

# CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIANITY 101

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## Introduction

There are several adjectives that I happily use to describe myself and my beliefs. The first is obviously, “Christian,” but there are a lot of people and groups that call themselves “Christian” with whom I have significant disagreement, so I need other adjectives to modify “Christian.” I happily call myself a *Baptist* Christian, which says certain things about my beliefs concerning church government and baptism among other things. I also describe myself as a *separatist* Christian, or a *fundamentalist* Christian, which helps to describe my perspective concerning ecclesiastic cooperation with unbelievers or those who grant Christian fellowship to unbelievers.

There are other adjectives I use as the occasion warrants, but from my perspective, the most important adjective that I use to modify “Christian” is *conservative*. In fact, I would suggest that my convictions as a Baptist and as a separatist actually flow from my conservatism, which I explain more in a moment.

Now I would suspect that most people here also consider yourself conservative or at least use the word “traditional,” which is essentially the same thing. The blurb about this pre-conference in the brochure says that its purpose is to target difficult issues *conservative* Christian musicians are facing. Most relevant to those in this room is likely the matter of conservative worship vs. something else. So I think we all have some degree of concern about what it means to be conservative.

What I’d like to do during this session is to really get at the heart of what it means to be a conservative Christian in its fullest, most consistent expression and then defend it biblically, and there are two primary reasons I would like to address this issue. The first is that we have progressed to the point, even among those who have a heritage in fundamentalism, where “conservative” is considered a bad word; something extra biblical, unbiblical, and even anti-biblical. For example, a pastor from Arizona wrote the following on September 26, 2009 on a popular fundamentalist blog:

Let’s shoot in the head the desire to be conservative. Let’s be Biblical and where that leads to doing things in a traditional way....well “rejoice.” Where that leads to a more contemporary approach....Selah!

I thought his comment well-reflects the sentiment today of many people. He sets conservatism over and against being biblical, but it does raise an important question: Is conservatism the best way of viewing life and ministry as explained and prescribed by Scripture? It is no secret that conservatism is falling on hard times, especially when it comes to worship and music, again, even among those people and institutions that have traditionally described themselves as conservative. I had lunch with the president of a fundamentalist institution a couple years ago, and he was expressing his concerns to me about what he perceived I was trying to do with my ministry. And so I explained to him the distinctives that I had articulated about my ministry: Religious Affections Ministries seeks to promote biblical worship, lifestyle worship, deliberate worship, and finally, *conservative* worship. And right then he said, "See, that's where I have a concern."

You see, there is this impression that conservatism adds to Scripture boundaries that are themselves not biblical, and that is a legitimate concern. Admittedly, "conservative" is not a biblical word *per se*; it is a way of viewing Scripture, doctrine, life, and ministry. We all approach these things in some way; the question is what is the best way to approach them—conservatively, or some other way? You cannot simply say that you want to be biblical, and some times that will lead to conservatism and sometimes that will lead to progressivism. Again, "conservative" is an adjective that describes Christianity just like "Baptist" or "separatist." These are terms we use to describe what we believe to be the most biblical approach to biblical Christianity. Similarly, both conservatism and progressivism are attempts to be biblical. You are going to approach life and ministry in one way or the other. The question is, which is the better way?

So the first reason I would like to address this question is to demonstrate that conservatism is not extra-biblical or anti-biblical; it is simply a way that I approach biblical ministry, and I believe it is the best, most biblical way to do so.

The second reason is this: many people use the term conservative to describe certain aspects of their belief or ministry, but not others; and while I am certainly grateful for conservatism wherever it appears, I do not believe it is possible to truly preserve biblical Christianity without preserving all of it. For example, you may be familiar with what has come to be called the "Conservative Resurgence" in the Southern Baptist Convention. Essentially, this movement in the early 80's rescued the convention from theological liberals to the point where today there are no theologically liberals in any positions of leadership in the convention. But again, when they say "Conservative Resurgence," they are speaking of theology and not necessarily anything else. In fact, it is a sort of strange phenomenon on the SBC that the more conservative a church is theologically, the more likely it will have quite "progressive" worship, and the theologically

liberal churches that were kicked out of the convention usually have much more conservative worship.

