

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 (Rev 2:5).

Orthodox Formalism II

I. The management of orthodoxy can become the "workshop" of formalism.

The management of orthodox, biblical truth can become the workshop of formalism. Man settles into a role of keeper, guardian, and explainer. Instead of studying the Scriptures in order to know the Lord, please Him, and become complete in Him, the formalist stops at academic inquiry. He asks, "What does the text mean?" but does not ask, "How does this passage lead me to glory in Christ, commune with Him, and deepen my affection for Him?"

The sufficiency of God's Word must never compete with the preeminence and sufficiency of Christ. A system that terminates with the academics of orthodoxy breeds formal practitioners who become guardians of institutionalism. It is man managing the truth instead of man being managed and transformed by the truth.

II. *Formalism is allied to the fear of man.*

In an institutional system, clericalism begins to erode the priesthood of all believers. Those considered "spiritual" are the men of letters who "know what the Word means." In an institutional setting, men of letters tend to perpetuate a system that overly esteems academia. In that system the Word can become an end in itself (rather than the divinely intended means of getting Christ formed in the man).

A mild "bibliolatry" begins to reign. Practitioners ride the shoulders of honor – the clergy-laity gap widens. The tragedy is that Christ is marginalized in the process. Orthodox institutionalism thrives in a climate of orthodox teaching that neglects the centrality of Christ and His cross.

Without Christ as the focal point of the local body, the fear of man rushes into the vacuum. The honoring of men becomes central to the church. Human distinctions increase. The laity becomes increasingly relegated to the place of paying spectators.

III. *The fear of man embraces a human value system.*

The fear of man runs hand in hand with formalism. Outward appearance dictates the value system. Excellence is pursued at the expense of genuineness. Brokenness is considered a liability. Excellence is defined by four outward criteria: *performance, perception, production, and popularity*. Professionalism is in league with a carnal, immature congregation.

The solution to formal institutionalism is always by returning to the base of the cross. The cross is the great leveler of men. At the base of the cross distinctions between men are less pronounced. Men who congregate at the base of the cross affirm that Christ is Lord of His church. He owns the church; it is His abode. He is enthroned upon her praises.

14 PAGER ON D-SHIP STARTS HERE:

How important is your ecclesiology? Ultimately, your view of the church (your ecclesiology) will govern how you do church. Regardless of how glowing your mission statement—*how you do church* reveals your actual working ecclesiology. Is the local church a commodity for spiritual consumers? OR, is it a community of the consecrated who are on mission? How we *do church* will communicate whether or not we see it as an organism rather than an institution—a community or a commodity.

Colin Marshall makes the incisive observation that ecclesiology is the 'soft underbelly of the Evangelical church'. In other words, our doctrine of the church is tissue-thin and weak and often less than biblical. As a consequence we tend to treat the church as a human organization that can be successfully managed by the same abilities that make a man successful in business.

What we forget is the biblical definition of the church—that the church is the fruits of gospel ministry. We struggle to get people into a local church while forgetting that the *ekklesia* is made up of individuals supernaturally called out of the world by the gospel of Christ and formed into disciples by obedience to the Great Commission. Our reductionist ecclesiology reasons too much around the structures of buildings, elders, programs, and leaders—and not enough around the gospel itself.

Author Paul Zahl warns that the commodification of (the objectification of) the church has a killing effect upon it BECAUSE it makes it appear as if it is a mere social organization

which can be defined by human categories—as if human management techniques are adequate for its flourishing. Not so—when the church is institutionalized and pushed through a bureaucratic business model grid, it sends the message that it is a society that may be directed by natural means. Zahl notes that the power of God in the gospel touches down like a Texas tornado—and by means of forgiveness by the cross and regeneration by the Spirit, a supernatural community is formed animated by the Spirit called the local church (organically joined to, and living because of shared life with her Head, the Lord Jesus Christ). The church is the byproduct of the gospel. Notes Zahl, “To overestimate church as a value in itself is to objectify the non-objectifiable and thus to possess that which never can be possessed” (Paul F. M. Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 2000, pp. 88-89).

