of the Reformation, justification by faith, deserves close scrutiny. Thus, a revision was made to the original article to include a few protesting voices.
2. Charles Colson, "The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective, " in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), 7ff.

3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Although this movement now includes the Eastern Orthodox Church, in this article I'll focus on Evangelical/Catholic relations.
6. Richard John Neuhaus, "A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," in James S. Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 54-55.
7. Richard John Neuhaus, "That They May Be One: Prospects for Unity in the 21st Century," a paper delivered at the conference "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," Nov. 9, 2001. Tom Oden puts the starting date for the old ecumenism as 1948.
8. Tom Oden, "The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to Society," Pt. 1, a revision of an address delivered Oct. 1, 2001 on the 20th anniversary of the founding of The Institute on Religion and Democracy. Downloaded from www.ird-renew.org/news/NewsPrint.cfm?ID=214&c=4 on December 3, 2001.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," First Things 43 (May 1994) 15-22.
12. Packer defended his decision to sign the document in "Why I Signed It," *Christianity Today*. December 12, 1994, 34-37.
13. For example, R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).
14. For a different twist on the doctrine from an evangelical Protestant, see S. M. Hutchens, "Getting Justification Right," *Touchstone*, July/August 2000, 41-46.
15. Rose Hill College is closely tied to the Orthodox tradition.
16. James S. Cutsinger, "Introduction: Finding the Center, in

Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming*, 10.
17. Neuhaus, “A New Thing,” 57.
18. Oden, “The New Ecumenism.”
19. J.I. Packer, “On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology,” in Cutsinger, 156.
20. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 52; quoted in Colson, 39-40.
21. From discussions with former Catholics I have gotten the impression that there is a difference between authoritative Catholic theology and the beliefs of lay Catholics. We cannot take up this matter here. I’ll just note that I am looking to the writings of Catholic theologians and, in particular, to the Catholic catechism for the teachings of the Church.
22. Michael S. Horton, “What Still Keeps Us Apart?” in John Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 251.
23. Packer, “On from Orr,” 174.
24. Peter Kreeft, “Ecumenical Jihad,” Cutsinger, ed., chap. 1.
25. Avery Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” in Colson and Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, 116-17. Dulles here provides a more detailed description of this kind of unity. Dulles discusses six different kinds of unity.
26. Ibid., 143.
27. Abraham Kuyper, Calvinism and the Future (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1898), 183-84; quoted in Colson, 39.
28. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 98, quoted in Dulles, “The Unity for Which We Hope,” 137-38.
29. Dulles, “Unity,” 144.
30. Ibid., 138-140. He gives ten; I’ve included seven.
31. Colson, *Evangelicals and Catholics,* xviii.
32. John F. MacArthur, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” The Master’s Seminary Journal 6/1 (Spring 1995): 30. See also R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

33. MacArthur, 28.
34. Sproul, *Faith Alone,* 30.
35. It should be noted that, because of protests such as those of MacArthur, Sproul and others, key signers of the document later issued a statement in which they affirmed their commitment to the doctrines of "substitutionary atonement and [the] imputed righteousness of Christ, leading to a full assurance of eternal salvation; . . ." and to "the Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone." See "Statement By Protestant Signers to ECT," available at www.leaderu.com/ect/ect2.html. This writer also commends for your reading the statement, "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue," drafted by Michael Horton and revised by J.I. Packer, and issued by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals in 1994, available at http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.ECTresolutions.html.
36. "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue." See also "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification available at www.alliancenet.org/month/98.08.appeal.html.
37. In another vein, Donald Bloesch believes that R.C. Sproul, in his criticism of ECT, has not "kept abreast of the noteworthy attempts in the ongoing ecumenical discussion to bridge the chasm between Trent and evangelical Protestantism." He believes that "Sola fide still constitutes a formidable barrier in Catholic-Protestant relations, but contra Sproul, it must not be deemed insurmountable." See his comments in "Betraying the Reformation? An Evangelical Response," in *Christianity Today,* Oct. 7, 1996.
38. Packer, "On from Orr," 157.
39. Colson, "The Common Cultural Task," 13.
40. Ibid., 14.

5 Lies the Church Tells Women

[Note: This article is taken from J. Lee Grady's book *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women.* I do not subscribe to everything in this book, particularly the author's belief that there are no restrictions to women in the church. I do not agree that the office of pastor and elder are open to women, though I believe God has given many women, including me, the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher (which some find easier to receive when it's called "shepherd-teacher"). At Probe, we exhort people to be discerning in what we hear and read. Mr. Grady's book is firmly in the egalitarian camp, but as a complementarian who seeks to be discerning, I can recognize the truth of some of what he says without embracing what I believe is unbiblical. Please see the end of this article for other articles on the role of women I have written for our Web site.]

In this article I look at five lies the church tells women, inspired by the book by J. Lee Grady called *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women.*{1} I'm not saying all churches say all these things, but there are certain pockets of Christianity where these lies are circulated.

Lie #1: God Created Women as Inferior Beings, Destined to Serve Their Husbands.

