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Final Thoughts

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A movement back to the classical Christianity of the early church is clearly growing in much of the Western world. I applaud this interest and happily support the movement itself. I believe the Spirit is using such interest to promote revival in reformation. Given the state of the Christian church in North America and Great Britain, and the profound hunger of younger evangelical Christians for something bigger and more satisfying than pop culture Christianity, this does not surprise me at all. Why should leaders be interested in the early church when so much around us cries out for relevance?

Well, the first reason is that the earliest Christians knew the apostles of the New Testament and best expressed what they wrote and believed. These "fathers and mothers" do not have absolute authority but they do speak profoundly to us as the first followers of Christ beyond the lives of the apostles. It strikes me as arrogant to employ the ideas of Christians from the sixteenth century, and those written and spoken since, and to ignore the writings and insights of these first Christians. If the Holy Spirit has been active in the whole church for two thousand years then surely we can learn from *all* who have followed Christ in faith.

Second, though these early Christians did not believe that their authority was equal to that of the apostles, they did clearly believe that they were faithfully passing along the faith "once for all delivered to the saints." We ignore their insights and interpretations to our own peril. John Calvin, for one, saw this rather plainly and thus his insights are filled with references to and from this era.

Third, these early believers focused upon living faithfully in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They did engage in polemics and defended the faith against detractors, but their primary focus was upon life itself and presenting the gospel to

unbelievers as clearly as possible. Only later did the church engage in philosophical debates that often moved the people of God away from the basic life-changing message of faith in Christ alone. Making theology an end in itself was not their interest. They did theology so that they could live and die well. If we are interested in reformation then they offer some great thought to us in this effort.

Fourth, their doctrinal formulations were much less complex and philosophical than what we see in later centuries. This does not mean that individuals were allowed to teach whatever they wanted without a response from the church. There was serious accountability in the early centuries. A life of faith was clearly connected to a right profession of the faith. Truth mattered to these people!

Fifth, these earliest Christian writers believed that the common core of catholic Christianity was not overly complex. Cyprian, as an example, wrote:

> When the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, came unto all, he gathered alike the learned and unlearned. He published the teachings of salvation to each sex and every age. He made a concise summary of his teachings, so that the memory of the scholars might not be burdened with the heavenly learning. Instead, we could quickly learn what was necessary to a simple faith (cited in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, David W. Bercot, editor; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendricksen Publishers, 1998, viii. This wonderful dictionary provides several of my reflections made above.).

Irenaeus criticized heretics for advancing doctrinal formulations that went beyond the simple teaching of Jesus. He said, "They form opinions on what is beyond the limits of understanding. For this cause also the apostle says, 'Be wise beyond what is fitting to be wise, but be wise prudently.'"

In our issue on "Justification: Some Modern Reflections" (Volume 11, Number 2) we raised a number of thoughts

related to how justification language can and should be understood as *both* present and future. Some were confused by this argument. The response several have given displays how we need to work together at better communication. Let me explain with one illustration.

Traditional Reformation categories, at least as they relate to the justification debate of the sixteenth century, do not give sufficient attention to the future phase of justification as spoken of in the Scriptures. A concordance will very quickly confirm that justification is used in a dynamic way in the New Testament.

For some years biblical theology has understood eschatology in the categories of already and not yet. By this recognition exegetes are affirming the observable fact that many texts in the New Testament speak of realities that are already present and yet have a dynamic future aspect as well. This is not a contradiction at all. It is a way of understanding some of the biblical statements that are clearly true at the present time but also clearly have a reference to something not complete yet. The whole idea of the Kingdom of God illustrates this point. It is here now, "within you" as Jesus said, yet it has a future tense and is yet to come in all its fullness. Such categories of thought were simply not employed by the Reformers of the sixteenth century. This does not mean that they were wrong in what they saw. It simply means that there was more truth to see and recent commentators help us to see it. This kind of thinking is really quite common in the New Testament departments of most evangelical seminaries these days.