Now here is the rub: when institutionalization occurs (with its over-dependence upon business model techniques and entrepreneurial skills) it has a deadening effect BECAUSE it sends the message that merely human methods of management are adequate—or even desirable. The truth is that the way we do church MUST communicate the fact that the CAUSE of the church’s formation is the power of God in the gospel and the LIFE BLOOD of the church which nourishes and sustains her existence is the gospel. The church is a byproduct of the gospel. If we understand this reality, it will totally condition the way we *do church*—the gospel will ever be front and center as the power source of our vine work.

New covenant ecclesiology means that the radical hierarchy of the mosaic covenant has been replaced with the reality that every believer in Christ is now a believer-priest. We are to offer up ‘sacrifices’ of thanksgiving and service to God (Heb 13:15; 1 Pet 2:5; Rom 12:1). The church is made up of believer priests (Rev 1:8; 5:10). This has everything to do with our philosophy of ministry—literally, ‘how we do church’. We dare not choose a ministry methodology merely because it looks expedient or pragmatic. Christ has set forth a very clear pattern for His body—that pattern set by our Lord is a fully ministering laity (Eph 4:14-16).

Under the new covenant every true believer has an equal portion of God’s Spirit; each believer has the knowledge of God; we each have the anointing of the Holy Spirit to teach us (1 Jn 2:20). We have full and free access to God (Eph 2:18; 3:12). And, we have this believer priest status in order to practice true community and biblical discipleship so that each member may be brought to spiritual maturity (Col 1:28-29).

The way we do church ought to visibly model that we understand we are believer-priests. The radical Old Testament hierarchy of levels of access to God is gone (Gal 3:26-29). Only a couple centuries after Pentecost the gospel doctrine of the priesthood of the believer was under attack and eventually became concealed by the powerful bishops of the Roman church.

The believer-priest philosophy of ministry is rooted in the new covenant. Our ecclesiology must model the reality of the body being made up of believer priests, OR, the glory of Christ and His ownership of His church will be obscured by a ministry far too centralized in mortal figureheads. The more we really understand this—that our identity in Christ is that of believer-priests; the more action steps we will take in decentralizing ministry in order to work towards a fully ministering laity (Eph 4:14-16).

The church as the body of Christ on earth is a supernatural community —‘supernatural’ because all true believers are in union with Christ and with one another by means of God’s Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). The world (in its love of darkness) is reading our relationships instead of reading the Bible. Our relationships are intended by Christ to go far beyond anything nature is capable of. Consider the ‘supernatural’ character of the following commands—each of these commands is beyond our natural strength: *love one another as I have loved you; consider the interests of others are more important than your own; bear one another’s burdens; be filled with compassion and gentleness and be continually forgiving one*

another; defer to one another; build with Christ in building up one another; relate in such a way that it shows that you are members one of another. Our relationships within the body of Christ are to incarnate the virtues and character of Christ in such a way that, as Jesus said in His High Priestly prayer in John 17:21, *the world might believe that the Father sent Me.*

Christ's pattern for His church is a pattern of discipleship—that pattern is: disciples making disciples who are capable of making disciples. Unfortunately we have defined the Great Commission as primarily a foreign endeavor instead of also a domestic endeavor. The attitude often is, “We are a healthy church because we have missionaries in the following countries.” But wait, how did we become exempt from fulfilling the Great Commission in the local body here at home? No, we need to reexamine our priorities. The Great Commission teaches us that body life exists to bring each member of Christ's body to maturity.

Paul summarizes the discipleship mandate in at least two places: “*And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power which mightily works within me*” (Col 1:28-29). “*You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful man who will be able to teach others also. Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus*” (2 Tim 2:2). Timothy, discipleship has its ups and downs and setbacks. You'll need to endure hardship as a good soldier if you are to succeed as a discipler of brethren—that's the context here in second Timothy.

