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Compromise and Confusion in the Churches

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The absence of doctrinal precision and biblical preaching marks the current evangelical age. Doctrine is considered outdated by some and divisive by others. The confessional heritage of the church is neglected and, in some cases, seems even to be an embarrassment to updated evangelicals. Expository preaching—once the hallmark and distinction of the evangelical pulpit—has been replaced in many churches by motivational messages, therapeutic massaging of the self, and formulas for health, prosperity, personal integration, and celestial harmony.

Almost a century ago, J.C. Ryle, the great evangelical bishop, warned of such diversions from truth: “I am afraid of an inward disease which appears to be growing and spreading in all the Churches of Christ throughout the world. That disease is a disposition on the part of ministers to abstain from all sharply-cut doctrine, and a distaste on the part of professing Christians for all distinct statements of dogmatic truth.”

A century later, Ryle’s diagnosis is seen as prophets, and the disease is assuredly terminal. The various strains of the truth-relativizing virus are indicated by different symptoms and diverse signs, but the end is the same. Among the strains now threatening the evangelical churches is the temptation to find a halfway house between modernity and biblical truth. Another is the call for an “evangelical mega-shift,” which would transform orthodox evangelical conviction into the categories of modern process thought. This is a road that leads to disaster and away from the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

What is our proper response to all this? Should we devote our attention and energies to epistemology and metaphysics? Must we spend ourselves in arguments concerning foundationalism and non-foundationalism? While these issues are not unimportant, they cannot be our central concern. Again, the words of Ryle speak to our age: “Let no scorn of the world, let no ridicule of smart writers, let no sneers of liberal critics, let no secret desire to please and conciliate the public, tempt us for one moment to leave the old paths, and drop the old practice of enunciating doctrine—clear, distinct, well-defined, and sharply-cut doctrine—in all utterances and teachings.”

We contend for the objectivity of truth, and we must insist that all persons do actually believe in the objectivity of Truth. The fact is that even the relativists objectivize their own positions. The difference for us is that we know that truth exists in God, who is Truth, and whose Word is truth. Our knowledge is true only in so far as it corresponds with God’s revealed truth. We are dependent upon the Word, the Word is not dependent upon us. As Martin Luther stated so clearly, “The objectivity and certainty of the Word remain even if it isn’t believed.” We have no right to seek refuge in a halfway house of false epistemological humility. To deny the truthfulness of God’s Word is not an act of humility, but of unspeakable arrogance.

This is our proper epistemological humility - not that it is not possible for us to know, but that the truth is not our own. We are dependent upon the Word of God. Indeed, we submit ourselves to the Word of God, as believers, teachers, and preachers. And this is genuine knowledge, revealed knowledge. It is knowledge of which we are not ashamed. As Gordon Clark warned: "If man can know nothing truly, man can truly know nothing. We cannot know that the Bible is the Word of God, that Christ died for our sin, or that Christ is alive today at the right hand of the Father. Unless knowledge is possible, Christianity is non-sensical, for it claims to be knowledge. What is at stake in the twentieth century is not simply a single doctrine, such as the Virgin Birth, or the existence of Hell, as important as those doctrines may be, but the whole of Christianity itself. If knowledge is not possible to man, it is worse than silly to argue points of doctrine—it is insane."

We confess that knowledge is possible, but knowledge of spiritual things is revealed. Without the Word of God we would know nothing of redemption, of Christ, of God's sovereign provision for us. We would have no true knowledge of ourselves, of our sin, of our hopelessness but for the mercy of Christ. As Professor R. B. Kuiper reminded his students, the most direct, the simplest, and most honest answer to the question, "How do you know?" is this: "The Bible tells us so."

As Jesus reminded Peter, immediately after Peter's majestic confession, "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). So it is with us: Our true knowledge was not revealed to us by flesh and blood, and certainly was not discovered on our own by the power of our own rationality and insight; it is revealed to us in the Word of God.

This is our proper humility. But we must be on guard against an improper and faithless humility. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has asserted that "it is morally not possible to actually go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent fellow human beings: We believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong." Of course, Smith is correct; we have no right to assert such a statement, in and of ourselves and of our own knowledge. But we have no right not to bear witness to the truth of God's Word, and on that basis to proclaim the truth revealed in God's Word.

For this reason, our defense of biblical inerrancy is never a diversion or distraction from our proper task. This is why those who affirm biblical inerrancy and those who deny inerrancy are divided, not by a minor distinction, but by an immense epistemological and theological chasm.

Every aspect of the theological task and every doctrinal issue are affected by the answer to this fundamental question: Is the Bible the authentic, authoritative, inspired, and inerrant Word of God in written form, and thus God's faithful witness to himself? For the believing church, the answer must be yes. With the framers of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, we affirm that "The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church. We confess and affirm the truthfulness of Scripture in every respect, and we stand under the authority of the Word of God, never over the Word. In other words, we come to the Scriptures, not with a postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion, but with a faithful hermeneutic of submission."

As our Lord stated concerning the Scriptures, "Thy Word is Truth" (John 17:17). And, as Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Made clear in this text is the inescapable truth that our task is to teach and to preach this Word; to reprove, to correct, and to train in righteousness. Should our churches return in faithfulness to this fundamental charge, the secular worldview would lose its grip on the believing church.