This is a phenomenon that is not limited to the SBC; more and more we hear about the “Conservative Evangelicals” represented by groups like Together for The Gospel and The Gospel Coalition. These are groups who are thankfully recovering and strongly proclaiming conservative theological positions that used to be very weak in evangelical circles like the inerrancy of Scripture, substitutionary atonement, and even complimentary gender roles. However, the term “Conservative Evangelical” is actually not entirely accurate since most if not all of these groups are quite progressive when it comes to especially worship philosophy. For example, Mark Driscoll has proudly claimed to be “theologically conservative and culturally liberal.”<sup>1</sup> The problem is that this is not just limited to the Conservative Evangelicals either. More and more fundamentalists are trying to distance themselves from so-called “cultural fundamentalism,” which is just another way of saying a conservative philosophy of worship.

And this leads to another related problem: many groups are truly conservative, but what they are conserving is not biblical Christianity but rather a progressivism from the past. In other words, certain groups bought into the progressive philosophy in the past and went right along with allowing Christianity to be reshaped by the newest ideas and expressions, but then at some point decided that they would no longer move forward but would instead conserve the current way of doing things. The clearest example of this is the Roman Catholic Church. In many ways, the Roman Catholic Church is extremely conservative, and the Reformers looked quite progressive in their desire to change. But what the RCC conserves is not biblical Christianity; it is a Christianity that had welcomed certain theological and liturgical innovations during the middle ages that progressed well beyond Scripture. The Reformers were the true conservatives who desired to return the Church to its biblical roots in both theology and worship and thus truly conserve biblical Christianity. And there have been other groups who have done similar things as the RCC.

So I’m targeting what I consider two opposite errors when it comes to discussing conservative Christianity: on the one hand are those who dismiss the idea of conservatism altogether, arguing instead that we should be simply “biblical”; on the other hand are those who say they are conservative but are not, in fact, conserving biblical Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup>Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 138. I would suggest that this is a key distinction between historic fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. While fundamentalists have never been perfectly conservative culturally, they have always been more cautious in adopting the most novel cultural forms.

## **The Twin Pillars of Conservative Christianity**

So what, then, is conservative Christianity? At its essence, a conservative is simply someone who wants to conserve something, and so it is really a broad term that can describe a number of things; we talk about political conservatives, social conservatives, fiscal conservatives, and theological conservatives. What I would like to specifically address today is fully-orbed conservative Christianity, that is, a perspective that believes the best way to be biblically Christian is to preserve certain ideas and ways of behavior from the past. The opposite to “conservative” is “progressive,” or we often use the term “liberal.” A progressive is one who believes that the best way to be biblically Christian is to reshape certain ideas or behavior into newer, more relevant forms.

Essentially, there are two pillars that hold up the house of conservatism, and really, these two pillars could describe any kind of conservatism from political, to social, to fiscal. But I’m going to apply them specifically to Christianity and most specifically to Christian worship.

### **Transcendent Principles**

The first pillar of conservative Christianity is affirmation of transcendent, absolute principles, which are declared as such by the sovereign will of the self-existent Creator. These principles govern all creation and reveal its meaning and value. They are revealed to us in creation, in our consciences, and mostly perfectly in the written Word of God.

Generally speaking, these transcendent principles can be grouped into three categories: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Now most evangelical Christians will readily affirm the absolute nature of truth and goodness, and they may rightly be called “conservative” in these realms. Yet when it comes to beauty, most evangelicals deny any universals. Of course, aesthetic judgments play a significant roll in one’s understanding of the value and meaning of cultural expressions and art forms in worship. This is why a congregation otherwise conservative theologically and morally can espouse a quite progressive philosophy of worship.

In other words, by definition conservative Christianity is dependent upon a commitment to transcendent principles of truth, goodness, and beauty as expressed by the Bible and creation.

## *God as the Source of all Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*

Belief in transcendent principles is rooted in a belief that God is the source, sustainer, and end of all things. Romans 11:36 declares that “from him and through him and to him are all things.” The Bible clearly proclaims that God is self-existent and self-sustaining, and all things come from him. Everything that is true is so because God is True. Everything that is good is so because God is good. And everything that is beautiful is so because God is beautiful. There are no such things as brute facts apart from God; they are facts because God determined them to be so. There are no such things as moral standards that are merely conceived out of convention apart from God; actions are moral or immoral because God says they are. And in the same way, beauty is not in the eye of the beholder; something is beautiful because God has determined it to be.