Paul's focus in fulfilling the Great Commission reminds us that every bit of this discipleship mandate is utterly intentional. In other words, it's a mandate to bring each believer to spiritual maturity (Col 1:28-29). Our relationships exist for the purpose of growing up into Christ. Genuine fellowship is *spiritual*; it doesn't just exist for our social needs—it exists for the purpose of doing spiritual good to another that the body might grow up into Christ its Head. “*But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love*” (Eph 4:15-16).

It is here, at this juncture where we need a mind shift. For it is common to think of the activity of the body as a series of programs devised by the leaders (approved programs that we participate in). Christ's pattern for His church differs substantially from this perception. Here is the reason why: all forms of ministry are to be some form of expression of the Great Commission. That means that all forms of ministry exist to nurture discipleship; to nurture disciples; to nurture disciple-making (Colin Marshall).

Equipping through shepherding involves a sacrificial commitment from the shepherd to ‘steward’ the giftedness of his disciple. That means equipping your disciple and exposing him to ministry opportunities and working to unleash him to ministry. Without this commitment to be stewards of the giftedness of those we disciple, our attempts to speak into their lives will be hollow.

A huge mind shift is required if we are to fully embrace Christ's pattern for His church, for the nature of the church is that of a supernatural community—and as a supernatural community, the way we do community is by discipleship! That way of thinking would certainly change a great deal wouldn't it—to get into our heads and hearts that our relationships in the body exist for the purpose of discipleship—to bring one another to maturity,

“until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

This throws an intense light on the matter—the church is first and foremost an organism not an organization: the church is a supernatural community and that community functions supernaturally by means of discipleship. How can we begin thinking this way?

A radical change in our thinking will take place when we are staggered by the ‘glory story’—that God Himself is on mission and has called us to be on mission with Him. Prior to entering a discipleship relationship many believers may have felt no obligation to share their faith—but when a person enters biblical discipleship it is normal for them to believe they are sent on mission. If we are serious about implementing discipleship we will need to ask these questions: *is this a bigger dream for the church than we have entertained ourselves? Does this picture seem too idealistic? Is the discipleship lifestyle just described considered normative in the New Testament? How do we begin to live this way? How can we form caring relationships in which discipleship will thrive?*

One of the major impediments to discipleship is apathy and self-protection. We fear being known; having our sins discovered; our reputation being damaged; or our spiritual immaturity uncovered—and/or, we have some apprehension that a discipleship relationship will turn the screws of high accountability and wind up being a ‘black hole’ drawing us into an unending commitment—eating up too much of our discretionary time. I want to lay those misconceptions to rest. The majority of discipleship takes place in a context of the informal. Jesus spent time with His disciples not only during ministry; but in traveling, meal time, recreation, and rest. They ‘hung out’ together they talked as they walked and ate together. There was as much ‘caught as taught’ in these casual moments of fellowship. As we will see in a moment; only *gospel saturation* has the power to set the conditions necessary for mutuality; interdependence; and vulnerability.

Our truncated ideas about discipleship too often narrow our concept to the curriculum used in discipleship, as if studying a book together is enough to accomplish discipleship. I want to blast us out of the classroom model of ministry (the lecture-student approach) and shift our thinking to the caring relationships themselves—in which there is mutual edification and mutual access to one another’s lives. It is incumbent upon us to grasp that discipleship is a two-way street. As the discipler shares his struggles and communicates God’s faithfulness amidst his trials, the disciple is encouraged to grant greater access to his life. This is reciprocity and not a matter of those ‘who have arrived’ instructing those ‘who have not arrived’. Life on life soul care is impossible without interdependence and mutual vulnerability.

Biblical discipleship can be as simple as determining to prayerfully speak God’s Word in our relationships. Much discipleship will be informal and spontaneous. We can be proactive—determining that we will not allow our conversations to remain in the realm of the mundane. As soon as you approach conversation with edification in mind; you are in a position to provide discipleship input. To be *on task* in discipleship is to purposefully steer the conversation in the direction of redemptive language. Let me define that for you. Redemptive conversation involves initiating comments and questions which draw out Scripture truths and principles and apply them to life. Every believer can be in some form of disciple making simply by asking, “Who am I helping grow in Christ?”

