

The Lyceum

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"Has anyone heard of the Reformation?"

In the book of Acts the Apostle Paul encountered some disciples of John the Baptist while in Ephesus and asked them "did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" The disciples of John responded by saying, "we have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit". As I see and hear the things being done within Evangelicalism, I wonder if contemporary Protestants have so much as heard of the Reformation. Most Protestants adamantly oppose the Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the Pope, the rosary, confession and the intercession of the saints. The average Protestant recognizes the difficulties associated with the idea of purgatory and certain other things practiced and believed by Catholics. However, a close examination of some of the beliefs and practices common among Protestants will reveal that the distance between the two camps is not as great as imagined. This closeness is not because there is actual doctrinal kinship between the two traditions. On the contrary, it is due more to the fact that a large segment of Protestantism has drifted away from their theological moorings or at the very least they are woefully inconsistent in the interpretation and application of the Protestant faith.

The idea so prominent among Evangelicals that suicide is an unpardonable sin is a page right out of Roman Catholicism. The popular infatuation with angels especially guardian angels resembles the Catholic teaching on the intercession of the saints. And I think a

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Is The Doctrine of Justification Really That Big A Deal?

Martin Luther wrote this about justification, "this doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour". John Calvin wrote "Whenever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown". Is this just a matter of 16th century theologians given over to hyperbole? John Piper (a contemporary Baptist preacher) in his book "Brothers We Are Not Professionals"; has a chapter entitled "Brothers, Live and Preach Justification By Faith". In that chapter John Piper says "preaching and living justification by faith alone glorifies Christ, rescues hopeless sinners, emboldens imperfect saints and strengthens fragile churches". Why have these men placed such a high value on a doctrine which a significant number of evangelicals have only a vague acquaintance at best? Perhaps a more direct question is; if justification is that important why is it preached and taught so infrequently? The answer to that question is complex and too far reaching to fully address in one brief article. But I will offer a general analysis.

Let me begin with a brief synopsis of justification. God declares sinners righteous on the basis of imputed righteousness of Christ. This grace is received by faith; that faith is also a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). Let me point out some key features of God's declaration. First; "God declares" sinners to be just or righteous. Sinners are not made righteous but are declared righteous. The image is that of a judge issuing a judicial judgment or decision. Secondly; the basis of God's

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case can be made that the Protestant rededication system is a watered down version of the Catholic penance system.

The 16th century Reformation was concerned primarily with recovering the gospel of grace. The foundational doctrine supporting this movement was that of justification, as is widely known. But to establish this important doctrine Martin Luther and those that followed his lead had to first establish the authority of scripture over and against the Roman Catholic conception of the traditions of the church as the basis of faith and practice. Our Protestant forefathers labored long and hard to study the Holy Scriptures in their original languages in an effort to be as clear and consistent as possible in understanding both what the scriptures said and meant. This led to a prodigious outpouring of pamphlets and treatises on biblical doctrines and confessions of faith. But what is often overlooked or downplayed when discussing the Reformation at least among churchmen (secular historians have always recognized the Reformation's far reaching impact) is that it was more than a discovery of theological gold. It was more than an intellectual and academic rejuvenation with a scriptural bent. The Reformation sparked a vigorously integrated conception of the Christian life in terms of family, community and vocation. Free from the constraints of obtaining peace for a troubled conscience through the appointed means of a wayward church, the Christian was free to experience a full-orbed understanding of how to glorify a sovereign and holy God who was also abounding in grace. The spiritual life was no longer confined to the monastery practiced only by a select and dedicated few. The Protestant

merchant became conscious of the fact that by buying and selling at a fair price and by being conscientious of the quality of good and services offered glorified God and ministered to his fellow man. Protestant catechisms raised the bar of educational standards as theology began her ascent to the "Queen of the Sciences". The religious life was extended to persons and spheres previously unknown. In other words Christians thought deeply about what scriptures taught and sought daily to live out that faith. They were careful about what they professed and how they lived.

It means something in particular to be a Christian and how that is defined separates us from Catholicism. Failure to be clear on the distinctives of the faith can lead, and to some degree has led, us back into the bondage experienced prior to the Reformation. The division between Catholics and Protestants is deep and may not be resolved in this lifetime. However, as Protestants we must define, defend and declare the faith that was once delivered to all of the saints. We must be clear in what we proclaim and consistent in what we practice. To the shame of the church, the Middle Ages saw a Christianity that was superstitious with little resemblance to the apostolic church. The Reformation restored that faith. My concern is that having neglected the labors of our Protestant forefathers we are slipping back into the darkness and confusion that the Reformation delivered us from. The Reformation did happen and if we do not stoke its flames, we will find ourselves back in the darkness that preceded it.

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declaration is "the imputed righteousness of Christ". This righteousness is not infused or "put within" the essential nature of that individual but rather it is "charged to" or "reckoned" to that individual to whom God has made this declaration. That declaration declares that Christ's perfect obedience to the law of God is credited to sinners and that elect sinners sins are charged to Christ. Thirdly; the sinner receives this gift of the imputed righteousness of Christ by faith. Romans chapters 4-8 outline this cornerstone doctrine in brilliant detail.