With this in mind, Christians as image-bearers of God must be committed to thinking God’s thoughts after him, to behaving in certain ways that conform to God’s moral will, and to loving those things that God calls lovely.

Perhaps the passage that most clearly articulates such a command is Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Here we find a list of absolute standards by which we must judge all things. The phrase rendered “think on” literally means, “take into account.” Everything we encounter must be judged by the qualities in this list. Each of these terms is worth considering:

- “true” — truthful, honest, real, genuine
- “honest” — noble, of good character, worthy
- “just” — conforming to the standard, righteous
- “pure” — holy, chaste, innocent
- “lovely” — literally “towards affection,” pleasing
- “of good report” — worthy of praise, admirable
- “virtue” — moral excellence
- “worthy of praise” — commendation, approval

These qualities could be grouped into the three categories of truth, goodness, and beauty. Something is true when it agrees with reality; something is good when it meets real

needs; and something is beautiful when it is worthy of pleasure. In all three of these categories, there is a subjective realm (what we think) and an objective realm (what really is). With truth, we may subjectively think something is true that is objectively not true. For example, I may truly believe that grass is red, but that doesn't make it true. So in the case of truth, we must always change what we think is true to match what God says is true in his Word. John 17:17 says, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." With my belief about the color of grass, I have to readjust my beliefs to match reality.

With goodness, we may subjectively think that something is good for us when it is objectively not good. For example, I may think that drinking cyanide daily is good for me, but that doesn't make it so. Here, too, we must always change what we think is good to match what God says is good. With my views of cyanide, either I would need to adjust my thinking or reality would eventually sink in!

The same is true with beauty. We may subjectively think something is beautiful — we may take pleasure in something — but what we think may not match with what is objectively beautiful. For example, I may take pleasure in a particular work of art or song or style of music and think that it is beautiful, but that does not make it beautiful. According to this passage, we are to take into account things that are worthy of praise, things that are *admirable*. This implies absolute standards. Here again we must change our tastes to match what God says is beautiful. Our responsibility as Christians is to change what we take pleasure in to those things that are actually *worthy* of our pleasure — those things that are actually beautiful.

So since God is the source, sustainer, and end of all things, a conservative Christian believes in absolute standards of truth, goodness, and beauty.

### *The Bible as the Expression of all Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*

There is one primary reason that I think it is so difficult for those who otherwise affirm absolute truth and goodness to believe also in absolute beauty: most Christians today want to be biblical, but they believe that the Bible is only a collection of truth statements and moral standards.

Certainly the truth we wish to preserve—the truth of which the Church is the pillar and support (1 Tim 3:15)—has been revealed to us through the written Word of God. Everything contained within God's Word corresponds rightly with reality, and it is our responsibility to pass that truth on to future generations (Acts 20:27). What we find there is truth about God, man, sin, salvation, the world, and so much more. Therefore, the Christianity we wish to preserve can be no less than doctrinal.

But what we have been given through Scripture, and what we are charged with preserving, is more than brute theological facts compiled in abstract statements. Christianity is no less than facts in statements to be sure, but it is more. I am convinced of this primarily because I believe in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible does not come to us as a collection of propositional statements or a systematic theology. As Kevin Vanhoozer observes, “The Bible is more than divine data.”<sup>2</sup>

Instead, God’s revelation of truth comes to us in the Bible in various literary forms, most of which are not merely didactic or propositional—they are aesthetic. James S. Spiegel helpfully summarizes the various literary genres that God chose to communicate his truth:

... the books of the Bible are, in the main, works of literary art. From Genesis to Revelation we find epic narratives (tragic and comic), proverbs, poems, hymns, oratory, and apocalyptic literature whose artistic tools include allegory, metaphor, symbolism, satire, and irony. Comparatively little of the biblical material is strictly didactic, and where this is the case, such as in the book of Romans, the logical rigor itself is elegant (an aesthetic quality). Finally, Jesus’ own preferred method of instruction, the parable, is an aesthetic device. And even when not using parables, his language tends to be heavily laden with metaphors and symbolism, a fact that exasperated the disciples.<sup>3</sup>