Redemptive questions and comments can be as simple as: How’s your walk with the Lord? Where are you getting beat up this week? Is there a ministry opportunity you are

thinking about taking? How can I pray for you? I've got to share with you what God has been teaching me. Here is what I have been going through at work as far as my testimony. I sure could use your prayers; I am going through a time of trial. Have you ever considered how your attitude about Christ's second coming is a supreme litmus test of where you are at spiritually? Hey, want to go witnessing? Let's invite those unsaved guys over for a bar-be-que. Etc.

The Apostle Paul's focus is unmistakable: discipleship is the "X Factor" in spiritual maturity. Discipleship is an important avenue in finding our place and part in the body of Christ. A faithful discipler will help equip and 'unleash' his disciple to ministry. The discipler will actively look for situations where his disciple can be exposed to various ministries and be given opportunities to gain ministry experience. True piety is joined to body life—for we are members one of another in Christ. Therefore it is of key importance that we remember that our spiritual growth and sanctification is a *group effort*. In other words, our growth cannot be sustained by sequestering ourselves like St. Francis of Assisi under a tree in the woods. We need the mutual edification of the members of the body of Christ in order to grow. We mature spiritually as we find our place in the body of Christ and then serve there enthusiastically. Discipleship is the central instrument in moving this process forward.

What actually gives a believer 'permission' to jump into the discipleship continuum (2 Tim 2:2) without reservation? How is it that believers become empowered enough for discipleship ministry to happen? There is no net change in practical holiness UNTIL a Christian has a captivating vision of Christ; a thrilling and stirring kingdom consciousness; and an awestruck awareness of the holiness of God. The paradigm shift comes when we begin to realize that this must come from sources in addition to the pulpit; we need to hear this from one another; and remind one another of this all-consuming spiritual reality that all of this life exists as preparation for life to come. There is no substitute for the spiritual fellowship commanded by Paul (Rom 15:14; Col 3; Eph 5; etc.).

In our culture of marketing; consumerism; personal autonomy and anonymity, the church ought to shine into that darkness as a place of supernatural true community—this ought to be one of its strongest 'selling points'. But instead we commonly see these three: spectatorship; marketing/consumerism; and autonomy/anonymity as characterizing much of church culture. Our drift from the Great Commission is evidenced by *how we do church*. Church becomes an event, an institution, a bureaucracy, a performance viewed by spectators, and a collection of programs. Recapturing the Great Commission is inseparable from practicing a biblical ecclesiology.

Discipleship is 'spiritual parenting' for the purpose of helping fellow believers develop 'first hand' convictions. We live in an age of 'screen culture'—immediacy characterizes the way we locate and assimilate information. But, the process of growing in our knowledge of God cannot be successfully conformed to a five minute Google search and download. In our consumer-information age, efficiency is associated with 'short cuts' and consolidation of time and resources. Living for Christ cannot successfully be adapted to these two values. Nonetheless, the temptation in a sound-bite, instant society is to live vicariously through our celebrity pastor leaders.

Consequently, church culture pulls in the direction of an informed, but passive spectatorship. Associated with this problem is the fact that few professing believers actually meditate upon Scripture so that the truth of God is presented to the mind's eye and then to the religious affections. Consequently we have churches full of people with second hand convictions—professing believers who have contented themselves with merely a *God concept* instead of a passionate growing intimate knowledge (*epiginosko*) of the Lord (2 Pet 3:18).

I saw a striking illustration in our neighborhood which reminded me of the dangerous complacency surrounding second-hand convictions. A windstorm had swept our community and numerous medium-sized trees were completely uprooted and laying on their sides. I immediately saw a sermon illustration in this; for what had been hidden from view, the root systems, were now above ground and laid bare to the eyes of all. The trees that had been toppled were not to be replanted; they were destined for the chain saw and the wood chipper. It was a sad sight—the well-shaped boughs of leaves still green and attractive; but, having fallen over, had lost their connection with the earth—death was imminent.