The first lie is that God created women as inferior beings, destined to serve their husbands. Those looking for Scripture to back up their beliefs point to Genesis 2:18, where God makes a "helpmeet" for Adam. "See?" they say. "Helpers are subordinate to the ones they help, which proves women are here to serve men." This ignores the times in the Psalms (10:14, 27:9, 118:7) where God is praised as our helper, and He is certainly not inferior or subordinate to us!

Lee Grady points out, "[I]t is a cultural bias, not a spiritual or scientific principle, that women were 'made' for the kitchen or laundry room. This is the most common form of male chauvinism, a burden placed on women by selfish men who want someone to wash their dishes."{2}

This view that women are inferior to men is not biblical, but it has infected the church from the beginning.

> *The Greek culture into which the early church was born viewed women as "half animal," unworthy of education, to be kept quiet and kept locked away, obedient to their husbands. In Jewish culture it was considered inappropriate for a man to even speak to a woman in public—including his own wife. A woman speaking to a man who was not her husband was considered to be giving evidence that she had committed adultery with him, and could be divorced. You can imagine the scandal Jesus caused when he regularly sought the company of women and talked to them, and taught them, just as he did men. Or when he allowed prostitutes to talk to him or pour perfume on his feet.{3}*

Eve was not created to be Adam's servant, but his honored and respected wife and co-regent, fashioned to rule over creation with him. We see another picture of God's intention for the first Adam and Eve in our future as the church. The bride of the Second Adam, Christ, is created and is being fashioned to reign with Him forever.{4}

Lee Grady says, "Jesus modeled a revolutionary new paradigm of empowerment by affirming women as co-heirs of God's grace."{5} Paul continued this completely new, respectful view of women by inviting women to share in the ministry of the gospel and the church, and by teaching the equality of husbands and wives in the marriage relationship (although there is a biblical distinction of roles).

When God created woman, He didn't create an inferior being, He

created what He delights to call “the glory of man.”(1 Cor. 11:7)

Lie #2: A Man Needs to “Cover” a Woman in Her Ministry Activities.

The second lie is that a man needs to “cover” a woman in her ministry activities. “In many cases, leaders have innocently twisted various Bible verses to suggest that a woman’s public ministry can be valid only if she is properly ‘covered’ by a male who is present. Often women are told that they cannot even lead women’s Bible studies or prayer meetings unless a pastor, deacon or some other man can provide proper oversight.”{6}

One woman was told that she could not start a backyard Bible school class in her neighborhood during the summer unless her husband agreed to be present at each session and teach all the Bible lessons. Her church elders said she could plan each day’s crafts and make all the snacks, but a man had to conduct the “spiritual” aspects of the outreach since he is the proper “covering.”{7}

It is disturbing to think of the implication of this belief. When we, as women, use our spiritual gifts and respond to God’s call to minister in various ways (within the biblical restrictions for women) without a man present, is our ministry less legitimate and valid than a man doing the same work? What if a woman with the spiritual gift of evangelism senses the Holy Spirit directing her to speak to the cashier at the gas station, and there’s no man around? On a personal note, when I am speaking at one of Probe’s Mind Games conferences, do my lectures lack legitimacy or truth because the male Probe staff members are busy teaching in other rooms?

Ephesians 5:21 says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Out of respect for our own weaknesses and limitations, I believe that all of us who wish to minister to

others should pursue an attitude of humble submission to the body of Christ. We need to submit our beliefs and methods (and content, if we're teaching) to trusted believers who can provide support, direction, and, if needed, correction. And anyone engaged in ministry needs prayer support, which some have called a "prayer covering;" although that is not a biblical term.

But there is no verse that says, "If a woman teaches My word, make sure a man is present so she will be covered properly." Paul's instruction that older women teach the younger women doesn't include making sure that someone with a Y chromosome is present! What underlies this erroneous idea that a man's presence somehow validates any woman's ministry is, intentional or not, a profound disrespect and distrust of women.

Lie #3: Women Can't be Fulfilled or Spiritually Effective Without a Husband or Children.

The third lie is that women can't be fulfilled or spiritually effective without a husband or children. Some churches teach that God's perfect plan for every woman is to be a wife and mother. Period. Sometimes Christian women successful in business or some other professional field are made to feel unwelcome at a church, as if they are an unhealthy influence on "purer" women.

In some places, single women are prevented from leading home fellowship groups because they're single.{8} Others have been discouraged from running for political office or pursuing a graduate education because God's plan was for them to marry and keep house—even when God hadn't brought a groom into the picture!

Lee Grady says, "We must stop placing a heavy yoke on

unmarried and divorced women in the church by suggesting that they are not complete without a man in their lives or that a husband somehow legitimizes their ministries."{9}

In some churches, women are routinely taught that the best way for them to serve God is to get married, make their husbands happy, and have children. They think this should be the sole focus of women's lives. And to be honest, when God has given a woman a husband and children, especially young children, focusing her primary energies and gifting on her family truly *is* the most important way she serves God in that season of her life. Children will not be impressed with how many Bible studies their mother teaches each week. And most husbands will be less than enthusiastic for their wives to go off on several mission trips each year when it means the home is falling apart and everybody's life is in chaos.

But women, even women with families, are given spiritual gifts that God intends for us to use to build up the body of Christ, both inside and outside our families. When we exercise those spiritual gifts and abilities, God delights to honor us with a sense of fulfillment. And usually that involves ministry in the church or in the world, as long as it's secondary to our family priorities.