These forms provide a way of communicating God’s truth that would be impossible with systematic statements of fact alone. These aesthetic forms are essential to the truth itself since God’s inspired Word is exactly the best way that truth could be presented. Clyde S. Kilby observes, “The Bible comes to us in an artistic form which is often sublime, rather than as a document of practical, expository prose, strict in outline like a textbook.”<sup>4</sup> He asserts that these aesthetic forms are not merely decorative but part of the essential presentation of the Bible’s truth: “We do not have truth and beauty, or truth decorated with beauty, or truth illustrated by the beautiful phrase, or truth in a ‘beautiful setting.’ Truth and beauty are in the Scriptures, as indeed they must always be, an inseparable unity.”<sup>5</sup>

To reduce Christianity, then, only to doctrinal statements does great injustice to the way God himself has chosen to reveal truth to us. Vanhoozer articulates this well:

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<sup>2</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>3</sup>James S. Spiegel, “Aesthetics and Worship,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 4 (1998): 44.

<sup>4</sup>Clyde S. Kilby, *Christianity and Aesthetics* (Chicago: Inter-varsity Press, 1961), 19.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

There are other types of precision or clarity than the scientific. It has been said, for example, that poetry is “the best words put in the best order.” Similarly, because we are dealing with the Bible as God's word, we have good reason to believe that the biblical words are the right words in the right order. . . .

To interpret the Bible truly, then, we must do more than string together individual propositions like beads on a string. This takes us only as far as fortune cookie theology, to a practice of breaking open Scripture in order to find the message contained within. What gets lost in propositionalist interpretation are the circumstances of the statement, its poetic and affective elements, and even, then, a dimension of its truth. We do less than justice to Scripture if we preach and teach only its propositional content. Information alone is insufficient for spiritual formation. We need to get beyond “cheap inerrancy,” beyond ascribing accolades to the Bible to understanding what the Bible is actually saying, beyond professing biblical truth to practicing it.<sup>6</sup>

Most evangelicals, however, view the Bible—and by extension Christianity—as merely propositional.<sup>7</sup> To most, whatever aesthetic aspects are present in Scripture are incidental at best and for many a distraction. Truth is simply something to believe and perhaps get excited about.

But there is a reason the Bible calls God a “king” rather than simply asserting the doctrinal fact of his rulership. There is a reason the Bible calls God a shepherd, fortress, father, husband, and potter rather than simply stating the ideas underlying these metaphors. These images of God paint pictures that go far beyond mere doctrinal accuracy.

Thus what we are charged with preserving is not only a collection of propositions that correspond to God's reality, but also ways of expressing these ideas that likewise correspond to God's reality. We are committed to preserving not just intellectual facts, but

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<sup>6</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 48, no. 1 (2005): 96, 100. Vanhoozer's opinion here is clearly rhetorical overstatement; neither he nor I would disparage the value of systematic theology. Yet the point is clear: systematic theology alone cannot fully encapsulate Christian truth.

<sup>7</sup>For a helpful comparison between the typical evangelical view of the Bible and truth and one that sees the imagination as essential to truth, see Peter W. Macky, “The Role of Metaphor in Christian Thought and Experience as Understood by Gordon Clark and C. S. Lewis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 24, no. 3 (1981).



“the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Faith is more than facts; faith is right facts combined with the affection of trust; faith is right facts felt rightly.

The point is that the Bible itself uses forms of beauty to express God’s truth and moral standards in a manner that accurately shapes the way in which people perceive the truth. Most true Christians, such as the so-called Conservative Evangelicals, desire to preserve God’s truth and moral standards as expressly stated in the Word of God. Where conservative Christianity goes a step further is to also commit to preserving the *way in which the Bible expresses truth and moral standards*—in other words, Conservative Christians seek to preserve biblical truth, biblical goodness, and biblical beauty.

## **Nurturing Tradition**

The second pillar of conservatism is a commitment to conserve those institutions and forms that best reflect a recognition and respect for this transcendent order. Conservative Christianity recognizes some forms of expression were designed to express transcendent truth, goodness, and beauty, while other forms were by nature designed to do something entirely opposite.

### *The Importance of Form*

I have argued to this point that preserving biblical Christianity must include not only the preservation of right doctrine and behavior, but also the preservation of right aesthetic expressions of that doctrine. People’s sensibilities are shaped and cultivated through aesthetic forms. We have focused most specifically on literary forms since this is what we find in the Bible, but all art forms shape the affections in some way. Therefore, someone who truly desires to preserve biblical Christianity will not only concern himself with preserving truth but also with preserving specific aesthetic ways of expressing that truth. And of course, the area in which this is most essential is with the aesthetic forms chosen for expressing God’s truth in worship.

