

Orthodoxy 101:

Talk given at the Essentials Conference

The Gospel Still works. November 26, 2005

As the Essential Executive was planning this conference we thought it important to have a session where we could take some time to talk about orthodoxy. And for some reason I said "Sure, I'll give that talk". So here we are after lunch thinking about this rich and important word **Orthodoxy**. Orthodoxy is a word important to the Essentials Movement. When Essentials was founded in 1994 at a conference held in Montreal, one of the documents that resulted from those five days in June was *The Montreal Declaration of Anglican Essentials*.

As we think about the name given to that document we have a hint as to the meaning of the word orthodoxy. We can define orthodoxy as those doctrines that are essential to Christian belief and Christian practice.

However there is a definition of Orthodoxy that is even more basic than the one I have just given. Psalm 19 is a psalm celebrating orthodoxy. It begins with this paean of praise that contains within it this more basic definition.

1 God's glory is on tour in the skies, God--craft on exhibit across the horizon. 2 Madame Day holds classes every morning, Professor Night lectures each evening. 3 Their words aren't heard, their voices aren't recorded, 4 But their silence fills the earth: unspoken truth is spoken

everywhere. God makes a huge dome for the sun--a superdome! 5 The morning sun's a new husband leaping from his honeymoon bed, The daybreaking sun an athlete racing to the tape. 6 That's how God's Word vaults across the skies from sunrise to sunset, Melting ice, scorching deserts, warming hearts to faith.

This psalm is an expression of orthodoxy. Before we can think of orthodoxy as meaning right belief we have to understand it to mean "right" (ortho) "glory" (doxy)

When we think about the word glory is has to do with the character of God. So when the psalm says that God's glory is on tour in the skies, it means that God's character and personality can, in part, be known from the creation he has so masterfully crafted.

In these psalm verses we can therefore understand orthodoxy as creation in its multitudinous expression glorifying the character of God. In these opening verses of the psalm David declares the creation is itself orthodox in how it speaks of God's glory. The king reflects on how the cycle of day turning to night leading to another day declares God's glory. Then he further develops this cycle by declaring that the sun is like a newlywed who cannot wait to get up and greet his beloved, or like an Olympic athlete reaching for the finish line. I think what he is conveying here is the thought that just as a bridegroom wants to greet his new bride with enthusiasm and sprinter just wants to finish the race, so the sun has been created by God to give glory to him. The sun desires to do this.

Every day people are exposed to the testimony of the sun. The sun is the greatest symbol of God in nature. For just as the sun is needed to give light and strength to all living things on earth, so God is needed to give moral light and spiritual strength to people.

Here is David declaring that nature points beyond itself to God and so it is orthodox. Nature is to bring us to an understanding that behind this universe is the great intelligence and wisdom and power of the living God.

So you need to keep in mind that before anything else orthodoxy means "The Right Glory". As we grow in living in relation to God so that just as the sun gives glory to him, we in turn see it as the desire of our hearts to do the same.

In fact the opening prayer of each Eucharist is an expression of orthodoxy. We pray:

Almighty God unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify (glorify) your holy name through Christ our Lord Amen.

The Collect of Purity expresses with an economy of words how it is that we can grow in giving glory to God. As we open our hearts, minds and souls to

God he is able to cleanse our intentions and so shape our wills so that the way we live will glorify God.

It is worth noting that the words expressed in the Collect are echoed by what we read next in Psalm 19:

7 The revelation of *GOD* is whole and pulls our lives together. The signposts of *GOD* are clear and point out the right road. 8 The life--maps of *GOD* are right, showing the way to joy. The directions of *GOD* are plain and easy on the eyes.

Here is mentioned the resource God designed for the inner life of men and women. Nature ministers to and feeds and strengthens and supports our outer life. But here is that which touches the inner life, the Word of God. The Psalmist takes its characteristics one by one and shows us what God's word can do.

First, "the revelation of the God is whole and pulls our lives together" That is the widest term for all the written revelation God has given us. Another version speaks of the law of the Lord as being perfect. It is complete, there is nothing left out. It is comprehensive, it does everything that we need it to do. There is no part of your life, no problem that you will ever face in your life, no question pertaining to the things of the spirit and soul with which you will ever be troubled, that the Word of God does not speak to and illuminate and meet. So it is perfect, "reviving the soul." Remember that Jesus spoke of "rivers of living water" which would be available to buoy

up the human spirit and to meet its need. This is exactly what the Word of God is designed to do for us.