The struggle comes when systematic categories of theology, rooted as they are in the actual debates and heresies of the past, are employed so rigidly that you cannot see the importance of looking at a text in a fresh way in the present. Systematic theology is a valuable and important discipline but it must be driven by continual interaction with the text of the Bible.

This is how I understand the justification discussion. There is an "already" sense in which we can and should speak of justification in the present. This justification is not based on "merit" or "human works." It is not me giving something to God

that obligates him to justify me. I do not appeal to God to show mercy based upon anything I have done or will do. But the text of the Bible (cf. Romans 2:13) plainly suggests that there is a future event at which I will be justified and this is based upon something I do in the present. I take it that this is the "not yet" of my salvation. This is not in conflict with the first use but rather it shows the dynamic nature of God's gracious saving work. The reason many cannot hear this note of the Bible is because they only hear justification as the decision of a law court in the past, and not as an announcement of final acceptance to be demonstrated to all in the future. And the reason this sounds so wrong is because they only hear this conversation through *traditional* Catholic and Protestant categories.

In the end this all comes down to a methodological question: What method will be employed in setting forth salvation language as it appears in the Bible? Will we have an *ordo salutis* or a *historia salutis*? Will we think of the revealed truths of Scripture that relate to our salvation as "ordered" by logical /systematic categories or by historical/redemptive categories? If we think that salvation follows a linear pattern in which God does X, then we do Y, and God completes Z, then we create problems that do not exist in the text itself.

The longer I study the Bible the more I see that the biblical writers are a lot less precise than some of the theological categories adopted over the course of two thousands years of church history. This discussion focuses upon the relationship between faith, works, regeneration, justification and sanctification. In the words of a good friend, "We know that salvation is by faith and not by works (Romans 4), but this surely does not mean that works are not related to faith (James).

While it is true that this present debate is to be dated to events in the last century it is not true that others have not raised such questions before now. Jonathan Edwards, for one, held dynamic views of justification language that do not fit comfortably into the regular systematic categories of scholastic Reformed and Lutheran thought. A friend has recently suggested that even John Owen makes reference to a future dimension of justification (I cannot confirm this, since I am

not a specialist in the work of Owen, but I do know that Edwards was thinking about some of these ideas long before the twentieth century's renaissance of Pauline studies!)

So, how do we proceed? If we want to truly "hear" one another, and engage in a meaningful discussion, it will become more and more evident that the only way this can happen is in a context where we *listen well* and *honor one another* out of a profound regard for the Bible as final authority. If we can "listen" to the Spirit in the text we have an opportunity to speak with biblical authority to our generation. And when we are gone, if Christ tarries, the next generation will have to listen to us, and the twenty centuries of the church before us, and then write a theology that best interacts with their age and the unchanging Word. Out of such engagement with the text, and in the context of worship and faith, the church experiences fresh reformation. No serious Christian should doubt that the church in the West needs reformation in our time.

The early Christians faced almost everything the modern Christian faces each day. They thought much more in terms of faithfulness to a life to be lived than to a philosophical foundation that was to be defended and assumed. We certainly need more than the insights of the earliest Christians but surely do not need less.

The oft-maligned, and frequently misunderstood, project known as "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" (ECT) has continued to go forward since the publication of the first document in March 1994. The committee has been enlarged and the process has matured over the last eight years. A second document, issued in 1997, bore the title "The Gift of Salvation." It was an improvement over the first one since it candidly admitted that there were areas of real disagreement that remained. Some conservative Protestants continue to express their unhappiness with this whole process. I was one such Protestant in 1994. I have come to understand this ECT process in terms of the larger picture of things and my

thinking has moved since the initial effort in 1994.

