

Reformed or Reforming?

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Which is it—reformed or reforming? The church is at its best when it is both. At this time in our short history, we in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church need to take stock of our church. I am told that we are the fastest growing Reformed church in North America. Why? One reason is that "Reformed" communicates that there is something fixed and unchanging about who we are because we serve a God who has given us his infallible, sufficient Word. "Reforming," on the other hand, suggests that we recognize that *we* are fallible in interpreting that Word. We are ever in need of renewing, reevaluating, and deepening our knowledge of Scripture. As children of the Reformation, then, we must ever be both reformed and reforming.

The Task of Each Generation

Renewing our knowledge of Scripture is the task of every new generation of believers. It is the responsibility of the older members of the church to teach the younger ones the biblical basis for our doctrine and the implications of the clear truth of Scripture for the faith and life of the church. Each generation must rediscover the truth of Scripture for itself. "Rediscover," however, does not mean starting with a blank sheet. Rather, it means humbly recognizing the biblical basis of the teachings of our Confession and Catechisms, as well as (I might add) our Book of Church Order. The failure to teach our children this marvelous map of Scripture truth, the Westminster standards, can actually lead to the traditionalism we should all dread. Jesus warned us about the awful tendency for man-made traditions to contradict God's truth (Matt. 15:3).

While rejecting traditionalism, though, we must inculcate a deep respect for the tradition of interpreting and formulating the teachings of Scripture. This may at first sound contradictory. In a culture addicted to novelty and individualism, *tradition* has become a dirty word. However, there is a vast difference between an unthinking commitment to "what we have always believed" (traditionalism) and an appreciation of the reasons why certain things have been believed. Scripture itself exhorts us to "hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13). Tradition is the body of teaching handed down from one generation to another. Paul speaks positively of the apostolic "tradition" (2 Thess. 3:6). "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thess. 2:15).

The radical individualism of our age asserts that *each person* is the final arbiter of truth. This is similar to the audacity of those who think it is the pinnacle of humility to disdain confessions, commentaries, and other Christian literature as "the writings of men." Certainly these are fallible. However, the Spirit gives the entire church, both today and in history, the wisdom of interpretation. As C. H. Spurgeon once said, "It seems odd that

certain men who talk so much about what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves should think so little of what he has revealed to others."

Some will say, "The tradition which Paul commends is the Bible, but the Westminster Confession is man-made tradition." We admit that confessions are man-made and therefore fallible. However, just like maps, they are perfected over time, making them reliable guides. No one would confuse a map with the actual roads. Traveling the roads verifies the accuracy of the map. God's Word is always primary. But unless one wants to start out drawing his own map, it is wise to have great respect for maps that have stood the test of time. They are an accurate portrayal of the landscape of God's Word.

"No creed but Christ; no book but the Bible" is a half-truth. Everyone has a system of doctrine. The question is, is it what the Bible teaches? American individualism reinforces the pride of private interpretation. The church has a history that we need to study and appreciate as we grow in the knowledge of God's Word. Not only will this help us to understand Scripture better, but it will keep us from error, as we learn from the church's past mistakes.

J. Gresham Machen and many others in the twentieth century believed that we are not living in a creed-writing age. However, Machen also believed that the church has a responsibility to write creeds. But without renewing our knowledge of what we confess, we are never in a position to reevaluate it—and reevaluating is a necessary companion of deepening our knowledge. If we do not believe in the possibility of creed writing, we will tend to place our confessional standards on the same level as Scripture.

Reevaluating what we believe, including our confessional standards, is the task of the whole church, especially her ministers and elders, at all times. Paul infallibly instructed us on this matter: "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). This means that seeking to understand (exegeting) Scripture has priority as we read our Confession and as we seek to understand our culture.

The Founding of the OPC

In the long battle over liberalism in the old Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA), the battle lines were drawn over the "fundamentals" of the faith. Thus, at the outset of our history, we had to struggle with this question: "What does it mean to be a Bible-believing church?" The liberal Harry Emerson Fosdick famously asked in the title of a sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" As far as the PCUSA was concerned, we lost. But, as Dr. Machen declared at our first General Assembly, we became "members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church."