Now here is the lesson: the carefully landscaped trees which had blown over revealed shallow root systems. Their carpet of roots was only inches deep; they had been living off of their daily ration of sprinkler water. They had no apparent need or motivation to send their tap roots deep to find their own liquid nourishment. Therefore, when the windstorm hit, there was no adequate support to help them weather the gale. They blew over far too easily; never to grow again.

For me this was a vivid picture of second hand convictions. Like trees planted in a landscaped park-like environment depending on timed sprinkler water, many church goers sit complacently under the pulpit week after week; but never learn to meditate on the Word so as to develop first hand convictions. They have never learned to send their own roots deep—to seriously feed themselves and gather their own ‘manna’ (and water) from the Word (Ps 1:1-3; Jer 17:7-8). Therefore, they will be remarkably vulnerable when the storms of life come.

As disciple-makers we will be ministering to this very kind of individual ensconced in church culture. True discipleship is not simply going through a particular curriculum; it is speaking your first hand convictions into the lives of others. Your disciple needs to see and hear your first-hand convictions ‘first hand’ from you—in an up close relational space with you. This is an indispensable part of training in biblical discipleship (spiritual passion is *caught more than taught*).

The loss of the centrality of the gospel is always through the blight of second hand convictions. It has been said that the first generation preaches the gospel; the second generation assumes the gospel (second hand convictions); and the third generation denies the gospel. Colin Marshall notes that first hand convictions start when theology becomes connected with deep reading of the Bible. By meditating on Scripture and connecting deep reading of the Bible with doctrine, our passion for Christ will naturally be increased. And, it is not possible to hold these passionate first hand convictions in the abstract—they will translate into Christian character in our relationships and the fruit of the Spirit. Out of convictions flows character and fruit-bearing. These three: *conviction, character, and competency* will be the focus of the leaders engaged in training disciples and disciple-makers. Leaders will always be working on these three in the lives of those they are training.

‘Gospel saturation’ is the condition necessary for new covenant ministry. By gospel saturation we mean that the believer is to be so controlled by gospel realities that his entire set of goals and incentives is transformed. We live in a culture of anonymity—people want love and attention without vulnerability and commitment. Without ‘gospel saturation’ church members will tend to be content to allow socializing to eclipse true community. I reiterate that according to Scripture the way we are to do true community is by discipleship. The gospel gives us all the reasons for true community—for kingdom living—for self-forgetfulness in the care and discipleship of others. The gospel gives us the mandate, the equipping, and the ‘want to’ for true community.

The gospel is relational from beginning to end—living a gospel-centered life is about translating God’s *vertical love* to us into *horizontal love* to the brethren (the theme of 1 John 4). That is intensely counter-cultural; for in our society of ‘me first’ consumerism; of brands and logos; and of anonymity—we find no concrete reasons to lay our lives down for one another. The gospel alone gives us the reason and the desire to love sacrificially.

Gospel saturation makes believers willing to prefer one another without feeling personally diminished. Gospel saturation enables us to defer to the giftedness of another in the body without the fear that we will lose our rung on the ladder. This willingness to defer to the giftedness of another is the heartbeat of body life. This mindset is vital to new covenant ministry. We can talk about spiritual gifts all day—but the mind-shift only comes when I can say it and mean it (including the leadership saying this), “I need your giftedness; I am willing to come under the influence of your giftedness. I can’t do what God has enabled you to do. And isn’t it a blessing that you can’t do what God has enabled me to do? Our gifts work together to make the body function as a harmonious whole to edify itself.”