What art forms are chosen in worship is of utmost importance since they present to the congregation not just theological facts, but those facts felt in certain ways. Most evangelicals today view worship forms as simply pretty packaging for truth or at best a way to “energize” the truth. Music is just a way to make truth interesting and engaging in worship. But aesthetic forms are not incidental to the truths of Christianity—they are essential, as Spiegel explains: “At its best, liturgical art is not merely consistent with sound

doctrine but serves positively to illuminate biblical teaching, making imaginative expression or application of biblical truth.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, worship forms help to express the affections of Christianity in ways that propositional statements alone cannot; they communicate not just the *what* of biblical content, but also *how* that content is felt. And the kinds of aesthetic forms God chose to communicate his truth should inform our worship forms. Art in worship is more than incidental; it is God-ordained because of its power to express rightly felt truth. Spiegel continues: “Surely the fact that God himself chose an artistic medium as his primary vehicle of special revelation ought by itself to persuade us to place a special premium on the arts.”<sup>9</sup>

Conservative worship is essentially a desire to preserve the kinds of aesthetic forms contained in Scripture in our worship because a Conservative Christian recognizes the importance of aesthetic form. Aesthetic form shapes propositional content; just like a liquid takes the shape of its container, doctrinal facts take the shape of the aesthetic form in which they are carried. This is accomplished in worship music through poetic devices, melody, harmony, rhythm, performance style, and many other musical elements.

Consider this example of how just the propositional content of a song text can be shaped by its form: suppose I want to communicate the idea that God is all-powerful, that he promises to protect us, and that we should trust in him. Here are four different ways to communicate that content through poetry. Notice how the form shapes the content:

1. A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;  
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;  
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.<sup>10</sup>

2. How strong and sweet my Father’s care,  
That round about me, like the air,  
Is with me always, everywhere!  
He cares for me!<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Spiegel: 51.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>10</sup>Martin Luther, 1529.

<sup>11</sup>Anonymous, ca. 1929.

3. God is bigger than the boogie man.  
He's bigger than Godzilla, or the monsters on TV.  
Oh, God is bigger than the boogie man.  
And He's watching out for you and me.<sup>12</sup>

4. Draw me close to you  
Never let me go  
I lay it all down again  
To hear you say that I'm your friend

You are my desire  
No one else will do  
'Cause nothing else could take your place  
To feel the warmth of your embrace  
Help me find the way, bring me back to you

You're all I want  
You're all I've ever needed  
You're all I want  
Help me know you are near.<sup>13</sup>

In each of these poems, the basic idea is the same: God is great, and we can trust in him. On the propositional content level, each of these poems is saying something that is true. But when we get to the level of form—what words are chosen and how they are put together—the idea in these poems is imagined very differently. Add the musical elements and performance style, and the imagination is even more significantly shaped.

The problem is that since most evangelicals understand truth to be only right knowledge of right facts, they view worship as a time to impart only right facts with some enjoyable music to make such transmission interesting or engaging. Yet while theological facts must be transmitted in worship, this misses the whole point of worship. Thus most theologically conservative evangelical worship services are filled with good doctrinal teaching but worship forms that do not express an aesthetic expression of that truth that rightly reflects the way the Bible expressed that truth. They view the purpose of worship

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<sup>12</sup>Veggie Tales, 1992.

<sup>13</sup>Kelly Carpenter, 1994.

music as making truth “engaging” rather than its deeper purpose of shaping the affections in profound ways. With this view, it matters not what kind of music a church uses as long as it is “passionate” and resonates with the worshipers.

Worship choices, then, are not merely about what is pleasing, authentic, or engaging; what forms we choose for our worship must be based on the criterion of whether or not they are true—whether or not they correspond to God’s reality as it is imagined in his Word.