But not all women are called to marriage and motherhood. It is disrespectful to single Christian women to treat them as second-class women because they don't wear a wedding ring. It's heartbreaking and frustrating when a woman would love to be married, but God hasn't brought her to the man of His choice; it just adds unnecessary sorrow for the church to say, "Sorry, honey, without a man you don't have a place here."

Lie #4: Women Should Never Work Outside the Home.

The fourth lie is that women should never work outside the home. Women who take jobs are shamed and judged, because they

can’t please God if they do anything outside of being a wife and mother.

This is a hurtful lie to many women who don’t have a choice about working or not. There are huge numbers of divorced and widowed women in the church who would much rather stay at home with their families, but they’re the only breadwinners. And for many two-parent families, they honestly can’t survive on the husband’s paycheck alone.

This lie comes from a misreading of Paul’s exhortation in Titus 2:4 for women to be “workers at home.”

Paul wasn’t calling them to quit their day jobs to stay home. Women in that culture had no education and usually no opportunities for employment. He was addressing a character issue about being faithful and industrious, not lazy and self-centered. This letter was written to the pastor of a church on Crete, a society known for the laziness and self-indulgence of its people.{10}

Before the 1800’s and the Industrial Revolution, both men and women worked at home, and they worked hard. Whether farming, fishing, animal husbandry, or whatever trade they engaged in, they did it from home. The care and nurture of children was woven into the day’s work and extended families helped care for each other. There was no such thing, except among the very wealthy, as a woman who didn’t work.

This lie completely ignores the Proverbs 31 woman, who not only took excellent care of her family, but also had several home-based businesses that required her to leave her home to engage in these businesses. I personally appreciate this biblical pattern because I had a home-based business and a ministry the entire time my children were growing, both of which took me out of the home sometimes. I was able to grow my gifts as my kids were growing, and now that they’re both adults, I am able to use those gifts and abilities more fully

with my new freedom to leave home.

On the other hand, an equally distressing expectation common to younger people in today's churches is that women should always work, regardless of whether they have children or not. Our culture has so downgraded the importance of focused parenting that many people consider it wasteful for a woman to be "only" a homemaker. It's sexist to say that a woman's only valid contribution to the world or the church is to be a homemaker, but both extremes are wrong and harmful.

Lie #5: Women Must Obediently Submit to Their Husbands in All Situations.

The last lie says that women must obediently submit to their husbands in *all* situations. This lie really grieves me deeply, because it is probably responsible for more pain and abuse than any other lie we've looked at in this article.

In Ephesians 5:22, wives are commanded to submit to our husbands. For some people, this has been twisted to mean the husband is the boss and the wife's job is to obey his every whim. That is a relationship of power, not self-sacrificing love, as this marriage passage actually teaches. The wife is called to serve her husband through submission, and the husband is called to serve his wife through sacrificial love.

We have no idea how many women have been physically, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually abused by their husbands wielding the submission verses as a weapon. When they finally tell their pastor about their husband's rage-outs and physical assaults, they are often not believed, and sometimes they are told that if they would learn to submit the violence would stop. Then they are counseled that it would be a sin to separate and hold the husband accountable for what is a crime! Some abused women, who feared for their lives, have actually been told, "Don't worry. Even if you died you would go to be with the Lord. So you win either way. Just keep praying for

him. But you are not allowed to leave."{11}

A comprehensive study on domestic violence in the church in the mid 80's revealed that 26 percent of the pastors counseled an abused wife to keep submitting and trust that God would either stop the abuse or give her the strength to endure it. About a fourth of the pastors believed that abuse is the wife's fault because of her lack of submission! And a majority of the pastors said it is better for wives to endure violence against them than to seek a separation that might end in divorce.{12} I respectfully suggest that separation *with the goal of reconciliation* is often the only way to motivate an abusive husband to get help.{13} Just as we cast a broken limb to enable it to heal, separation is like putting a cast on a broken relationship as the first step to enable change and healing. We see in 1 Cor. 5 that God's plan for unrepentant believers is to experience the pain of isolation in separation from friends and loved ones; why would it be unthinkable for the same principle to be effective within an abusive marriage?

All the lies we've looked at in this article are the result of twisting God's word out of a misunderstanding of God's intent for His people. The way to combat the lies is to know the truth—because that's what sets us free.

Notes

1. Lee Grady, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2000).

2. Grady, 23.

3. George Byron Koch, "Shall a Woman Keep Silent? Part 1." http://www.resurrection.org/shall_a_woman____part_1.htm.

4. Rev. 22:5, 2 Tim. 2:12.

5. Grady, 21.

6. Grady, 89-90.

7. Grady, 90.

8. Grady, 140.

9. Grady, 143.

10. “Even one of their own prophets has said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.'” (Titus 1:2)

11. Grady, 172.

12. Grady, 174.

13. I especially recommend Dr. Paul Hegstrom of Life Skills Learning Centers. He is a recovered abusive husband and pastor who wrote an excellent book, *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them: Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse* (Beacon Hill Press, 1999). His Web site is http://www.lifeskillsintl.org.

Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

Christ’s last commandment was to engage the world with the gospel. But today’s church has often embraced postmodern attitudes that reject absolute truth, absolute values, and even the Bible’s insistence that Jesus is the only way to God. We are hardly ready to engage the world anymore.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .”

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears that the majority of the church has responded in one of two ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking “Christianese”—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and

religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, "[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation."{1}

Charles Colson writes, "We live in a culture that is at best morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the 'Culture war' is over and we (the church) have lost."{2}

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let's see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

The Church and Truth

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

> Relativism says the truth isn't fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.{3}

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold,

hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."{4} Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that 'since there are multiple descriptions of reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth."{5} Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define "truth" in conflicting ways and both be correct."{6}

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God's revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life. . . ." God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17 Jesus prays for His disciples saying, "Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth." Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe

an objective standard of truth exists{7}

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the "belt of truth." Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God's truth is the foundation on which the church's message stands.

The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, "This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . ."{8}

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

> If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.{9}

Dr. Schaeffer's conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone's beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God's universal

law for mankind.

Barna's survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.{10}

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.{11} 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.{12}

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world, Christianity is abolished."{13}

The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion

of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual's preferences. Indeed, Barna's research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that "it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life."{14}

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world's religions reveals that they are contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, "Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true."

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband's funerals because of their religious convictions? How about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn't say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church

regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn't matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.{15} 30 percent believe Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.{16}

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

The Church That Will Engage

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, "'Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.' But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith

that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, “set apart Christ as Lord.” Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer’s heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member’s life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word “answer” in the Greek is *apologia,* which was used in connection with a formal public defense often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they believed.{17} We can’t expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can’t give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe’s ministries include our

Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

Notes

1. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.

2. Charles Colson, *How Shall We Now Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1999), ix-x.

3. Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.

4. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.

5. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.

6. Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 44.

7. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173.

8. Barna, *Boiling Point,* (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 2001), 78.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1976), 145.

10. Barna, *Boiling Point,* 78.

11. Ibid., 80.

12. McDowell and Hostetller, 21.

13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.

14. Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1993), 79-80.

15. Barna, "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online,* 19 April 2001, 2.

16. Barna, "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online,* 12 July 2000.

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Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church

Rick Wade examines the nature of the gospel message as oral tradition in the early church, and the relation of that tradition with the New Testament.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Introduction: Evangelicals and Tradition

Evangelical Protestants have historically considered the Bible to be the final source for faith and practice. Church tradition plays little or no role in our lives beyond the

celebration of certain holidays. In this article, I want to look at one context in which tradition was very important in the church. I'm referring to the relationship between tradition in the early church and Scripture. In this study, I'll refer often to the book *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*{1} by Daniel Williams, an ordained Baptist minister teaching patristics at Loyola University.

Most of us don't realize that tradition played an important role in the establishment of our faith. We tend to see the New Testament and its development as separate from the life of the early church. In fact, if there's a dirty word in church history to evangelicals, it is "tradition." We think of tradition as something man comes up with on his own. Since what man produces is tainted, we want to keep it separate from Scripture. We don't think of the Scriptures—specifically the New Testament—as being a written form of tradition.

We need to note, however, that all tradition isn't bad. What the apostles learned from Jesus, they handed on to others orally, and what they handed on they called "tradition." Thus, the Gospel proclamation began as oral tradition. Recall Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." (2 Th. 3:6; see also 2:15. The NIV translates the word "tradition" as "teachings.") The apostles taught people who taught others who taught others, and this tradition was authoritative for the church. As the tradition was being conveyed orally, it was also being written down by the apostles and sent throughout the church. As the various local churches received these writings they weighed them against what had been taught orally. Many writings were circulating at the time, some of which falsely carried the names of apostles. The major test for the authenticity of these writings was whether they accurately reflected the apostolic tradition as taught in the

churches.

Losing the Past

If evangelicals attempt to study the past, it's typically out of historical interest alone, not with a view to being taught by our forebears. While we're doing better at crossing boundaries with our contemporaries in the church, we forget that the church extends back in time as well. We tend to isolate the church in the here and now.

How is it that we've become separated from our past?

Individualism

First, we're an individualistic church. A fairly prevalent attitude in the church is that "me, my Bible, and the Holy Spirit" are all that we need to understand Christianity. In most debates today, what is the final word? "Well, it seems to me that . . ." It is considered impolite or even arrogant to tell someone he or she is wrong, especially in the area of religion and morality. This attitude has penetrated the church as well. It is considered rude and pretentious to say that someone's understanding of something in Scripture is wrong, no matter how gently and lovingly it is said. We think, "Why should we need anyone else to tell us what the Bible means?" We have let modernistic individualism take root in our psyches to the extent that we believe we are individually the final arbiters of truth.

Some consequences of this attitude, however, are disunity in the church, and the possibility of the intrusion of false teaching as individuals attempt to understand the faith by themselves. While we certainly are responsible individually to be in the Word and seeking to understand it, we learn from a study of church history that it is the lone interpreter of Scripture who can easily go astray. Theologian Harold O. J. Brown notes that "Solitary study, cut off from the fellowship

of believers seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and lacking any awareness of the faith of the church through the ages, is often a source of serious error."{2} "Evangelicals should come to grips with the fact that the Bible belongs to the church," says Robert Webber. "It is the living church that receives, guards, passes on, and interprets Scripture. Consequently the modern individualistic approach to interpretation of Scripture should give way to the authority of what the church has always believed, taught, and passed down in history."{3} As Daniel Williams notes, "Protestants must reconsider the work of the Holy Spirit in the life history of the church no less than in the life of the individual believer. For it is with the church that God's new covenant was formed."{4} The Spirit is working to build the body of Christ, not just individuals. Each of us needs the church.