At our next assembly, the question of fundamentalism was in essence raised again, but from a different quarter. Questions about eschatology and Christian liberty were hotly debated. We were forced to reevaluate our identity and beliefs. We had to ask, "What does it mean, not just to be a Bible-believing church, but also to be a confessional Presbyterian church?" On the biblical side of the chasm between liberalism and historic Christianity,

Machen and the Old School Presbyterians wanted to distinguish the OPC from fundamentalism. Thankfully, we affirmed the whole Scripture and nothing but the Scripture as our rule for faith and life. This has involved a thoughtful struggle. The reports of study committees and decisions of the General Assembly reflect the depth and breadth of this battle. These should be read by every member of the church. (Many of these can be found on our Web site: www.opc.org.)

Finally, deepening and expanding our knowledge of Scripture should always be on the horizon of the church's life. The "progress of doctrine" is perhaps an uncomfortable concept to some. It may appear that progress implies the fallibility of the Word of God. Actually it implies both *our fallibility* in understanding the Word and *our need* to reapply the infallible Word in our day.

This means that asking ourselves what our forefathers taught on the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of justification is quite different from asking what they taught on the doctrine of creation. The reason is that during the fourth and sixteenth centuries, the church was challenged to formulate its understanding of Scripture on the Trinity and justification. True progress was made by the church (not simply by individuals) over an extended period of time in debating these issues. The doctrine of creation was not controversial then in the way it has become today, with the advent of evolutionary thought. Thus, we need to apply the text of Scripture to this question with humility, patience, and diligent study.

Our former OP historian, Charles Dennison, pointed out two further areas in which the church is presently being challenged to grow in its doctrinal knowledge: the doctrines of the church (ecclesiology) and "last things" (eschatology).

Relying on the Lord through His Appointed Means of Grace

In renewing, reevaluating, and deepening our knowledge of Scripture, we must always remember the means of grace. For it is here, especially in the preaching of the Word, that the church finds its nourishment. Today the gospel is threatened by the church's accommodation of the text of Scripture to the text of the world. In the name of relevance, much of the American church has removed herself far from the text of Scripture.

The *immediacy* of the electronic media has seduced the church to marginalize Scripture in its worship and life. The arts of speaking, hearing, and reading God's Book are disappearing. The preached Word is the voice of the Good Shepherd (Rom. 10:14), by which we participate in the heavenly realm through our Mediator, Jesus Christ. This Word is being eclipsed. Worship is being transformed into entertainment. In such an environment, preaching becomes a mere prop, another means of self-improvement or of making a better world—of seeking to make *this* world our home. Our technological means are seducing us into thinking that *we* are in control, and that God depends on us, rather than we on God.

To combat this dangerous trend, the academic model of preaching is powerless. The theoretical lecture, which is necessary for laying the theological foundations in seminary,

will not help any more than the practical pep talk. The passionate quest to connect heaven and earth through the preaching of the Christ of Scripture from the entire Scripture is the only antidote to the postmodern malaise. This is the approach of our Savior on the road to Emmaus and of the apostle Paul in Athens.

In circles where the Bible is received as the infallible Word of God, the odd tendency is to treat preaching as something different from worship. We have preaching and we have worship. However, the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, presents preaching as the supreme act of worship. True preaching, which brings us into the very presence of God himself, is the only way to overcome the myopia of the electronic age.

The keeping of the Sabbath is the chronological context of worship, without which the world engulfs the church. This present taste of the coming heavenly rest is our vital contact with the risen Christ. This spiritual reality stands at the heart of our identity as a confessional church.

In conclusion, the electronic media, while expanding global information exchange, are at the same time privatizing individual experience. This trend toward radical individualism has been under way in American culture for well over two centuries. This, along with other cultural forces, is undermining commitment to the corporateness of the visible church, its worship, and its covenantal responsibilities. God's Word calls the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church to witness to, and participate in, a heavenly kingdom—in contrast to those who are seeking to build an earthly kingdom. Christ thus calls the visible church to be "counter-cultural."

Confessional Presbyterianism has a powerful heritage upon which to build a truly countercultural church—a church that will valiantly withstand the powers of this present evil age. Our heritage is rooted in heaven and moving toward the great consummation for which we have been graciously created and redeemed. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Heb. 12:22-24). "For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Heb. 13:14-15).

As children of our crucified and risen Lord, we must ever be both reformed and reforming, depending on God and his appointed means to build his church. To be anything less will not please or glorify him.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church must continue to renew, reevaluate, and deepen her knowledge of Scripture in humble dependence upon the Head of the Church. Then she will have good reason to exist for him, as a good and faithful servant of the Servant of the Lord. And then she will be able to serve as an effective witness to the broader church and to the world of Christ's heavenly calling to his people.

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