Second, "the signposts of the Lord are clear and point out the right road." God's word is dependable, and reliable. You can count upon this word to be true. Therefore you do not need to know a lot about everything else. The Word of God is not against knowledge; it is only against knowledge which does not begin at the right place. But even if you do not have a lot of knowledge, even if you are "simple" in terms of education you can still be made wise by trusting Scripture because it is sure, it is reliable. That is why we are exhorted:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight. (Proverbs 3:5 RSV)**

**There is a way which seems right to a man,
but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 14:12, 16:25 RSV)**

You can be deluded and deceived by some of these alluring, ungodly philosophies which float around today, suggesting, for example, that pleasure is the reason for which you exist, that to enjoy yourself is the supreme object in life, that anything you do toward that end is right. But the Word of God says, "No, that is not right!" God is the One who ultimately will give pleasure. It will be beyond anything you ever dreamed. But to follow pleasure for pleasure's sake is the way of death, and it will lead you on to that. The testimony, the Word, is sure.

Then, "The life--maps of *GOD* are right, showing the way to joy. " Do you not rejoice in your heart to know that you are right about something? When you get into a controversy with somebody and he argues with you but you have the solid assurance that you are right -- what a feeling! Well, that is the way it is with the Word of *God*. The glorious thing about this Book is that when the story is all told, when everything is said and done, it will all end up just as it is written here. This Book is right, it is the way things really are.

And, The directions of *GOD* are plain and easy on the eyes.

The charge is sometimes made that the Bible is a dirty book because it speaks of incest and adultery and fornication and homosexuality and other ugly things. It also speaks of malice and bitterness and is filled with slaughter and bloodshed.

It is true that the Bible contains these things, because it is a realistic book which deals with life as it is. But it never shows evil as though it were good. It always looks like what it really ends up to be -- sordid and shameful. And it never makes pride, jealousy, factions and the like appear to be inconsequential. It reveals them to be a terrible distortion of human nature, and reveals that those engaged in such behaviours are lost beings who need to be prayed for and helped and delivered from the clutch of its awful hold over them. The Bible is pure, enlightening the eyes, showing you the truth.

David then he sums this all up by saying: "*GOD*'s reputation is twenty-four-carat gold, with a lifetime guarantee. The decisions of *GOD* are accurate down to the nth degree." As we come into a place where *God*'s word is

working in our hearts we see that not only is his word "more to be desired than gold," he goes on to say.

"God's Word is better than a diamond, better than a diamond set between emeralds. You'll like it better than strawberries in spring".

This Psalm declares with a clarity that it is only when we are learning to express right glory to God that our lives can become filled with the kind of purpose that God has intended them to have. This is why being concerned about orthodoxy is of critical importance.

For you see it is the church that is to be the repository of orthodoxy. It is within this community alone that we have the resources to help bring people into that place where God's word and holy presence are changing people so that their lives, your life and mine, can be lived giving God his rightful glory. God has entrusted to us the responsibility to declare aright his praises so that people can in turn live as those who are thinking about God aright and living as Christ desires us to live. The first is what we call theology. The second is what we call ethics. But all right thinking and right living grow from our being in relationship with the God who has made himself known to us in and through his holy word.

As we think this through some more, we understand that a right understanding of God's character, results in right thinking which in turn influences how we live.

A cursory study of The Montreal Declaration will show you that its focus is on

Orthodoxy: Right Belief

Ortho: ecclesia: Right Church

and

Ortho praxis: Right Living

Another way of putting this is to say that the Montreal Declaration of Anglican Essentials divides into three parts:

Clauses 1 - 5 Focus on Theology: How will we order our understanding of God

1. The Triune God

2. Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier

3. The Word made Flesh Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God,

4. The Only Saviour

5. The Spirit of Life. The Holy Spirit, "the Lord, the Giver of life,"

Each of these clauses declares that Christian theology is Trinitarian and shows the intricate balance between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Trinitarian theology is like a three legged stool. If one leg is wobbly or broken the stool cannot stand. Likewise, apart from the theology that is thoroughly Trinitarian Christian theology is missing one of its legs and will falter.

Clauses 6-10 focus on Ecclesiology: How will we order the Church

6. The Authority of the Bible

7. The Church of God

8. The New Life in Christ

9. The Church's Ministry

10. The Church's Worship

As you look at the ordering of these five clauses it is of utmost importance that clause six is what it is. The Church always is to come under the authority of the Scriptures and is not to place herself over the revealed word of God.

This is clearly laid out for us in two of the 39 articles of Religion, a document that helps us to keep our bearings in the turbulent waters of the contemporary church. The thirty-nine articles contain as distillation of core Anglican teaching. Unfortunately they are often neglected today in Anglican circles. This has, in part I believe, resulted in some of the serious theological problems we are facing in the church today. We Anglicans in North America are suffering from a kind of theological Alzheimer's because we have forgotten who we are.