Anti-traditionalism

A second problem is our anti-traditional attitude. There have been several influences on our thinking about tradition. The Enlightenment era was very significant in this regard. Enlightenment philosophers taught us to see the world as a collection of scientific facts, to look forward instead of back to the wisdom of the past, and to see the individual as the final authority for what is true. The ideal is the individual who examines the raw data of experience with no prior value commitments, with a view to discovering something new. Unfortunately, knowledge was pursued at the expense of wisdom. The past had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today?{5} Besides, the church dominated people in the past. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.

This new attitude had an effect on the handling of Scripture. Bible scholar Christopher Hall writes, "Evangelical scholars assented to the Enlightenment's deep suspicion of tradition and proceeded to produce a traditionless hermeneutic. The

‘Bible alone’ survived the Enlightenment assault against tradition, but only by becoming a timeless text filled with facts to be scientifically identified, analyzed and categorized.”{6} Now we were to interpret Scripture individually through a simple examination of the facts. “As [historian] Nathan Hatch observes, the Bible ‘very easily became . . . ‘a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way.'”{7} There was no need to look to the past for help.

Thus, evangelicals came to believe that simply by using their reason under the guidance of the Spirit they could understand the Bible as it was intended. Tradition and the history of exegesis no longer mattered. For some, it was a mark of triumph to be able to say one wasn’t affected by what anyone else said about the meaning of the text. Some actually believed that a *lack* of formal training was beneficial for understanding Scripture!{8} Mark Noll sees this as “bordering on hubris, manifested by an extreme anti-traditionalism that casually discounted the possibility of wisdom from earlier generations.”{9}

The Enlightenment’s anti-traditional stance was fostered to some extent by Pietism, the 19th century movement encouraging a return to Scripture and ministry by lay people. Pietism served as a corrective in a church which had given the work of the kingdom over to the professional ministers. For all the good that it wrought, however, its emphasis on the individual and his or her religious experience encouraged a focus only on the here and now. The larger church, especially the church in time past, wasn’t so important.

The Free Church Tradition

Following the Reformation, the Protestant Church split into multiple denominations or traditions. Out of the Anabaptist branch grew what is called the Free Church tradition. This includes such offshoots as the Baptist, Evangelical Free,

Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal and Bible churches. A core belief is that "the church is not an institution on account of its structure or external rites, but exists only when it is voluntarily composed of the faithful." Williams further explains: "There is little or no sacramental attribution to any place, thing or ritual, because only the believing members of the congregation are holy by reason of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. . . . The believer is free, therefore, to follow the faith in accord with his or her conscience . . . having no other ultimate authorities than the Bible and the Holy Spirit."{10} Thus, there is a rejection of authoritative tradition of the church.

For whatever good this brought about, it also meant "The councils, the creeds, the grand theologians, the apologists, and the philosophers—all could now be abandoned." Protestants tend to look only as far back as the Reformation if they look to the past at all. What we must understand, though, is that the Reformers were trying to restore apostolic Christianity. In their disputes with Roman Catholics, they sometimes referred to the church Fathers directly or indirectly to prove they weren't guilty of theological novelty.{11} For all their efforts to restore the church to what it should be, what followed them was a splintering "into a multitude of conflicting versions of the faith."{12} In time, that which was common to all, the tradition of the apostles, was diminished in favor of an emphasis on our differences.

This way of looking only as far back as the Reformers has produced "a huge gap in the historical consciousness of the Free church."{13} We have little sense of historical continuity with the church from the early days up to the Reformation. Williams believes we are in real danger of amnesia, of losing our roots, of forgetting who we are. "The formation of a distinct Christian identity in years to come will not be successful unless we deliberately reestablish the link to those resources that provide us with the defining

‘center’ of Christian belief and practice.”{14}

Constantine

Occasionally one will find references to the idea of a “fall” of the church following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. Some believe that under Constantine the church began its slide into a state religion, having been corrupted by power and money. The interests of church and state overlapped, resulting in the corruption of the church. This cast a pall over the whole of church history until the Reformation. Tradition is seen as an element of the corrupted, institutionalized church.{15}

While it is true that the new freedom the church experienced under Constantine did have its negative side, it doesn’t follow that the church “fell” as some say. Throughout history the church has made mistakes in its dealings with secular society and in knowing how to properly handle the freedom and power it has experienced. Some complain *today* that Christians become too wedded to political parties, courting compromise in the process. This was no different in Constantine’s day. That there was a new coloring to the church when it became established under Constantine, there is no debate. But the idea that the church quickly became corrupt, and that the councils convened during his reign were simply pawns of the emperor is simplistic. The church continued to be faithful to the task of clarifying and passing on the apostolic tradition. “The faith professed and practiced in the early churches was not determined by the political machinations of emperors and episcopal hierarchies,” says Williams. “The essential formulation and construction of the Christian identity was something that the fourth century *received* and continued to expand upon through its biblical exegesis and liturgical life as reflected in the credal Tradition.”{16}