Only in the gospel in which Christ is proclaimed will we be made whole so that we can risk mutual admonishment, interdependence, accountability, and sacrificial love and commitment. The gospel demands and enables us to incarnate Christ in our relationships so that the reality of being *members one of another* is lived out. Without gospel saturation we will ‘do church’ in a default mode characterized by mega-church values of: *celebrities; hype and fanfare; spiritual consumerism; hyper-structuralism; spectatorship; and success judged by numbers.*

The gospel gives us the ‘shape’ of the Christian life. Without a clear grasp of the gospel ‘mould’ or shape, believers tend to slip into a fall-back position, or default mode of performance Christianity. Here are the major gospel elements that give the proper ‘grace-life’ shape of our Christian walk: *we who are redeemed are now the Lord’s possession—and we are to diligently care for this relationship given at salvation. As the Lord’s possession, we are to joyfully give ourselves (offer ourselves) back to God each day. Because of union with Him; we are to regard Christ as our life—as our ‘Source Person’—out of this reality of Christ the ‘vine’ flows the reality of abiding in Him—the Christian walk is ‘shared life’ with Christ—living upon Another. We are to define ourselves by the cross and the resurrection—these redemptive events tell us who we were; who we are now; what we are becoming; and what we will be—this is to form our identity and control our walk—we ‘live between’ the cross and the resurrection. We are saved to serve—we are to be faithful stewards of our spiritual giftedness. Therefore it behooves us to find our place of service in the body of Christ so that we may build together with the Lord in building the Body of Christ.*

In the realm of ecclesiology, the failure of institutionalism in the church is tied to its streamlining, or reductionist concept of church life—that is, the attempt to codify the Holy Spirit’s work through layers of programs. The institutional problem is generally always the same: it is a phenomenon which takes place when we presume that the trellis is real “vine work” when it is not. The answer comes back to the Great Commission. No substantial change takes place until we reach a point at which the Great Commission mandate is throbbing in our veins.

It is so important to understand that our biblical efforts to recover the spiritual life and vitality of the primitive church will not automatically occur by merely abandoning our structures (our hyper-structuralism) for a new model. What is needed is disciples speaking their first hand gospel convictions into the lives of other disciples and then watching God work in power. The gospel is the CAUSE of the church’s origin and the gospel is the CONTENT of the church’s growth into the likeness of her Head (Eph 4:13-16). In our bureaucratic arrogance, we assume

that human structures can set the needed conditions for vine work. Such is not the case. In this church age, God is concentrating His power in the gospel's transforming ability (Acts 20:32).

Discipleship is deliberate--when we begin to be deliberate, our relationships will no longer be viewed as existing merely for social reasons; but for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission. The more radically identified with Christ we are; the more radically identified we will be with His mission. This means that the reception of Christ's love in our life demands expression—we cannot be content unless we pass it on in love and self-less service. Our passion and heart's desire will be to see our brethren brought to maturity and presented perfect and complete in Christ (Col 1:28-29). We will make the effort and the sacrifices necessary to see that happen. The answer is the exchanged life in action—Christ's love and power exchanged for my selfishness and weakness (Gal 2:20). What would you attempt that you wouldn't ordinarily do IF you were convinced Christ was calling you to do it and was waiting to empower you? Why is pursuing one another so vital to intentional discipleship?

RESUME “ORTHODOX FORMALISM”

IV. *The man God uses is “constructed” around Christ.*

The man God uses eschews the fear of man. God's verdict at Calvary dominates his thinking. As a result, he is freed from the verdicts of men.

He submits to the Spirit's work of “kicking” out the props of ego. (All of our props of ego are in collusion with the fear of man.) The man God uses welcomes the application of the cross to his life. He has been trained in the school of affliction. His resultant brokenness makes him useful to the Master.

The man God uses is “reconstructed” around the Person of Christ. He is a Galatians 2:20 man. The “voice” of Christ is the loudest voice in his conscience and affections. This is a reliable mark that his *fear of Christ* is greater than his fear of man. (The lordship of Christ is vitally linked to the desire to please Him first and to regard Him as “Source Person.”)

V. *The grip of formalism can be broken by a “grace awakening.”*

A grace awakening begins with a “*depravity awakening!*” The man waking from the deadening slumber of formalism is struck anew with the depth of his sinfulness and the degree of his dependency upon Christ. A grace awakening requires that we be in a position to receive from God.

