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WHY BOTHER?

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*The Place of Theology in the
Postmodern World: Is the Study of Theology
and History an Antiquated Discipline?*



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The opening lines of Charles Dickens' 1837 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, a description of turbulent revolutionary times in France and England, seems an appropriate starting point for a description of our times. There is warrant for wondering if the era of the birth of the noble experiment in enlightened thought differs significantly from the era of its unraveling and denigration. "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of darkness. It was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of light; it was the season of darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair," wrote the literary craftsman and social critic.

Many in the social sciences alert us that we are living in times of upheaval, a time of transition from one system of values and assumptions to another. Some suggest that the unease will subside as we make our peace with the changes; others that we are entering a dark, glacial age and the destruction of civilization.

Comfortable or not, at least two things can be argued from all of this. First, this is a time of rapid and often disconcerting cultural and social change; the contrasts between the world of our grandparents and ours is akin to Gulliver's transport to the land of the Lilliputians in its newness and culture

shock. Second, no amount of wishful thinking will make the negative features of the postmodern world, or even the "modern world," vanish as a bad dream in the night. The church will live and flourish in this era as it has in every other because its origins and power are not of this world, but from heaven; religious doomsayers will all prove as wrong as the naturalistic optimists. The former is true because we are prone to forget, in the flurry of religious activities, that behind the scene of events is the Lord of all history who "works all things according to the counsels of his good pleasure." The latter is true because human engineering and political agendas, enhanced by vast access to new information now accumulating at a truly staggering rate, have never overcome the destructive potential of human greed from within, nor can they. It is into this world, resolving to trust in the God of the heavens, that we face with joy and delight, seriousness and pain, the challenges of the new century.

THE DENIGRATION OF THEOLOGY IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

In this strange new world, how much of the past is still relevant and useful? Even more strange in our times is the suggestion that history and theology are beneficial for the health of the church today; but that is exactly what the church needs.

In our day, theology is regarded as an irrelevant, even destructive topic for the health of the church. Parishioners are more attuned to quick, easy solutions to their questions—the gratification of felt-needs and slick and easily grasped answers—instead of the pain of reflection and mental exertion. Pastors, not desiring to bore the flock of God or unnecessarily divide them, seem to view theology as a subject to be broached with extreme caution, even embarrassment, while waxing eloquent on topics that are hardly the central focus of God's revelation to us. Though perhaps a cruel judgment, it can be argued that contemporary sermon fare deals far more frequently with self-help and psychological issues than with the knowledge of the character of God, leading to behavior that is the fruit of sound theology. Thomas Erskine was quite

correct when he argued that "religion is about grace, ethics about gratitude." Worship is more often a celebration of personal security and temporal happiness than the frightening, yet wonderful experience of coming before a holy God whose demands are only met in his Son. "I Am So Glad I'm a Part of the Family of God" is not a song for Sunday morning; far more fitting is "Holy, Holy, Holy." Theology is wrapped in a veil of silence, like some haunting past hurtful experience. Or we are told that theology is actually harmful for postmoderns. I reject such talk as wickedly flawed and destructive for our Lord's church. Yet it bears asking, "What, then, is the value of theology in today's world?" Why has so much that has been written by so many over the centuries now lying unread? Is the study of theology and history of marginal value in the Christian community today?

While there are some notable exceptions, articles on the contemporary relevance of theology seen through the lens of history have been written generally by academicians for the scholarly community. Such defenses are rarely aimed at our pastors and an inquiring laity. Largely this is the case, I suspect, because the intellectual content of the Christian faith has been diluted. Theology is not merely about the occupation of scholars; the intended audience is that of pastors, Christian workers, and the Lord's people in general. A truly biblical theology seeks to avoid the perils of lofty but irrelevant intellectualism and mere speculation on the one hand and the often superficiality of popular literature on the other. It arises from the belief that the quest for the knowledge of God is not an idle pastime, that spiritual vitality in any era is found in people who know their God, and that the greatest danger for the church is ignorance of God. Fears and adversaries come and go, but only those who know God can change the course of human events, bring permanence from impermanence, and speak a word of peace in a world that knows only self-advancement, self-hope, and self-fulfillment. In short, theology is a call to the church to return to God and make him the center of its priorities and life.