### *Nurturing Biblical Tradition*

Now let’s take this one step further. To speak of art forms is to speak of culture, so what I am suggesting is the preservation of certain cultural forms as essential to the preservation of biblical Christianity. Such an assertion that some cultural expressions are better than others may sound elitist until we remember that culture is never created in a vacuum. Culture, according to Roger Scruton, is “a shared spiritual force which is manifest in all the customs, beliefs and practices of a people”; it is “a demonstration of a belief system.”<sup>14</sup> This follows closely T. S. Elliot’s classic argument that “no culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion.”<sup>15</sup> Cultural forms are nurtured in value systems as ways of expressing those values. In terms of our current discussion, art forms are products of human imagination intended to propagate that particular imagination. Mark Snoeberger explains the difference between a culture nurtured by Christian imagination and one formed by pagan values: “There are two worldviews among humans, the Christian worldview (which produces Christian culture) and the non-Christian (pagan) worldview (which produces pagan culture).”<sup>16</sup>

Now, it is important to recognize, then, that all cultural forms are built upon what has come before; no one creates culture *ex nihilo*. No one “invents” cultural expressions, artistic forms, rituals, liturgies, customs, languages, or styles out of nothing. Every human being builds upon what has come before him, and we call what has come before “tradition.” Tradition is not a bad thing; it is inevitable.

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<sup>14</sup>Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 1, 286.

<sup>15</sup>T. S. Elliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), 100.

<sup>16</sup>Mark A. Snoeberger, “Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization How Culture Receives the Gospel,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9, no. (2004): 349. Snoeberger is basically summarizing the presuppositionalist definition of *worldview* as articulated by Greg Bahnsen.

A cultural expression is like a building. No one has even built a house without first receiving instruction from someone else. This instruction may have come in the form of an apprenticeship, a blueprint, a textbook, or at very least an observation of a house itself. But no one decides one day to build a house without having ever been told how a house works or at least discovering himself how a house works from studying a completed house. Tradition is that blueprint from which culture emerges.

After we have come to understand a given tradition, we may do one of three things with it: 1) We may simply continue to use the tradition; 2) We may nurture and further cultivate the tradition; or 3) We may reject the tradition altogether and create something completely different. But even with the latter, we have begun with a tradition in the creation of something new.

The implication of this is that all of the various cultural institutions, forms, artistic expressions, media, languages, and systems of thought are what they are today based on hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years of nurture and development. Christian Tradition, then, according to Daniel Williams, is simply “the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly.” Tradition “sits in indispensable relation—historically and theologically—to the Christian use of Scripture and to the development of doctrine and spirituality. This was true in the early church; it is still true today.”<sup>17</sup>

This is perhaps no more clearly apparent than with how we articulate doctrine today. How we explain the Trinity or Jesus Christ comes to us in many cases, not explicitly from the pages of Scripture (although the truth is certainly there) or from our own novel ideas, but from tradition. The doctrines themselves are in the Bible, but the particular ways of explaining difficult doctrines were cultivated over time, sifted through controversy, debate, and intense discussion. Yet though these ways of expressing biblical truth have come from categories of thought outside Scripture, they nevertheless remain faithful to how the Bible itself expresses those doctrines. The same can be said of worship forms and standards of conduct; how we worship and how we act is built upon customs and forms that have been, in most cases, nurtured for a long time.

Yet we must also remember that just as some traditions have been cultivated within crucibles of transcendent, biblical values, others were nurtured in an environment of paganism. Cultural forms, customs, and mores develop because of the value systems out of which they grew, and we must evaluate those value systems in order to judge the traditions

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<sup>17</sup>Daniel H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 9.

themselves. Dean Kurtz explains how some cultures may be better than others depending upon how closely they reflect biblical forms of expression:

As politically incorrect as it may sound, I believe an examination of various human cultures reveals that some cultures may be closer than others in reflecting the fixed norm of Kingdom culture (how things will be when Jesus is King). That is why it is dangerous to reason from culture back to the Scriptures. Instead we should endeavor to build the best biblical model for worship and music that we can and then go to the culture in which we find ourselves and look to stimulate progress toward that model.<sup>18</sup>

This becomes no more important than when we attempt to preserve the absolute, transcendent values of God's character and nature. We have been given a truth deposit to protect (and remember, "truth" involves more than mere propositions), we are the pillar and support of that truth (1 Tim 3:15), and it is our responsibility to pass those values and ideas to future generations (Acts 20:27). The way in which we accomplish this goal is by cultivating Christian tradition. Again, this is fairly obvious with regard to doctrine. With the difficult doctrines that are not necessarily systematically explained in Scripture, we do not attempt to "reinvent the wheel" in our explanation of those doctrines to each new generation or ethnic group. Nor do we try to "repackage" those doctrines using contemporary idioms or categories developed in pop culture. We have always and will likely always explain the Trinity in terms of God being one in essence and three in persons. We have always and will likely always explain Christ as one person with two natures. We do not get these categories (essence, person, or nature) from Scripture itself; these categories have been nurtured within the Christian tradition in order to explain Christian doctrine.