Consider what came out of the period of Constantine’s reign. Says Williams:

> *I am claiming the late patristic period functioned as a kind of doctrinal canon by which all subsequent developments of theology were measured up to the present day. The great creeds of the period, the development of Trinitarian and Christological theology, the finalization of the biblical canon, doctrines pertaining to the human soul and being made in the image of God, to the fall and redemption, to justification by faith, and so on, find their first and (in many cases) enduring foothold in this period. All theological steps later taken, in confirmation or denial, will begin on the trail marked by the early Fathers. . . . The theology that developed after Constantine was not a movement radically subversive to Scripture and to the apostolic faith. On the contrary, the major creeds and doctrinal deliberations were a conscious extension of the earlier Tradition and teaching of the New Testament while attempting, in light new challenges, to articulate a Christian understanding of God and salvation.{17}*

The reason this is significant for our study is that some have let the idea that the church fell in the late patristic era cause them to discount the entire era. This is a mistake. There was good and bad for the church under Constantine's reign. Nonetheless, the church continued to develop in its understanding of the apostolic Tradition. We shouldn't ignore the early church because of occasional failings.

Tradition and Roman Catholicism

Because we so often associate tradition with the Catholic Church, it is very likely that the reader is wondering how this understanding of tradition differs from that taught by the Roman Church. Before beginning our look at tradition, then, let's distinguish what we're talking about from that which is held by the Roman Church.

In the first few centuries after Christ, oral and written tradition was thought of as being the same thing. The "canon" was acknowledged in either form. By the 4th and 5th centuries tradition and Scripture were distinguished more carefully, but still were seen as being of one piece. In the 14th century, however, tradition became a separate *source* of truth when it was realized that some traditions couldn't be proved from Scripture.{18} There were now, then, *two* sources of revelation—Scripture and Church—tradition, rather than *one* source in two forms. What the Reformers wanted to do was not to pit Scripture against tradition *per se* and throw out the latter. They wanted to let go of man-made traditions and go back to the true apostolic tradition. "The sixteenth-century Reformers were cognizant of this distinction and highly valued the Tradition located in the Fathers as a means of interpreting biblical truth. . . . The Reformation was not about Scripture versus tradition but about reclaiming the ancient Tradition against distortions of that Tradition, or what eventually became a conflict of Tradition versus traditions."{19} They wanted to avoid citing the church fathers as authorities for doctrines or practices, which were incongruent with Scripture. They rejected the idea that the ancient Tradition had become secondary to the traditions of medieval Catholicism. Tradition with a small "t" had begun to interpret Tradition with a capital "T"; the Reformers thus emphasized Scripture as delivering true apostolic Tradition to argue against Rome's claim to authority.

While some branches of the Reformation retained some of the old traditions, others didn't. The former wanted to be sure Scripture didn't *oppose* them; the latter wanted to know if a tradition or belief was actually *taught* in Scripture. Man-devised traditions were to be set aside. This is the more dominant approach taken by the Free Church tradition.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on Scripture along with a suspicion of traditions in general worked together to produce

an anti-traditional attitude that was unnecessary, and which has cut-off much of the church's past from Christians today.

Apostolic Tradition

Tradition and Traditionalism

The Greek word that is translated *tradition (paradosis)* "means a transmission from one party to another, an exchange of some sort, implying living subjects." It involves the idea of receiving and passing on. Williams notes that tradition is "not something *dead* handed *down,* but *living* being *handed over*."{20} It is as much a noun as a verb, meaning "that which is handed over" as well as "the process of handing it over."

Note, too, that tradition isn't necessarily something old. As one scholar writes, "The scriptural use of the term *tradition* has nothing to do with oldness or with a practice or beliefs being time-honored. A tradition, in the strict sense of the word, becomes tradition the instant it is handed over."{21}

This kind of tradition isn't to be confused with "traditionalism," which refers to faith in tradition *per se*. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan contrasts the two this way: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."{22}

We often think of traditions as being *practices,* such as decorating a church a certain way during certain seasons, or conducting worship services certain ways. But traditions can be teachings—beliefs passed from one person to another. Paul referred to his teachings as traditions. He exhorts the Thessalonians: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." (2 Th. 3:6, *NASB*. The *NIV* translates the word "tradition" as "teaching.") Paul's job was to pass on what he had been taught so those who heard could

pass it on themselves. This idea is expressed clearly in his letter to Timothy, where he said, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2 Tim 2:2)

Someone might object, pointing out that Jesus speaks only negatively about tradition. “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men,” He says. (Mark 7:8) But notice: Jesus is chastising the Pharisees, not for holding to traditions *per se*, but for letting the traditions of *men* trump the things of God.