Let's think a moment. Has the decline of doctrinal

preaching in our churches prevented the intellectual anemia and cultural irrelevancy that has marginalized the church as an advice-giver among Americans? Has the de-emphasis on God brought to the church more willing hearers and maturity to the people who are already there? No! I believe that the decline of theological content in preaching is the cause of the weaknesses of the church today. When the message of the church merely affirms the morals of the culture or makes us more culturally identifiable, the church has ceased to be the church. The essence of Christianity is not morals; morals are the fruit of a vibrant profession of it. If we aim to promote the fruit of Christian faith without its foundation in the knowledge of God in Christ, how are we any different from the moral Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, or secularist? A person can certainly have a solid home, raise good children, and contribute to the betterment of society without Christ. Those wonderful things are not what distinguishes a Christian from others.

I am asserting in this article that theology *does* matter in the life of the church today. Both history and theology are indispensable to the vitality of the church. Scholars have lamented the denigration of historical studies; departments of history have steadily fallen prey to budgetary restraints while investments for science and technology have mushroomed. If financial expenditure is an evidence of priorities, theology and history have hit upon hard times to say the least! Such decline of interest among our scholars and teachers has an interesting parallel to the disinterest in theology in the churches. It seems to be far easier to worship God with our emotions and affections today than it is with our intellectual energies. Did not the Lord instruct us that the foremost of the commandments is that we should "love the Lord our God with all your hearts, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30)? A fragmented society has led to a fragmented church. A culture that marginalizes rational reflection has infiltrated the church of the Savior; we live in a world that generally appreciates knowledge for its pragmatic and utilitarian ends rather than as sub-

stantive essence. The Bible asserts that the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. The pulpit fare in our churches, at times, appears to be sending the message that what is most important is to get in contact with the innermost recesses of the self. Failure, impotency, and disappointment come from ignorance of the appropriate recovery group or the latest "secret" of walking with God.

In short, the church seems to be in a rather awkward situation. Having struggled for several centuries to deflect the intellectual attacks posed by Enlightenment rationalism, which denigrated the biblical notions of God, sin, and grace, the church shows signs of imbibing those very characteristics: the penchant for micro-management (the emphasis on procedures, "steps," and "rules" for everything from church growth to personal happiness); pluralism; tolerance; and privatization (i.e., truth is only personal and private, not public or universal). Theology, once the "queen" of all the sciences, is rapidly becoming "an embarrassing encumbrance."² Thomas C. Oden suggests that the state of the church is that of "an ecclesiastical swamp." This has been produced, in his judgment, by three intellectual sources: first, the emergence of "an intellectual immune deficiency syndrome, a marked decline of Christian content in the churches with a corresponding emphasis on the emotions"; second, "an acceptance of many of the premises of modernity"; and, third, "an ignorance of the roots of the church in classic orthodoxy."³

If this is true, then the church is truly in a precarious time. The church, and I mean the evangelical portion of it, is in a strange situation. We are increasingly defined by and identified by the very movement we invested enormous energies to denounce as unbiblical and ungodly. It may be argued that modern evangelicalism stands under the same judgment as turn-of-the-century liberalism that also berated doctrine while stressing morals and culture. I write from the conviction that the church must be aroused to reinvest heart and mind in historic Christian orthodoxy. A Christianity separated from historical credibility is not a biblical faith; a Christianity without theology is morality and not the "faith once for all deliv-

ered to the saints of God" (Jude 3).

THE PLACE OF THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

While theology is not to be confused with the Bible, there is an inseparable linkage between the two. As the Spirit of God and the Word of God are never severed (that is, God speaks most assuredly through his Word to our consciences, both private and corporate), so the Word and theology are inseparable. The source of our knowledge of God, which is the meaning of the term "theology," is fundamentally Word and Spirit related. Theology is the fruit of the study of the Word that is the voice of God.

