

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.