

ORTHODOX FORMALISM, THE ERROR OF THE EPHESIAN CHURCH

Both Israel's history and church history bear out the fact that religion grounded upon the truth always faces the danger of decaying into formalism. Formalism is an *outward attention* to forms, exercises, religious duties and even religious dogma. The error of formalism involves the declension of true religion within the soul of man (Isaiah 29:13).

In his book, *The Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards thoroughly establishes that true religion consists very much in the affections. Without the affections, religious devotion is unable to guard against hypocrisy. In formalism, outward religion is kept up while love for God freezes over.

Decay into formalism is often secret and gradual. Duties, ordinances and even attention to biblical truth are maintained while the heart strays from Christ as its first love.

It is a frightening revelation that formalism may also be a pitfall to and retreat of the orthodox. The self-deception inherent in formalism is formidable. Even among those within the pale of orthodoxy, religious activities may be looked upon by the conscience as "evidence" of spirituality and safety.

The heart is capable of guile. A person's life may appear to be ordered by the dictates of orthodoxy, but in actuality be void of affection for Christ. By their religious activity, by their purity of doctrine and by their proximity to orthodox exposition, men flatter themselves that they are spiritually secure.

When the affections rise no higher than the horizon of this world, they remain under the domain of self. As a consequence, the heart settles upon carnal objects in its affections and pursuits. Religious devotion proves to be primarily outward. For such an individual, life under God becomes bifurcated, religion fits into a compartment.

The Lord's assessment of formalism in the church can come as a shocking jolt. It must have been so in Ephesus in response to John's epistle (Rev. 2:1-7). Perhaps the Ephesian church was tempted to reason as follows. "The loss of our lampstand can't happen here, we are distinguished and zealous stewards of the truth. We have watchmen on the wall who contend earnestly for the faith. Our love to Christ is demonstrated by our zeal for the truth and by our abundant ministries."

Church history tells us that the lampstand at Ephesus was removed. Though she had the best teachers and even a personal warning from the risen Christ, the church at Ephesus lost its lampstand.

Even as 21st century believers, the demise of the Ephesian church continues to disturb. It provides a sobering object lesson that formalism's imperceptible drift can result in shipwreck.

Scripture rightly applied is able to root out and mortify formalism. Of assistance in this task is an understanding of the formalist's presuppositions concerning spiritual truth. Formalists assume that the truth and its power exist objectively, independently of the Person of Christ. By contrast, the Scriptures are careful to

keep truth joined to the Person of Christ. Truth is written upon the pages of Scripture, but truth is also a Person. The Bible keeps love for the truth joined to love for the Lord.

In formalism, to the degree that truth is objectified, religion is externalized. That is a decision that always involves a radical declension in devotion to Christ and a substantial erosion of desire to have Him preeminent in all things (Col. 1:18).

Christo-centric Christianity is replaced by a "principle-ized" Christianity. Thus in orthodox formalism, the implicit message is that truth principles are able to transform the life. Without intending to do so, Christ is "marginalized" in the process of exegeting principles. Precept overtakes relationship.

It is a grave danger to separate Christ from doctrine. We worship Christ, the truth incarnate, not a body of truth that can exist and function apart from Him. Christ is the revelation of God. The God of truth in all His perfections and beauty is made manifest in the Person of Christ.

Orthodox formalism's error entails "falling" from that place of "first deeds" or love to Christ (Rev. 2:5). Intimacy with the Lord becomes supplanted by an academic consideration of truths and principles. One might say that formalism finds dealing with truth propositions a "safer" prospect than dealing with Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire.

By contrast, the godly man welcomes examination from the Lord (Ps. 139:23,24). It is submission to the Lord's gaze that enables him to probe his own ways and find joy in renewed repentance.

Scripture describes this kind of contact with God as characterized by radical humbling, brokenness, utter dependency, waiting, periods of darkness, profound weakness, and personal devastation over sin. God announces that those He meets with are characterized by deep humility, by brokenness, by trembling at His Word, by contrition and by repentance (Isaiah 57:15; 66:1,2).

Intense humblings and messages of abject weakness are in reality gifts from God in order that Christ may be all in all in our lives. The believer is to reckon all privilege, status, security, favor and acceptance as having their source in Christ alone. When Christ is magnified in our thoughts and affections, self is decentralized, dethroned and set off center (Gal. 2:20).

It is the self-examined Christian who understands that the carnal self always presses for a formalizing of religion. Man's lower nature craves an undisturbed self-life, formalism provides a form of godliness that grants that desire.

Consequently, formalism avoids the pursuit of the cross of Christ.

Fellowship with Christ involves fellowship with His cross. The believer who abides in Christ adores his Lord and he reckons co-crucifixion with Him. He is both comforted and devastated by the cross. He seeks to sit at the feet of the Savior and learn from Him. He knows that the self-life resists the application of cross to the Adamic dominion of the old man. He knows that the self-life objects to God's verdict that the old man is slated for demolition, not renovation through Christian principles. He also knows that union with Christ is the source of all

power and progress. Therefore, to glory in the Lord is to live dependently upon Him.

The humility and utter dependency necessary for spontaneous praise of Christ is absent in orthodox formalism. The reason for this is that formalism contains a smugness that measures spirituality by precision in orthodoxy and by academic prowess.

Needless to say, a rightly divided Word is the mandate of every believer. But the meeting place of the believer with his God is the Person of Christ, not orthodoxy without Christ. The Word must stay joined to Him. A mystical Christ without the Word is neo-orthodoxy. The Word without Christ preeminent tends toward orthodox formalism.

Let Israel's history warn us as well as the book of Revelation. Apostasy germinates in the soil of enduring formalism. Scripture is replete with examples of professing believers who trusted in their orthodoxy while their hearts remained unconverted (Jer. 7:4).

Only the Christ adoring Christian can be taken off of self. Christ's words to the church at Ephesus are also to the church universal. The situation is not hopeless. The Lord spelled out the way of return. Repent and do the first works, sit at the feet of Christ again and learn of Him.