The role of theology in the church is at least four-fold. First, the task of the skilled theologian or pastor is to gather together the knowledge of God available to us with a view to the church's worship and service. Older theologians, particularly of the English Puritan tradition, did not seem to define theology in cognitive terms (i.e., the science of the knowledge of God) though their endeavor to understand the Scriptures was remarkable as a scientific endeavor. They often referred to it as "the art of living unto God" or "the art of living blessedly forever." Theology was neither a mere intellectual discipline nor the attainment of a body of knowledge; it was a means to an end, a godly life. Theology, then, may be defined as the distilled knowledge of God that is the foundation of a walk with God. No one can walk with a person they do not know, neither can we say we walk with God if we do not have an accurate knowledge of him. It is not about the admiration of gathered insights, however wonderful. It is about responding appropriately and regularly to the God revealed to us. This is the task of the pastor for his people. The pastor is to lead his people to a deepening knowledge of God. His tool is a knowledge of God derived from the Bible.

A second function of theology, and here I have in mind historical theology, is to preserve the church from fads and novelty. Knowledge of the past keeps the church from confusing the merely contemporary with the enduringly relevant; it distinguishes the transient from the permanent. In so doing,

it spares the church of harmful diversions, which at the moment may appear promising. Knowledge of the past bequeaths a stability and confidence in a world where flamboyant voices lend credibility to spurious ideas promising success. In essence, theology presents to the church a valuable accumulation of enduring insights, often acquired at an enormous price, without expense to us along with many relevant lessons and warnings. It abounds in lessons and examples, both positive and negative, for the contemporary church. It thus functions with a view to the growth and maturity of the church by increasing the church's understanding of its teaching. The relationship between the study of systematic theology and the study of historical theology is integral. Theology is both a science and an art concerning itself with the meaning of the Bible. Historical theology is a discipline that seeks to understand what the church has taught that the Bible teaches. The two disciplines function together. Knowledge of the past provides a wealth of insight about the meaning of texts. History is not opposed to creativity, though it is opposed to novelty.

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Third, theology in its historic context and development will preserve the church from error; it provides both apologetic and polemic weapons against deception. The accumulated wisdom of the church can provide an arsenal of arguments as we struggle to preserve the church today from its opponents within and without. For example, the church has been ravaged both by an over-intellectualization of the gospel, as well as by a de-emphasis on the cognitive aspects of the faith; it has alternated between an arid faith full of knowledge but with little vitality and an experienced-centered faith with little

intellectual content. An over-emphasis in either direction has proven destructive to Christian experience. Though a contemporary issue, this is not the first time that the church has been forced to articulate the relationship between "the faith as known" and "the faith as experienced." The collective insights of the past are instructive in gaining a perspective.

Another issue that has recurred in the church is (the question of) the cause of something and its proper effect. Are morals in some sense the cause of salvation or are they the necessary and proper effect? The struggle of the church in the past with this issue provides helpful insights as we attempt to handle the same controversies in a contemporary setting.

Fourth, knowledge of history and theology provide a bulwark against pride and arrogance borne of the thought that any one church or ecclesiastical tradition stands in the exclusive heritage of first century orthodoxy. While all ecclesiastical expressions of the church today mirror a continuity with the one, holy, and apostolic church, there are also significant discontinuities as well. Various ecclesiastical traditions, whether Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Congregational, claim biblical warrant for their structures yet each have evolved forms. Some have more elaborate structures than others. But do they possess explicit biblical justification for all their forms? Church structure often has emerged out of a particular historic setting and answers needs of the time. While it may be argued that one form or another more faithfully reflects the Bible, each evidences modification from the embryonic structure of the New Testament.