There will be a willingness to:

- Say no good thing dwells in my flesh.
- Say apart from Him I can do nothing.
- Say my adequacy is only in Him.
- Say, I am weak, that He may be strong through me.
- Say my boast is in the Lord alone.
- Say that I will consent to be loved by God for Christ's sake alone.
- Say that I am willing to be still and know that He is God.
- Say that I will humble myself under the mighty hand of God.
- Say that God draws near to the contrite.

Orthodox Formalism

The Error of the Ephesian Church

By Jay Wegter

God's saving grace restores the ability to enjoy God and to take delight in Him. The new birth effects a radical transformation of the affections. The regenerate individual is changed in his inner faculties so that he becomes a worshipper of the Creator instead of the creation. As John Piper often refrains, "God is most glorified when He is most enjoyed."

God is exceedingly glorified by the plan of salvation in Christ. God's wisdom and power are seen in His ability to make new creatures from a ruined race (2 Cor. 5:17). By the exercise of sovereign grace, God in Christ becomes the portion and treasure of former rebels. The Holy Spirit produces this change through the agency of divine truth (1 Pet. 1:23). There is nothing more important than God's Word, the revelation of divine truth. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto eternal salvation.

The topic at hand reminds one of Jonathan Edwards's most important written work, *The Religious Affections*. In that book, Edwards gives overwhelming proof to support the proposition that true religion exists primarily in the affections.

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 formalism, outward religion is kept up while love for God freezes over. Just as the natural man "materializes" his needs in a denial of his need of God (1 Cor. 15:46-48), so also, the religionist, in his descent into formalism settles upon carnal objects in his affections and pursuits. Decay into formalism is often secret and gradual. Duties, ordinances and even devotion 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 powerful indeed. The religious activities of the formalist provide the conscience with the "evidence" that supposedly prove he is spiritual and in no danger.

Here is deception. By their religious activity, by their purity of doctrine, by their sitting under orthodox exposition, men flatter themselves that they are spiritual. Their religious life appears to be outwardly ordered by the dictates of orthodoxy. All the while, their affections remain under the domain of self. Their private world is carnally managed. Their devotion proves to be primarily outward. Life under God becomes bifurcated, religion fits into a compartment in one's life.

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 the letter of the apostle John (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 had a personal warning from the risen Christ, the church at Ephesus lost its lampstand.

Even as 21st century believers, the demise of the Ephesus church continues to disturb. Was it the case that Paul's prayer for the Ephesians was not answered? Did the Ephesians fail to gain a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ (Eph. 1:17-23)? Did they also fail to receive strength in the inner man so as to comprehend the dimensions of Christ's love (Eph. 3:16-19)?

These questions ought to be of concern to every evangelical pastor. As preachers, we call men to follow Christ and abide in Him in surrender and devotion. Our preaching ought to exterminate incipient formalism. We preach under a wall of growing formalism by preaching to men the deadness and depravity they possess in themselves. We preach over the wall of formalism by declaring the excellencies of Christ and His perfect suitability for the sinner's every need. We must know something of the formalist's profile in order to preach to him aright.

The orthodox formalist is a challenge to flush out of hiding. Of great 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, Scripture is careful to keep truth joined to the Person of Christ.

Christ's epistemic role as the truth of God incarnate and the truth of God spoken is inseparable from the fact that Jesus Christ is in Himself the revelation of God. In other words, truth cannot be separated from Christ and remain true. All things are summed up in Christ (Eph. 1:10). All things are created by Him and for Him (Col. 1:16). All things are reconciled to God by Him (Col. 1:20). Christ opposes every possible world view and philosophy in which He is not preeminent (Col. 2:8).

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

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

In formalism, Christo-centric Christianity is replaced by a "principle-ized" Christianity. 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. It is a grave danger to separate the Person of Christ from doctrine. Our access to God, our interface with God, our covenant with God is the Living Truth. Christ is the truth incarnate, we worship Christ, the truth incarnate, not a body of orthodox truth that can exist and function independently of Him.