Apostolic Tradition

The traditions that Paul passed on included three parts: the *kerygmatic* part, which was the core teaching of Christ (e.g., I Cor. 15); the *ecclesiastical* part, which dealt with matters of practice in the church (e.g., I Cor. 11); and the *ethical* part, which taught people how to live upright lives (e.g., II Thess. 3:6). Together, all this was simply called the Tradition (Williams and others capitalize the word to distinguish it from the individual traditions of churches that often distinguish them.{23}). “The Tradition indicates the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly.”{24}

The Tradition, then, was the substance of the Gospel message passed on from one person to the next. “Tradition was an expression of the original apostolic preaching,” says Daniel Williams. It was not “an extracanonical source of revelation . . . but a summary of the essential content of faith to which the Scripture, Old and New Testaments, testifies.”{25}

Apostolic Tradition was transmitted through “baptismal professions, credal-like formulas, and hymns. Such vehicles were the primary means by which Christian teaching and

spirituality was conveyed to believers."{26} The Tradition was also conveyed to the church in the writings that make up our New Testament. These, of course, were not an afterthought; they provided a fixed source of truth for God's people and eventually became the church's ultimate authority.

The Rule of Faith

The doctrinal core of the Tradition came to be known as the Rule of Faith. This was the "summary of the main points of Christian teaching." It referred "to the apostolic preaching that served as the norm of Christian faith."{27} "Those elements of what the church believed (*fides quae creditur*), a kind of 'mere Christianity,'" says Williams, "are discovered in the *regula fidei* or Rule of faith."{28} The Rule was widely recognized by middle to late second century, and universally recognized by the early third century.{29}

Although there was no set form for the Rule of Faith, which makes it distinct from creeds, "the essential message," says Everett Ferguson, "was fixed by the facts of the gospel and the structure of Christian belief in one God, reception of salvation in Christ, and experience of the Holy Spirit; but each teacher had his own way of stating or elaborating these points."{30}

Here is perhaps the fullest expression of the Rule, found in the writings of Tertullian.

> *Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the*

> *Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.{31}*

The Rule of Faith served a few important functions. It provided a summary of the faith for new converts preparing for baptism.{32} It also was used to counter the heresies such as those of the Marcionites and the gnostics. Marcion's understanding of Paul's doctrine of grace hindered him from accepting the Old Testament God as the Father of Jesus. This rejection was reflected in his treatment of the New Testament. He only accepted Luke and Paul's writings, and altered even those to suit his beliefs. Marcion believed that only those would be saved who accepted his teachings. Gnostic beliefs, which had to be answered, were that Jesus hadn't come in the flesh, or that the Christ had simply borrowed the human body of Jesus in the incarnation. Salvation was obtained by obtaining certain secret knowledge. The Rule was used as a response to such beliefs. It stood as a known oral tradition against the gnostics' secret traditions.

Since even these opponents of apostolic Christianity appealed to the Bible for support, appeal was made to the Rule of Faith for the proper interpretation of authentic Scripture. Says William DiPuccio,

> *The Rule served as a canon within a canon, enabling the Fathers to ascertain the correct interpretation of the Bible in fundamental matters of faith, and as a yardstick for measuring the canonicity of a particular writing. . . . The Rule was regarded, then, as the lens or reference grid through which the Scriptures were interpreted. Clement of Alexandria makes this distinction when he declares that the first principle of his system is the Scriptures as they are rightly interpreted through the church's Rule of Faith.{33}*

As a canon of interpretation, it served as the "plumbline of the truth." Without such a plumbline, "scriptural exegesis is left to the discretion of the individual interpreter or school of interpretation."{34}

Scripture, Tradition, and the Church

In the evangelical church, Scripture and tradition are typically set in opposition to one another. But in the early church the two worked together as two forms of the same message. As one writer notes, "It is not a question of whether Scripture *or* tradition has the primacy; nor is it even a question of Scripture *and* tradition; rather, it is more properly a question of *scriptural tradition*."{35}

At first, it was the oral Tradition or teachings of the apostles which was authoritative in the churches, because that was what people received. As the apostles' writings became available, they were accepted as authoritative because they were recognized as mirroring the Rule of Faith.{36} In the early church, Scripture and the Rule were never placed in opposition to one another; they taught the same thing.{37} These three—Scripture, Tradition, and the church—were considered one collective source for the truth of Christ. The Bible was to be interpreted by the church in keeping with the Tradition.{38} "Dividing Scripture from the Tradition or from

the church," says Williams, "creates an artificial distinction which would have been completely alien to the earliest generations of Christians."{39}

It's important to note, too, that the Tradition was never held above Scripture.{40} The two worked together. "The Rule, then, is co-extensive with the Bible, but it is not above it," says William DiPuccio. "It provides the *optics* we need to bring the Bible into focus."{41}

One might ask, however, why the Rule *itself* was accepted as authoritative in the early church. Wouldn't oral tradition by its nature be subject to contamination? What guaranteed it was *apostolic succession*. "Setting aside later alterations and/or distortions of this idea," DiPuccio says, "the original concept of apostolic succession (which included deacons or presbyters as well as bishops) was not so much a succession of ordination, as a succession of living *faith and truth* as these are embodied in the Scriptures and the ancient Rule of Faith."{42} Everett Ferguson gives us the thinking of Irenaeus on the matter:

> *A person could go to the churches founded by the apostles . . . and determine what was taught in those churches by the succession of teachers since the days of the apostles. In other words, the apostles taught those they ordained to lead the churches, and then these passed on to others what they had been taught. The constancy of this teaching was guaranteed by its public nature; a change could have been detected, since the teaching was open. The accuracy of the teaching in each church was confirmed by its agreement with what was taught in other churches. One and the same faith had been taught in all the churches since the time of the apostles.{43}*

Significance of the Tradition for Today

Does this issue carry any significance beyond historical information? Should the Rule of Faith have any meaning for us today? I think it does. First, it opens to us the teachings of the church fathers, providing a wonderful resource for understanding our faith. Once we recognize that the church didn't fall so precipitously in the patristic era and following, we can look to the church of earlier times for understanding and inspiration.