Knowledge of continuity in the midst of discontinuity should have a multiple function. First, it should cause us to be careful in claiming a biblical precedent for all that any particular church does. Second, it should cause us to make continuity with the New Testament, not later additives, the ground of true fellowship. And, third, it should cause us to focus on those areas of truth that are truly timeless and enduring, recognizing we all cling to certain things that are more a part of our tradition and our own accustomed way of doing things than strictly biblical.

In the process of the proclamation and defense of the faith through the centuries, the church has become the heir of a rich treasure. In countless books and other forms of literary witness men and women have recorded their faith in action. With literary skill and biblical insight the people of God have defended the faith, explained its deepest complexities, and revealed its practical implications. It is not too much to assert, it seems, that much of the literature produced by the church today appears trite, superficial, and anemic when compared to the rich treasury of the centuries. The works of Athanasius, Augustine, Cyril of Jerusalem, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and the English Puritans, to mention some now silent voices, have bequeathed such a wonderful heritage of insights that we are impoverished if we remain in ignorance of them.

Finally, knowledge of doctrine supports the Bible's witness to the triumph of the church. Through times of duress and trial the people of God have been preserved and steadfastly have proclaimed the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The devil has employed every strategy to destroy the church, armies have marched against it, faithless scholarship has relentlessly assaulted it, internal bickering has rent it, and martyrdom has depleted its ranks from time to time. Yet the church marches forward in triumphal anticipation of the great consummation when the kingdoms of this world will be put under Christ's feet, and the bride, without spot or blemish, will be given to the king. Theology witnesses to the truth of the Scriptures that the world will not end with some deluded false messiah pulling off the ultimate threat to destroy the globe through a nuclear holocaust, holding the world hostage, but in the glorious reign of the King of Kings.

CAN WE HAVE A KNOWLEDGE OF GOD WITHOUT THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY?

Certain basic assumptions support the endeavor of studying theology. Our fundamental assumption is that there is truth available to us; it is found both in the Bible and in the church's study of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God written; Christ is the Word of God revealed in it; and the Spirit is

the voice of God in it revealing Christ. The Bible is the work and witness of the triune God. Faith is Word-invoked by the Spirit who reveals Christ, our redeemer, enlightening our eyes, redeeming the soul, and infusing the very life of God into us. With child-like embrace, the church has clung to the Bible, searching its pages for direction in life and work. The central focus of the Bible is Christ.

A second assumption is that the Bible has been and can be accurately understood by the church. The Spirit promised through the apostle John that he would lead us into all truth (1 John 2:27). While this has been the subject of considerable discussion, it cannot possibly mean that all the details of orthodoxy are universally known in the church or that unanimity of teaching would prevail. There is simply too much division of opinion in the churches. "All truth" seems to be a reference not to all truth without distinction, but to all truth without exception; it embraces what Christians essentially believe and have commonly embraced across all traditions and denominations. It is a reference to Christ, his person and his work, which the Spirit reveals universally to all believers. While Christians have not been able or are able to agree on a wide range of topics (e.g., the sacraments, spiritual gifts, form of church government, eschatology), there is common consent in the redeemed community about the Lord Jesus Christ.

A third assumption is more difficult to explain. It is the idea that our understanding of what the Bible teaches or says (i.e., theology, doctrine, and dogma) has evolved both negatively and positively. History tells us that theology often has deviated from the path of biblical permissibility while simultaneously it has maintained a remarkable congruity to it. It is one of the duties of the historical theologian and pastor to demonstrate how the church has stood in continuity and discontinuity with the apostolic age.

While the evangelical Christian church has correctly understood the essentials of the gospel, this does not suggest that in every particular the various churches stand in continuity with the apostles' teachings; this is a logical impossibility. Either one particular community is in conformity with the

first century revelation of God or none of them is in every detail. It is my understanding that no single assembly of saints or denomination, however orthodox, evangelical, or primitive, strictly follows the Bible. While the church has sought to be always faithful, the meaning of texts is often subject to more than one interpretation. Theology is often the art of establishing central, classic texts, and every system of doctrine may fail to give proper regard to certain other proof texts. Circumstances also can furnish profound insight into the meaning of texts or current prejudices. No single individual, church, or denomination has escaped human frailty, though there is continuity and uniformity in the essentials of Christ, his person and work.