My thinking began to change when I personally engaged the writers on this committee who were my friends. I knew that many of those on the committee were excellent evangelical scholars who had no intention of compromising anything essential to Christian faith. Over time I began to see the importance of the work of this committee and the great benefit of a dialogical process which would bring about a new level of practical unity between many who knew the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It is odd, at least to me, that people who are deeply committed to the theology of the Reformation would so violently oppose such dialogue. There is a long history of such which grows out of solid Reformed thought. Chuck Colson and Richard John Neuhaus are right when they cite a leading Reformed thinker of an earlier era to explain what they are attempting to do.

> A century ago, the great Calvinist leader, Abraham Kuyper, recognized that the common defense of a biblical worldview made necessary precisely the kind of effort in which we are today engaged. In his Stone Lectures at Princeton, Kuyper argued that, when we understand Christianity also as a worldview, we "might be enabled once more to take our stand by the side of Romanism in opposition to modern pantheism" (*Your Word Is Truth*, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, editors. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, ix).

Catholic teaching, since Vatican II, has openly recognized the place of cooperation among Christians in contending for a culture of life and truth against the culture of death and deceit. The simple fact is quite obvious—serious believing Catholics have more in common with serious believing evangelical Protestants than they do with many liberal Catholics, liberal Protestants, and undefined, or ill-defined, "evangelical" Protestants. This is not an official ecumenical relationship, and precisely for this reason it holds promise for meaningful friendships in ministry.

The ECT committee has recently produced a third document, "Your Word Is Truth." This work also includes a book by the same title (Eerdmans, 2002). The honesty, theological precision, and care devoted to this particular collection makes it important reading for all serious evangelicals. Wonderful essays by Timothy George, J. I. Packer, and John Woodbridge are worth the price of the book at $20.00. The Roman Catholic responses are also well done. The committee has clearly agreed to disagree on some important issues that still vex our respective theological understandings about authority. The sheer honesty of this approach commends it to all future dialogues about Christian faith. But what does this really have to do with life in the present age? I am convinced a lot. Let me explain.

I have seen this work of the Holy Spirit among Catholics and evangelicals first-hand. Emmaus Ministries, a work based in Chicago, seeks to reach and disciple men who are trapped in homosexual prostitution. The vision for Emmaus began when John Green, a cradle Catholic, had a growing desire to reach such men of the night. His priest encouraged him to study at Wheaton College, from which he earned a B. A. and M. A. degree. Here, his priest insisted, he would learn how to present the gospel. John made serious friendships with evangelicals in the process. Some of these evangelicals had the courage to work with him in the formation of Emmaus Ministries. Over the past twelve years this ministry has plainly born fruit that remains. Men have been delivered from their bondage to sin, families have been established, and lives eternally changed as men have entered the kingdom of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who takes a good look at Emmaus can safely say that this is ECT worldview thinking at its best!

My wife and I prayerfully support Emmaus Ministries. We attended their annual banquet a few weeks ago and found the atmosphere charged with the love of Christ and love for one another. Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, of Denver, brought the keynote address. He carefully employed both evangelical categories and historic Christian faith. He reminded us that our differences were still too great to allow us full communion, but

our common convictions should certainly allow us to reach out to a broken world with the love of Christ.

I agree with the archbishop. In fact, my agreement has led to criticism from some evangelicals who think I have sold the farm in the process. I will let God sort those issues, but I believe what I have seen parallels an episode in the early church recorded in Acts. Luke records that "the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles" (Acts 10:45). Has the Holy Spirit been poured out on men like John Green? Unmistakably this is true, and any fair-minded serious Christian can readily see it. How do I know? Because John confesses that Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth and the life" and his life lines up with the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. His view of the Mass differs considerably from my own. His view of the role of Mary also differs. And on a host of even less important issues we do not agree. But we both love the same Christ. We believe the only answer to the plight of sinful people is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe in supernatural conversion by the Holy Spirit and we believe in the core doctrines of the historic Christian faith. So long as we do not agree, we cannot pretend that we do. Truth is too important to compromise. But we can love one another and we can find common ground in the "culture of death and deceit" when we stand together because of our faith in Christ.