And the same is true for our Christian worship. Conservative Christians will build upon the tradition of the historic Church; they will learn the essence of that tradition and then seek to preserve and continue to cultivate that tradition because they recognize it to be the best way to preserve biblical Christianity over and above any other available forms of expression.

This perspective is biblical. For example, Paul appeals to the "customs" of the churches as an actual basis of argument in his discussion of head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:16. As Paul commands others to imitate him (Phil 3:17), so we are to imitate the traditions and practices of those who have come before us. Even the observance of the

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<sup>18</sup>Dean Kurtz, *God's Word the Final Word on Worship and Music* (Xulon Press, 2008), 287.

Lord's Supper is based not only upon direct revelation given to Paul, but also apostolic tradition (1 Cor 11:2-34).<sup>19</sup> The biblical command to honor parents and elders is more than simply an attitude, but a direction and disposition. This principle is even implied in Matthew 18:15-20. Jesus clearly states that two or three believers gathered in an official capacity to make a decision for the full assembly possess a certain amount of derivative authority because God is "among them." Certainly this authority applies most directly to discipline situations contextually, yet the principle applies more broadly. This authority is not infallible and equal with Scripture, as the Romanist view of Church tradition argues, but it is real authority nonetheless. These biblical principles should make us very cautious about quickly rejecting the customs, practices, and traditions of those within the Christian heritage.

I am not arguing for a view of tradition that places its authority on the same level of Scripture, but rather a perspective that sees Christian tradition as the most faithful propagation of biblical Christianity. This was exactly the position of the Reformers. They did not reject tradition outright, but rather put it in its proper place. Daniel B. Clendenin explains:

It is clear that [the Reformers] even saw themselves as restoring the church to fidelity to the patristic consensus [i.e. the tradition of the early church]. A reading of Calvin's Institutes, for example, shows his indebtedness to the church fathers. Neither were they unaware of the dangers of individualistic and private interpretation of Scripture, and of the importance of the church context for the life of faith. What they objected to was the [Roman Catholic] church's elevation of tradition to the status of Scripture, and its arrogation to place itself above the Scriptures as its mediator.<sup>20</sup>

So I'm not arguing for infallible tradition, nor am I arguing that these traditions, customs, and forms will never change. One of the valid responses to tradition is continued cultivation of the tradition. But the change will not be one of an entirely different form but one of further nurturing. Nor does this mean that we will never reject a particular part of the tradition that has been handed to us. Tradition is fallible because the humans who have cultivated it are fallible. Tradition, just like anything else, must be evaluated based on what

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<sup>19</sup>For a helpful exploration into the traditional basis for the observance of the Lord's Supper, see Donald Farner, "The Lord's Supper until He Comes," *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (1985): 399-401.

<sup>20</sup>Daniel B. Clendenin, "Orthodoxy on Scripture and Tradition: A Comparison with Reformed and Catholic Perspectives," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (1995): 389.

values it carries. We may sometimes see the need to reject a particular part of the established tradition because we find that it does not express the transcendent absolutes that we are trying to preserve and pass on.

But what we must never do if we intend to preserve biblical Christianity is completely reject the tradition we have been given in favor of other non-Christian traditions. We must not throw away the customs, expressions, and forms that have been nurtured for thousands of years in order to express transcendent values in favor of customs, expressions, and forms that were, in the words of Mark Minnick, created by pagans to express pagan values to other pagans. We must never favor novelty for novelty's sake; we must not reject our tradition merely because it is tradition.

### **Conclusion**

So this is the essence of conservative Christianity. It is a belief in absolute, transcendent principles of truth, goodness, and beauty and a commitment to preserve those values and pass them on to future generations. And it is a recognition that certain ways of expressing those transcendent principles are better at preserving and accurately passing them on than others, particularly those expressions that most correspond to the kinds of aesthetic expressions that God inspired in his Word.