A fourth assumption is that theology has been forged in church history; the content of our faith was given by the apostles and understood clearly through the centuries in the believing church. However, the explanation of the revelation of God, not the fact of it, has emerged in history. It is amid attack from the enemies of the church or the serious intellectual inquiries of those inside the church that has occasioned the development of theology.

The Bible neither came to us completely intact as today nor with a topical index! It came to us a volume at a time; it was the verbal expression of the oral message of the church. For example, some have argued that the doctrine of the absolute co-equality of Christ with God implied that Christianity was not a monotheistic faith, an early Gnostic charge. Today some claim that the idea of the deity of Christ is not a first-century truth, but one that was invented in the fourth century by the bishops of the church at the first ecumenical council, Nicea (325). The Gnostics understood that the early churchmen made this claim; others deny that they ever made the claim. The answer is that the church has always made the claim, but it took serious reflection upon the Scriptures, as well as other circumstances, to explain, not invent, it. Theology is made in history; it is the result of the study of the revelation of God. It is a human endeavor by fallible people who engage all their intellectual strength and Spirit-inspired ability to under-

stand an infallible book with the sure promise that he will lead us into "all truth." Theology is a historical question and answer exercise. Presented with questions, apparent difficulties with the coherency of our faith, the church has given them serious thought. The church, in thinking about the inquiries, has reflected deeply on the Bible as the fountain for the substance of an adequate reply. Those answers, when delivered in written form, are doctrine. This formulated reply derived from the Holy Scriptures, the church has used to answer her critics.

CAN WE HAVE A KNOWLEDGE OF GOD WITHOUT THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY AND HISTORY?

While scholars throughout the disciplines of historical studies follow the same basic method of research, generally the rudiments set forth by Francis Bacon years ago, there are significant differences in their philosophical assumptions in approaching the task. The overarching assumption for the Christian pastor is a belief in the sovereignty of God in all human affairs and the decreed outworking of his purposes. His pastoral work is a blending of the data derived from the Bible including history and prophecy as well as the study of the events and various circumstances outside the Bible. A rather insightful attempt at writing a history of mankind employing this method was devised by the American Puritan Jonathan Edwards in his *A History of Redemption* (1739) to which I am indebted for many of my own views in the matter. In this particular book, Edwards suggests that the divine purpose in creating and sustaining mankind through the centuries is that God is gathering a bride for his Son, the Lord Jesus.

The Bible describes human history from beginning to end; it is selective of material and there are enormous gaps in the story, particularly of the events between the two testaments and the two advents or comings of Christ as well as the creation itself. The Bible begins with a description of a created, unspoiled garden and concludes in the same fashion, one in time and the other in eternity. The function of the book is also two-fold. It is a revelation of comfort and condescension.

It is about the comfort of God for his people through his condescension to them through prophets, judges, and kings though most perfectly and completely in the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is about his triumph in and through history. History is really a redemptive drama! If the subject of the Bible is Christ, the central event in the revelation of God is the cross.

The Bible is composed of two testaments or covenants, an old one and a new one. The Old Testament is a book of shadows; the ceremonies and symbols the ancient people of God anticipated the coming of a promised deliverer. Beginning with the promise to Adam after the Edenic catastrophe (Genesis 3:15), God progressively revealed the One who would crush evil. The Old Testament describes his person and his work. Gradually the former is unveiled as details about him are progressively disclosed (e.g., he is to be a male; a Semite; a son of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob; a son of Judah; a son of David). His work is gradually unveiled through ceremonies such as the Passover and the Day of Atonement. The summit of the shadowed unveiling is the revelation of Isaiah the prophet (chapter 53). In essence the Old Testament era is one of anticipation of the coming of the vaguely explained deliverer, shadows that gradually take on substance.