Second, by looking at the core message taught in the early church we can be reminded of the central truths of Christianity, which will give us a basis for evaluating doctrinal teachings today. Paul warned Timothy of the destruction caused by false teachings, and encouraged him to remember his teaching and to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of." (II Tim. 3:14) What Prof. Christopher Hall says makes sense: "The hermeneutical and historical proximity of the fathers to the New Testament church and its apostolic tradition demands that we listen carefully to their exegetical insights, advice and intuitions."{44}

Third, by seeing what is most important we can work to correct the disunity in the church. Think about what separates Christians in America. Right now worship style is a major issue. Ideas about end times and modes of baptism are two other divisive issues. When we think about our differences, however, do we stop to think about our similarities? Do we even *know* what people of other Christian traditions believe? We shouldn't minimize significant differences between churches. But by keeping our lines so carefully drawn, are we dishonoring our Lord who prayed for unity among His people? (Jn. 17:20-23) Maybe a look back will remind us of what is most important and around which we can unite. We can begin to break down the walls constructed by our differences over

matters which aren't so clear or which aren't as important as the central truths. Without taking hold of the Tradition flowing from the apostles into and through the early church, Williams believes we will see an increasing sectarianism "characterized by an ahistoricism and spiritual subjectivism," and we will be more susceptible to accommodation to the world.{45}

Fourth, we can be re-connected with the church of the past. Simply knowing about the history of the church gives us a sense of being part of something big; something that stretches beyond the world we see. It lifts us out of our provincialism, thus expanding our understanding of God and His ways with His church.

Finally, we will see even more clearly how down to earth our faith is. We can see how it moved with the ebb and flow of real life as regular people (like you and me) did their best amid trying circumstances to understand and live out the faith.

Conclusion

By reopening the church's past we will find a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom which can serve us well today. By learning about the early church and church fathers one will be both encouraged and challenged. Both are important for a vital faith.

There are a number of resources available for those who are interested in probing the minds of those who have gone before us. Daniel Williams' *Retrieving the Tradition,* Christopher Hall's *Reading the Scripture With the Church Fathers*, or Robert Webber's *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*{46} are excellent places to start.

Notes

1. D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition, and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
2. Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation: The Necessity and Temptations of Church Tradition" in James S. Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 80.
3. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 128. See also Harold O.J. Brown, "Proclamation and Preservation," 80.
4. Williams, 18.
5. Cf. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 24.
6. Hall, 25.
7. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), quoted in Hall, 25.
8. Hall, 25-26. Cf. Williams, 22.
9. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 127, quoted in Hall, 26.
10. Williams, 2-3.
11. Williams, chap. 6, 173ff.
12. A. J. Conyers, "Protestant Principle, Catholic Substance," *First Things* 67 (November 1996): 17, quoted in Williams, 15.
13. Williams, 5.
14. Williams, 13.
15. Williams deals with this at length in *Retrieving the Tradition*, especially pp. 101-131.
16. Williams, 130.
17. Williams, 139.
18. Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Tradition" by J. Van Engen. See also Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 96.
19. Williams, 175.
20. Williams, 35.

21. Father Andrew, “A Response to Harold O.J. Brown” in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, 201, n. 2.
22. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, “The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition” (100-600), (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), 9.
23. Williams, 36.
24. Williams, 6.
25. Williams, 97.
26. Williams, 68-69.
27. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1999), s.v. “Rule of Faith,” by Ferguson, 1003.
28. Williams, 92.
29. William DiPuccio, (1995). “Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and the Rule of Faith: An Ancient Key to a Modern Question,” *Premise II* (9), 5ff. capo.org/premise/95/oct/p950905.html.
30. Ferguson, “Rule of Faith,” 1004.
31. Tertullian, “The Prescription Against Heretics” Chap. 13, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3, 448-449, The AGES Digital Library Collections.
32. Ferguson, “Rule,” 1004.
33. DiPuccio. See also Williams, 97-98.
34. Williams, 99.
35. Everett Ferguson, ed, *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 19990, s.v. “Tradition,” by Donald F. Winslow, 908, quoted in DiPuccio. One can see the organic unity of the oral and written traditions by noting that both were called canon, first the Tradition, and later the Scriptures. Cf. R.P.C. *Hanson, Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 78-79, and F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 1988), 77.
36. Williams, 45.
37. “Tertullian clearly states that the Rule is identical to Scripture in content, though not in form.” DiPuccio.
38. Williams, 97-98. See also DiPuccio.

39. Williams, 14.
40. Williams, 96-97.
41. DiPuccio.
42. DiPuccio.
43. DiPuccio.
44. Hall, 196.
45. Williams, 14.
46. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999. This is a reworking of his earlier Common Roots cited above.