So why has justification become so obscure? One reason is because some have assumed that you are saved by becoming righteous. And they consider the notion that God declares sinners to be righteous is contrary to all the Scripture passages which demands that all humanity obey God's law. Others fear that emphasizing justification by faith makes a mockery of sanctification. I think both of those objections are overruled in Romans chapters 6 – 7. However, I think the influence of modernity is another reason the doctrine of justification has been somewhat displaced among evangelicals. Modernity or modernism is a worldview emanating from the 17th century Enlightenment. This worldview maintains that human reason was not only the ultimate authority for determining truth, but was also the source from which the cures for human ailments would come. Modern man, rooted in Enlightenment presuppositions, was convinced that through technology and technique human problems could be solved and utopia reached. The non-doctrinal therapeutic Christianity that appears most dominant today is highly influenced by modernity. Propositional, doctrinal, confessing Christianity (of which justification is a part) is not welcome to those influenced by a modernity world view – Because it does not offer

techniques or formulas. Basically it is a self-help atmosphere vs. the biblical understanding that the foundation of justification is based on the fact that man is incapable of helping himself. When you consider that because of our fallen nature we are prone to self-righteousness it is small wonder that the doctrine of justification has free fallen and landed on very lean times.

But when you carefully and biblically consider all the steps, principles and formulas offers as a means to a reconciled relationship with our Creator you can see why this doctrine needs to be recovered. And more importantly why it is such a BIG DEAL!

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A Generous Orthodoxy.

Like most preachers I am hopelessly addicted to books; spending sometimes hours in bookstores (not to mention many dollars) browsing the shelves and reading as much as I can even if I don't intend to buy anything. But in addition to my love of reading books I also have a thing for titles. Sometimes I am drawn to a book simply because of the title. One title that has intrigued me recently is "A Generous Orthodoxy" by Brian McLaren. McLaren is one of the leaders in the emerging church movement, which is a self-described post-modern version of Christianity. It is not my purpose to critique this movement whose minuses outweigh the pluses. I simply want to consider McLaren's title which I find at the same time provocative and revealing. "A Generous Orthodoxy" suggests to me two things – **First**, it commends the importance of being orthodox in one's beliefs. The word orthodox means to think straight and the word straight refers to a straight line. So another way to say it would be that orthodox means lining one's thoughts up with a particular standard. Orthodox Christianity then is Christianity defined by certain objective doctrinal standards. These standards include the Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed and Athanasian Creed. It also includes a standard terminology. This means that biblical terms like atonement, sin, redemption, etc. have pre-established meanings that are neither open to reinterpretation nor redefining. Furthermore, various denominations have confessions that outline their common beliefs. These confessional standards are the basis of ministerial ordinations, with the ordination candidate agreeing to preach according to the respective standard. Seen from this perspective orthodoxy is a good and necessary thing. Without it a person would be able to claim to be Christian and hold to beliefs contrary to what is contained in the standards. A case could be made that this is increasingly a problem today. Many professing Christians are ignorant of the ecumenical creeds and historical confessions of the faith and have made claims on Christianity diametrically opposed to the standards they claim. Sadly in today's Christian environment the word orthodox is much vaguer than it was in the past. Believing that the Bible is the word of God, that Christ was born of a virgin, died on the cross, was raised on the third day and will one day return seems to be all that is required to be called a Christian (oh, plus they must be able to give a testimony about their conversion experience). While most of these things would be included in orthodoxy, historically the creeds and confessions have allowed us to be more precise about what we believe. It is for this reason that as so-called Christianity has "evolved" away from orthodoxy into a plethora of vague and subjective ministries, it has been the confessional churches that have stood firm as the custodians of historic Protestantism. It is not surprising that credal and confessional churches have been on the decline for quite some time now, while the more doctrinally vague churches have been dominant.

Second, what strikes me about McLaren's title "A Generous Orthodoxy" is that it seems to imply that orthodox Christianity has not been particularly generous. In fact McLaren's subtitle is quite telling; "Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN". With this rather extensive subtitle I hear McLaren describing the areas of orthodoxy which he perceives have been less than generous. In other words although orthodoxy by definition is restrictive, the implication is that it has been overly so. While I think McLaren is too inclusive in his vision of a generous orthodoxy, he does raise an uncomfortable albeit necessary question. Has orthodoxy Christians been too restrictive and intolerant of those that do not line up with their creeds and confessions? I would like to narrow the scope of this critique to Reformational orthodox Christianity. Furthermore, in the place of "Generous" I would insert the word gracious. So instead of a generous orthodoxy, what I was provoked to contemplate by McLaren's title was the need for a more gracious Reformational orthodoxy. The lack of graciousness among Reformed Christians is not a new criticism. And it should be noted that some of the criticisms have been overblown generalizations. For example – Reformed Christians are not mission minded or evangelical. The facts simply do not support those claims. But on the other hand maybe we have been too pugnacious and strident on other issues. Here's my point; Reformed Christians have led the way in denouncing superficial, subjective, experience oriented, non-doctrinal Christianity. We have called for attention to the irreverence of contemporary worship, the replacement of theology with therapeutic principles and the pervasive consumerism that seems to be epidemic in contemporary Christianity. And believe it or not our voice is being heard – By the same people we have critiqued. As a result pastors and laypersons are reconsidering both their message and methodology. Pastors are attempting to be more biblical and theological in their preaching. Worship leaders are trying to bring more substance to the worship service. It may not be the same as traditional reformed churches, but some are making a concerted effort to be distinctly orthodox. Consider this – There are those who have been under the influence of a watered down, doctrinally vague, therapeutic, consumer driven Evangelicalism. As they are made more aware and seek to stand on the foundations of historic Protestantism will they find a "Generous Orthodoxy" because they have been turned away by sound orthodoxy because all of their 'i's' were not dotted and their 't's' were not crossed. The latter seems to be what McLaren fears. I pray that this is not the case – Because what may appear to be a second Reformation will be more a mirage than a real movement.

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