No longer revealed in shadow as in the Old Testament (Hebrews 1:1), Christ stands in his wonderful clarity in the New Testament revelation, where the person and work of the promised deliverer is unmistakably unveiled. The central event of the Bible is Calvary where God's promised deliverer became mankind's redeemer. There he rendered a sacrifice, a payment in his own life's blood, to divine justice in behalf of sinners, where atonement was made for sin, so that God could justly and freely forgive sin without a violation of his holiness.

The first of two monumental events in the Bible, one of two central foci of the book, is the cross of Christ. The long-anticipated Christ became our sin-bearer enduring the wrath of God due the sinner (2 Corinthians 5:21). There the debt of sin was paid so that God could be both just in his character

remaining always holy and yet justifying, declaring sinners righteous in his sight.

Beyond the gospels and in the epistles God revealed something of the early history of the church. Then through prophecy we are told about his second coming, not as a savior but as the Lord and king of history.

The second grand focus of the Bible is his return as king to rule over his redeemed in a renovated garden. If the great period before the advent of Christ can be called one of anticipation, the period before his coming again may be called one of both anticipation and reflection. Christians the world over have a double view as they gather for worship week after week; we express expectancy of the Lord's return and we reflect in the study of the Scriptures on his first coming, either from shadowed, Old Testament texts or the clearer New Testament revelation. At the end of time, when Christ comes to reign as king over the earth, the third era will commence, the era of fulfillment. All the promises of God, from both testaments, will come to fruition just as the Bible indicates; righteousness will prevail, not chaos. The era between the two advents of the Savior comprise the period of the history of the church, the era of the development of the apostle's doctrine.

A PLEA FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF THEOLOGY IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD: THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY IS AT THE HEART OF OUR TASK

Having written on the history of Christian thought and the importance of theology for the church today, I am compelled to ask the question that haunts every writer. Are my thoughts a service to the Lord's church or has all this work simply added to the proliferation of small, useless ideas that have littered the publishing landscape? Does anyone really care about theology anymore?

These concerns are particularly intense because we are now living in the world of post-modernity. We exist within a culture that has repudiated many of the assumptions of modernity, such as the importance of the rational, the propriety of the orderly, and the possibility of objective truth. We

live in a world where personality has more street value than character, psychological wholeness than spiritual authenticity. We find ourselves in a world where pleasures are embraced without moral norms and social responsibility. Christian truth is attacked not so much for its particular assertions, but for its fundamental claim that there is such a thing as binding, objective truth. The quest for truth has been replaced with the preoccupation for pleasure and entertainment. Thus, we live in a world of the therapeutic and the psychological, an endless quest for self-fulfillment and entitlement. Sin has become little more than the infringement of personal rights and privileges; there is little thought of defining it by the standard of the holiness of God. It is in this kind of a world that the question of the relevance of theology is raised. With so much interest in the management of life, what is the benefit of such a seemingly esoteric thing as timeless, transcendent, historic truth?

The question is complicated by the fact that modern evangelicalism is in a state of crisis. The very community that historically has been deeply interested in transcendent, timeless truth seems more earnestly intent upon focusing on the merely private, personal, and temporal. If I could be so blunt, the church has lost its soul. The quest for contemporary relevance has led it down the path of increasing irrelevancy and marginalization. The evangelical church is on the brink of becoming another of the many social, do-good agencies whose mission purpose has to do with helping people more fully to enjoy this life while neglecting the implications of eternity. While our culture has shown a marked inclination to secularism, the church seems to have followed suit. One of our recent Christian social critics has summarized the problem quite succinctly, "The stream of historic orthodoxy that once watered the evangelical soul is now damned by a worldliness that many fail to recognize as worldliness because of the cultural innocence with which it presents itself."⁴ This is characterized by a decline of Christian content in teaching and preaching, with an accompanying interest in self-help programs that merely promise a better management of everyday crises. There is also

an appalling ignorance in the churches of their rich Christian heritage.⁵ Mark Noll speaks of “the scandal of the evangelical mind,” the denigration of the intellectual content of the faith and the elevation of the subjective and personal.⁶ Barna complains that the average Christian is uninterested in life-changing religious convictions, having little more than the most superficial awareness of sin, grace, and redemption.⁷

This moral and intellectual crisis comes to the evangelical church when Christianity is without a serious secular opponent; there are no potent rivals in our culture making claims to having objective, final truth. Such truth claims have been abandoned in the postmodern experience.

