

Circulation of the Saints (8)

Doctrine, Schmocrtrine Number Crunching over Substance

What we believe matters. Doctrinal positions have consequences. Therefore, we need doctrinal awareness to keep the proper shape of the Church. But contemporary evangelicals seem to have lost their sense of excitement about doctrine. Already in 1969 Dorothy Sayers wrote: "Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as a bad press. We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist on doctrine - dull dogma as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man - and the dogma is the drama...."

Loss of Theological Awareness

Many evangelicals often stress style over substance. While they are upset by liberal theology in mainline churches, they appear more troubled by their tolerance of unbiblical lifestyles and the absence of an evangelical vocabulary. For most people, theology has become a secondary issue. Many evangelical churches no longer teach the theological foundations of the Christian faith. They are increasingly occupied with numerical growth rather than with in-depth growth through doctrinal instruction. As one megachurch pastor boasted about his church to the *Wall Street Journal*, "It is the fastest growing church" in the nation. "I want the biggest church I can think of." A well-known church-growth proponent stated, "I don't deal with theology. I'm simply a methodologist" - as if his theology didn't influence his thinking and his methodology is neutral. Theology is rarely more than marginal in the church-growth movement at the popular level. Instead, methodology is at the center and in control. In *Dining with the Devil* Os Guinness observes that the megachurch's disdain for theology and the seminaries is particularly striking. Theology is said "to be cerebral, theoretical, wordy, divisive, specialized, remote - obviously an intruder to the Holy Family of the spiritual, the relational, and the practical. The success of the superchurches, it is said, is the wave of the future. The traditional seminaries and their training can be ignored. They are on their way to join the Dodo bird." Hence, in megachurch literature a discussion of the traditional marks of the church is virtually nonexistent. There is a loss of a theology of worship. Contemporary worship has capitulated to pop culture. In worship many evangelicals are driven more by the market than they are by the Scriptures. Canadian church growth consultant Tom Bandy was asked: "How are worship and theology connected?" His reply: "In the first century and 21st century apostolic age, they aren't connected. Theology is largely irrelevant to worship. Christology is everything, however...What is crucial is that worship be connected with Jesus: the experience of Jesus, the grace of Jesus, the mission of Jesus. Worship, like Jesus, is experiential, relational, non-judgmental, and cross-cultural."

Is Bandy so focused on Christology that he neglects the doctrine of the Trinity, which is at the very heart of the Christian faith? The Trinity is the Christian doctrine of God. Do Christians not come together in weekly worship to worship their triune God in praise and prayer? Does doctrine not lead to praise? After the apostle Paul had expounded the great mystery of the doctrine of election, he burst forth in praise: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his path beyond tracing out!" (Rom. 11:33).

Our stress on doctrine should not be at expense of missions. Quantity growth and quality are not opposites. Both are essential for the well-being of the church. If we pretend otherwise, we surrender too much to the church-growth rhetoric. In Reformed theology there is no contradiction between building and maintaining the church.

Loss of Doctrine of Sin

While the doctrine of sin has not been actually abandoned, it has been muted to avoid offense. But the weakening of this doctrine goes hand in hand with soft pedaling the Gospel.

Megachurch advocates claim their aim is to meet people's needs. But the Gospel is more than meeting a need and healing a hurt. Salvation is more than a deliverance from emotional turmoil. True, the gospel is explicitly directed to human need. What is the greatest need of all? All who listen are sinful; all need reconciliation; all are guilty; all are destined for death and judgment; all experience the wrath of God in their lives. There are no exceptions. The Bible does not have an optimistic view of human nature. It has a bleak assessment of natural human abilities. The Bible has much more to say about human inability than human ability, particularly when it comes to perceiving spiritual truth. On our own we cannot discern the truth of the Gospel. The apostle Paul says we are dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2: 1-3). An unspiritual person is utterly unable to accept the things that come from the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2: 14). The sinful mind is hostile to God. How can a spiritually dead person listen to the Gospel? How can God's enemies start to love Him? This can only happen when God Himself allows the Gospel to come into someone's heart and life with such power that he is resurrected from spiritual death and brought to life in Christ.

Professor D.G. Hart of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, points out the implications of muting the doctrine of sin among advocates of seeker services. He says that a seeker service is "like saying we will design a coffee hour for people who do not like coffee. At some point, coffee hour may actually cease to be a time where people stand around drinking coffee. In the same way the worship that can be appreciated by people who do not desire to worship God or understand how he is to be worshiped, will end up as something other than Christian worship." The Biblical understanding of human depravity is crucial to the Gospel. When a Christian looks back to his conversion, he recognizes that his salvation was granted by God. He recognizes the truth in Ephesians 2: 8, 9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is a gift of God."

Therapeutic Society

With the muting of the doctrine of sin, many evangelicals became partners of our therapeutic culture. Someone commented that whenever Christianity is preached without its history or content, it is reduced to a social or psychological remedy, or worse, a manipulation of feeling, moving the individual into a contentless response. This is evident in the contemporary preoccupation with psychological techniques and the popularity of self-help literature. Self-help books are no more than hyped-up common sense for those seeking remedies to solve their problems. Someone even called these self-help books the "secular prayer books of a therapeutic era" which debase religion into "God's psychiatry." Much contemporary preaching accepts the notion that the hearers need emotional coddling and intimates that adopting the Christian faith will solve problems, improve family life and make one feel good. Though that may sometimes be true, the focus has then shifted away from the guilty sinner in need of salvation to "me and my problems." It downplays the call of Christ to costly discipleship, secularizes Christianity and cheapens it. The drift toward accommodation with our therapeutic culture is especially noticeable in the way many evangelicals interested in the church growth model look at the practical side of Christianity. In *Prepare Your Church for the Future* Carl F. George says that the church of the future realizes that God measures His people more by their obedience than by their knowledge of Bible facts. "Therefore, they've shifted from teaching to caring, from understanding to application." To show the churches care, they believe that churches should be known as caring places rather than as "teaching associations." The focus is therefore on nurturing within the context of small groups. For example, Willow Creek community care programs address everything from career transition and postpartum depression to homelessness and marital restoration.

Robert Schuller

Robert Schuller's writings over the years suggest that the language of therapy has overwhelmed the language of theology. In both sermons and books he offers simple step-by-step outlines and tidy sayings, like, "Turn your hurt into a halo," "Tough times don't last; tough people do," and "Give yourself a spiritual shampoo." Among some of his prominent books are, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* (1967), *The Greatest Possibility Thinker That Ever Lived* (1973); and *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (1974), all of which have developed his image of "possibility thinking" (related to Norman Vincent Peal's "positive thinking") as a key to successful living. In his most substantive book, *Self Esteem: A New Reformation* (1982), he even argues that the church should abandon God-centered language in favor of pop psychology. He defines sin as a lack of self-esteem. The work of Jesus Christ restores human dignity and enables Christians to overcome personal trials and pursue their dreams. Through his books, television broadcast, and his popular "Institute for Successful Church Leadership," Schuller's approach has become immensely popular and influential.

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