One of the more interesting books I read over the past few months was Michael Green's *Adventure of Faith: Reflections on Fifty Years of Christian Service* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). It is not by accident that Green is one of the most respected evangelical voices in the world. He is an evangelist, teacher and Christian apologist who has served the whole church faithfully.

This book, which is not an autobiography in a formal sense, reveals the heart and driving passion of a man who has lived well for seventy years of ministry to the glory of God. It is

also a reflection upon important issues such as reaching post-modern people with the gospel and defending the faith properly in our time. Green is shamelessly in love with Christ and the whole church. His catholic spirit is wonderfully displayed throughout the book. What he provides is a moving, simple, honest account of a life lived in the Spirit. His fast moving prose will move those Christian leaders who read it with care.

Green is the author of more than forty books and is currently the senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford and a special advisor in evangelism to the Archbishop of Canterbury. He also taught at St. John's College, Nottingham and Regent College, Vancouver. I pray that Michael Green will be granted many more years of service so that the church might profit from his big heart and generous spirit. Here is an evangelical statesman of the finest sort. Young men and women in ministry would especially profit from these wise personal reflections.

Jonathan Edwards often surprises me with his clear insight. The following example was recently sent to me by a friend.

> A great obstacle on the way of the prevailing Protestant religion, are those differences and controversies, sects and errors, among Protestants. These have been great stumbling blocks, and like mountains and rivers have, as it were, made the ground impassible. And possibly these may be removed to prepare the way of God's people, by God's raising up some in His church, who shall in a wonderful manner set forth divine and Christian doctrines in a clear light, and unravel the difficulties that attend them, and defend them with great strength and clearness of reason" (*A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, Harry S. Stout, John Edwin Smith and Kenneth P. Minkema, editors; New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press 1995, 54.).

One of the great writers of the early twentieth century was the Englishman, G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936). Chesterton wrote thousands of essays for the London newspapers. He wrote more than a hundred books including novels, plays, poetry, literary criticism, history, economic theory, philosophy, and theology. He even wrote detective stories (cf. "Investigating Father Brown," by Mindy Withrow in *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Volume 10, Number 4.) It was Chesterton who made that most astute observation that "[t]he Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried."

Mr. Chesterton often used the English language in unusual ways to make a point. He once wrote: "We are struggling and entangled in a fallen language, like men in the folds of a fallen tent." A number of recently collected examples of the speech of some leaders and shapers in our culture bear out the point quite humorously. Consider the following uses of our noble language:

"Whenever I watch television and see those poor starving kids all over the world, I can't help but cry. I mean I'd love to be skinny like that, but not with all those flies and death and stuff."
—*Mariah Carey, pop star singer*

"Outside of the killings, Washington has one of the lowest crime rates in the country."
—*Marion Barry, former mayor of Washington, D.C.*

"I'm not going to have some reporters pawing through our papers. We are the president."
—*Hilary Clinton, commenting on the release of subpoenaed documents*

"It isn't pollution that's harming our environment. It's the impurities in our air and water that are doing it."
—*Al Gore, former Vice-President of the United States*

"I love California. I practically grew up in Phoenix."
—*Dan Quayle, former Vice-President of the United States*

"It's no exaggeration to say that the undecideds could go one way or the another (in the election)."
—*George W. Bush, President of the United States*

"We've got to pause and ask ourselves: How much clean air do we need?"
—*Lee Iacocca, former president of Chrysler Motors*

"We don't necessarily discriminate. We simply exclude certain types of people."
—*Colonel Gerald Wellman, ROTC instructor*

And then there was this letter sent from the Department of Social Services in South Carolina which read:

"Your food stamps will be stopped effective March, 1992, because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances."

Surely Chesterton was right about our fallen language.

"I do not admire the excess of some virtue unless I am shown at the same time the excess of the opposite virtue. A man does not prove his greatness by standing at an extremity, but by touching both extremities at once and fitting all that lies between them."
—*Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)*

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