As I read through these three articles remember that this is classical Anglican teaching that grounds us clearly as a Church that affirms the supremacy of Scripture in the ordering of the church's life.

6. The Sufficiency of Scripture for salvation

Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. Consequently whatever is not read in Scripture nor can be proved from Scripture cannot be demanded from any person to believe it as an article of the faith. Nor is any such thing to be thought necessary or required for salvation. By holy scripture is meant those canonical books of the Old and New Testaments whose authority has never been doubted within the church. *Listing of 66 canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.*

19. The church

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of believers in which the pure Word of God is preached and in which the sacraments are rightly

administered according to Christ's command in all those matters that are necessary for proper administration. As the churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch have erred, so also the church of Rome has erred, not only in their practice and forms of worship but also in matters of faith.

20. The authority of the church

The church has authority to decree forms of worship and ceremonies and to decide in controversies concerning the faith. However, it is not lawful for the church to order anything contrary to God's written Word. Nor may it expound one passage of Scripture so that it contradicts another passage. So, although the church is a witness and guardian to holy Scripture, it must not decree anything contrary to Scripture, nor is it to enforce belief in anything additional to Scripture as essential to salvation.

These articles make it very clear that if we are to be orthodox in our theology we are not to order anything that is contrary to Scripture. These articles take on a particular importance today. Within the North American Church we have lost the centrality of biblical authority that has always been at the heart of orthodox Anglicanism. The revisionist theologies of today have taken their cues not from the revealed word of God but from some of the social, sexual, scientific and psychological innovations of the twentieth century. It is only as we take seriously this order, with Scripture directing the church as to how we are to govern our life that we can then rightly understand

7. The Church of God

8. The New Life in Christ

9. The Church's Ministry

10. The Church's Worship

Orthodox ecclesiology finds its basis in the word of God. Out of a right understanding of God and of the church the declaration then turns to ethics.

Clauses 11-15 Focus on Ethics: How will we order our lives

11. The Priority of Evangelism

12. The Challenge of Global Mission

13. The Challenge of Social Action

14. The Standards of Sexual Conduct

15. The Family and the Call to Singleness

St. Paul is very clear in Romans twelve that all ethics finds its origins in the character of God and the nature of the Church. Having spent the first

eleven chapters of Romans talking theology and ecclesiology he turns in chapter twelve to a discussion of ethics. Listen to what he says:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. ² Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

This is what ethics is all about. It asks and answers the question "How shall we live day by day?" Paul says that our lives are to be an offering to God. When we grasp what it means to offer ourselves to him we will be much more thoughtful about how we respond to the culture in which we live. Because we are living under the grace of orthodoxy we will think biblically about evangelism, social action, mission, human sexuality and the family.

Orthodox faith and practice find expression in the fifteen clauses of the Montreal Declaration of the Anglican Essentials. It also is reiterated in the closing verses of Psalm 19:

11 There's more: *God's Word* warns us of danger and directs us to hidden treasure. 12 Otherwise how will we find our way? Or know when we play the fool? 13 Clean the slate, *God*, so we can start the day fresh!

Keep me from stupid sins, from thinking I can take over your work; Then I can start this day sun-washed, scrubbed clean of the grime of sin. 14 These are the words in my mouth; these are what I chew on and pray.

Accept them when I place them on the morning altar, *O God*, my Altar-Rock, *God*, Priest-of-My-Altar.

What a wonderful discovery David made in his life. He admits there were times when he had fallen short of right theology and right practice. But he knew that he could always come back to *God* and experience afresh his grace. Living under grace he was being shaped by *God* so that in the more traditional language that ends this psalm he could pray "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, *O Lord* my strength and my redeemer."

Here is David praying that he would live an orthodox life where his words, (we could say his ethics) and his thoughts, (his theology about *God*) would be acceptable to *God* and so give Him glory.

In his 1909 book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton said the following. The Christian ideal (by this he means orthodoxy) has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried".

But when it is tried Chesterton observes:

There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad. It was the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses, seeming to stoop this way and to sway that, yet in every attitude having the grace of statuary and the accuracy of arithmetic. The Church in its early days went fierce and fast with any warhorse; yet it is utterly unhistoric to say that she merely went mad along one idea, like a vulgar fanaticism. She swerved to left and right, so exactly as to avoid enormous obstacles. It is easy to be a madman: it is easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own. It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect. "

This my brothers and sisters is glorious orthodoxy. As we experience what it is to be behind the rushing horses of our own day, let us remember that giving God his rightful glory will enable us to do our theology in such a way that our understanding of the Church will be informed by the word of God so that we can better order our lives by this same life-giving word.