David Wells has found a general parallel to the situation in the churches today to the era just prior to the Reformation in the sixteenth century. First, the two churches, he suggests, are similar in that they each manifest a lack of confidence in the Word of God. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the denigration of the Scriptures was manifested in the church’s appeal to papal pronouncements; today, it is to business know-how and psychological counseling. Second, both churches reflect a flawed understanding of the seriousness of sin. One of our philosophers, having reflected on the decline of the discussion of sin within his own religious heritage simply has stated: “The new language of Zion fudges: ‘Let us confess our problem with human relational adjustment dynamics, and especially our feebleness in networking.’ . . . ‘Peanut Butter Binge’ and ‘Chocolate Decadence’ are sinful; lying is not. The measure of sin is caloric.”⁸ Third, in both instances the church, having lost its grasp on sin, has minimized the glory and efficacy of the death of Christ.⁹ Sin and grace are intrinsically linked. The former is the problem; the latter the solution. Weak, unbiblical views of mankind’s plight lead to a weak solution to it. Without the biblical doctrine of human depravity, Calvary is little more than a moral object lesson of how to behave when misunderstood and tragically treated. Christ is reduced to a pathetically misunderstood fellow who neither died for sin or rose from the dead to verify his victory over it.

These very circumstances are the reason for the plea. It is a call for the church—pastors, teachers, and laity—to reverse the recent trends that pose a threat to the historic gospel of Christ by humanizing sin and, therefore, speaking lightly of the work of the Savior. It is time for us to listen to the Scriptures for our message, not the beckoning cry of a pleasure inebriated culture. The need of the hour is not for revival; it is for something even more fundamental. It is time for a reformation in the church. Revival has to do with the extension of the gospel; the greatest need in the contemporary church is to rediscover the gospel, its glory and its power. It is time to return to the fundamentals of the faith and be refreshed in its truths, to gain anew a love and respect for the Holy Scriptures. Revival without reformation is religious fervor at best; revival out of reformation is the only hope of the church.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL IN CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION

My plea is a rather simple one. It is one that has been stated with regularity, but practiced infrequently. Theoretically, I suppose, it is easy to talk about gradation of convictions. First, there are those beliefs that each of us holds that are simply essential. These are the core doctrines of Christianity without which there can be no Christianity, the beliefs that one would hold as so central that there should be a willingness to die for them. Among these, for example, may be the existence of God, the deity of Christ, the atonement, and salvation by grace without any human merit. Second, there is that cluster of beliefs that are reckoned to be very important and are held with the same conviction from the Scriptures as those most essential truths, but with the recognition that there is legitimate debate among Christians on their interpretation. Often these are what you might call “denominational distinctives,” if held by a particular religious group, or simply personal convictions. Examples of these types of convictions might be a particular view of baptism or the Eucharist, church polity, or the chronology of Last Things. While they may be fervently held, they are nonetheless teachings that are subject to a vari-

ance of opinion and are not issues that should divide the fellowship of the saints in the broadest sense. Third, there is another realm of beliefs that are distinctly personal. They are neither core doctrines of Christianity nor those embraced in a creed by any particular Christian group. They are simply private, personal views that arise from the study of the Bible and the experience of life. Traditionally these have been defined as "adiaphoria," in matters of difference. They might have to do with certain moral issues that are neither prohibited nor propounded by the Scriptures. Experientially, however, these concentric circles of beliefs are often blended together; sometimes, mere personal beliefs are treated as core truths. My plea is that these distinctions be recognized and that our Christian pastors, teachers, missionaries, and laity make sure that the central truths be foremost in our proclamation of Christianity.

The cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith concern the person and work of Jesus Christ, the gospel. The most important person in all of history is Jesus Christ; he alone must always be the passionate message of the church. Without Christ, there can be no gospel that is really good news. He is the essence of the Bible. While there are teachings that are important, greatly adding to the maturity of the church, Christ is the keystone of it all. The very center of the Scriptures is Christ. The cross of Christ is the great moment of redemptive history. That should always be, along with all the teachings of Christ that fill out its deepest meaning, the essential proclamation of the Christian community.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE NON-ESSENTIAL BECOMES A PREOCCUPATION?

There is a hazard for the church of Jesus Christ when the peripheral becomes a preoccupation, when the core doctrines of the faith are superseded by other, perhaps even, solid and wonderful teaching. I see at least two negative consequences.

First, when the non-essential teachings consistently are taught, the impression is conveyed that they are the very heart and core of the faith. To be biblical means, at least in part, that one not only derives the content of teaching from the

Bible, but that one also submits to the priorities and centralities of the Bible. The pages of history are replete with examples of people who have majored on the minors instead of minoring on them. Such a tendency distorts the gospel of Jesus Christ when the time-honored central teachings of the church are substituted with the particular insights of a teacher or a group, teachings not shared by the entire Christian community. My plea is that we become "catholic" in our profession of Christianity. We must stand together on the historic Christian doctrines, majoring on them in our proclamation of Christ, and not allow ourselves to be drawn away by the attractions of novelty or complexity.

*Novelty will always get a crowd
and build a following, but it does
not last beyond the gifted and winsome
teacher or teachers who proclaim it.*

Second, there is also a danger in majoring on minors for those who preach and proclaim them. Novelty will always get a crowd and build a following, but it does not last beyond the gifted and winsome teacher or teachers who proclaim it. There is a rather wonderful dynamic in all this. Christ has so ordered things, it appears, that the enduring truths of Scripture last from generation to generation, but novelty is short-lived. Those who teach other than the core truths of the gospel as gospel-truth can be compared to a person who walks along a beach in the soft, moist sand when the tide is out. In this analogy, they leave their footprints or teachings, as it were, in the sand, but the tide eventually comes and washes them away. In past centuries, many have taught unique or novel insights, but most of them have passed with the "tide" of time. In refusing to major on the great and timeless truths

of the gospel, precious time is poorly managed, the gospel distorted, and the Lord's people confused.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

The history of Christian thought suggests that there is a timeless core of Christian truth. It is what we call theology. It has survived the battering of those unsympathetic with it and the minimizing of it by its advocates. Because Christ and his gospel came to us from heaven, it has and will survive the ravages of friend and foe. Will it, however, in the American churches? Or will our churches drift like the churches of the great European Reformation in the sixteenth century, the churches once vibrant with the teachings of Luther and Calvin, that are now emptied of all but the old? Do our churches have the potential of becoming tomorrow's museums? Our pastors and teachers must make theology and history their task, the pulpit and lectern their forum. In this era of theological drivel, we must be people of courage in the proclamation of timeless truth. The issue is not that much in our contemporary churches is not stimulating and exciting; it is that it is not eternal! "Help us, O Lord, not to be ashamed of the simplicity and wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To preach nothing other than Christ and him crucified calling men and women, boys and girls to this One who has loved us and loosed us from our sins in his precious blood. Amen!"

Author

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Notes

1. This article is a summary of my new book, *Our Legacy* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2001).
2. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), 300.
3. Thomas C. Oden, "On Whoring After the Spirit of the Age," in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 196.
4. *No Place for Truth*, 11.
5. "On Whoring After the Spirit of the Age," 196.
6. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 35-36.
7. George Barna, *The Barna Report* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1994), 44, 58.
8. Cornelius Plantinga, "Natural Born Sinners: Why We Flee from Guilt and the Notion of Sin," *Christianity Today* 38 (November 14, 1995), 26.
9. David F. Wells, *Losing our Virtue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 28-29.