The God of truth in all His perfections and beauty is made manifest in the Person of Christ.

How can the sinful creature have fellowship with the infinitely holy Great I am? Only in our Substitute do we have access and relationship.

Orthodox formalism tends to lean upon its orthodoxy more than the living Lord Jesus Christ. A subtle pride in precision finds its way into the personal merit column. Intimacy with God is replaced by an academic consideration of truths and principles. In formalism, devastating contact with Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire becomes all but non-existent.

Scripture describes a kind of contact with God 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 repentance (Isaiah 57:15; 66:1,2).

The Psalmist pleads with God to show him the creature how weak and transitory he really is (Ps. 39:4-6).

Such humility is to be cultivated. In ourselves alone, we are reduced to super-dependent sinful creatures meriting only destruction. We are responders to God by His grace alone. He is in control, not us. These 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).

Man's carnal lower nature craves an undisturbed self at the helm of one's life. Religious man is no exception. Martin Luther quipped that the enemy he feared more than the pope and all his armies was the pope of self.

It is the self-examined Christian who understands that the carnal self always presses for a formalizing of religion. The formalizing of religion involves an ordering of the internal life so that the Lordship of Christ is usurped. Self at the controls of one's religious life will always choose not to pursue the cross of Christ.

By contrast, the believer who abides in Christ adores his Lord and is devoted to Him. He reckons co-crucifixion with Christ. 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 the 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.

The nearer one draws to Christ and His cross, the more precious and vivid the truths of union with Christ become (see Romans 6). Ongoing contrition becomes a byproduct of close communion with Christ.

The carnal self in its "respectable" tyranny is far more comfortable at a distance from Calvary. Self prefers to interface with "principle-ized" truth rather than with Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire (Rev. 1:14).

Orthodox formalism tends to sever truth from Christ. Truth that is objectified and primarily academic and principle-ized gives self a buffer of breathing room. Truth joined to Christ is filled with mortification. It applies the cross, mortifying the fleshly mind so as to place the creature in the dust. It lifts up Christ as all in all.

Orthodox formalism tears a breach between Christ and doctrine. Truth becomes primarily academic. The doxological and subjective side of truth is eclipsed by the scholastic and the formal. In the process, man gains a sense of control over facts and principles.

The issue is one of control. Christ must be preeminent in the realm of truth. In orthodox formalism, the exegete and his listener slip into an interface with God that turns upon the management of facts, truths and principles without the glory of Christ being central.

Lest we forget, the most accomplished exegete is not elevated above his less educated or precise brethren, he is still a sinner whose life and destiny are suspended upon Him Who is the living Word. Whether he is fully aware of it or not, his whole life is based upon organic union with Christ.

Orthodox formalism sows to our desire for a manageable Christianity. A Christianity that lies within the scope of our energies appeals to the self. Our method of self-evaluation may turn out to be based upon false assumptions. Perhaps the precision of our orthodoxy is the personal "scorecard" we have selected. Revelation 2:1-7 is a powerful antidote to the self-deception of formalism. He who walks among the lampstands presents His criterion for true Christianity, "Is Christ your first love?"

No wonder the divines of old were frequently devastated by views of God's holiness and their own bottomless depravity. No wonder they cried for grace so frequently. They saw that the cross applied and pursued was inseparable from knowing Christ (Phil. 3:8-14). They often faced a crushing sense of personal inadequacy. They often wept copious tears. They were careful to preach the gospel to themselves everyday because they knew the heart's tendency to search for a robe of covering other than the righteousness of Christ.

In formalistic circles, these experiences are selectively hidden from view. This should not be surprising, formalism seeks a form of religion that turns upon an academic interface with God. The living Christ of Revelation 1 is pushed to the periphery. The mind may be engaged, but the heart is buttressed against anything that would wrench pain and tears from it. Where are the ongoing heart expressions of overflowing gratitude concerning the grace of Christ?

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 for 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. Israel's beginnings of apostasy germinated in a climate of enduring formalism. Scripture is replete with examples of professing believers who took pride 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.