

# Tradition and The Catholic Spirit

John Wesley inherited his “catholic spirit” from his mother, Susanna – that is to say, the nondogmatic strain in Anglicanism that had discouraged the absolutizing of creeds, confessions, and systematic theological treatises. To be sure, Wesley was opinionated and partisan, like his father, with a stubborn loyalty to what he understood to be the essential cores of Christian truth. But he never supposed that this core of essential Christian truth had been or ever could be captured in a single formula of words – what we might today call “propositionalism.”

Wesley was well aware that most of the cruel controversies in the history of the Church had spilled too much blood, and that the ink of theological controversy was mostly about what he called “opinions” – that is, arguments about subsidiary doctrines, and quarrels over exactly how the historic affirmations of faith, what we would call Christian orthodoxy, should be interpreted and what they precisely mean. Wesley espoused a *theology of love*: “love is the surest way to truth and the highest goal of thought.” Over and over again in his sermons, and in his theological treatises, we encounter the sentiment, “True religion is right tempers [a right attitude or disposition] toward God and man. It is, in two words, gratitude and benevolence: gratitude to our Creator and supreme Benefactor, and benevolence to our fellow creatures.” Of course, Wesley is echoing Scripture: it is the loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves.

He set this out over and over again for the early Methodists, most famously and comprehensively in his 1749 sermon, *The Catholic Spirit*. In every case, Wesley’s overriding concern is to narrow the field of irreconcilable difference and disagreements among practicing Christians – to transfer their arguments about the precision of theological language in order to concentrate on faith in Christ and to its consequences. Theological formulations are important and necessary, but only insofar as they point us to a loving God and the salvation provided in Christ.

David Watson, the dean of faculty at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH helps us get at this in a blog he posted not so very long ago. In what follows, I am borrowing from Dr. Watson, but I have changed and adapted his wording to fit my intentions and our purpose in this Sunday lesson.

## Belief and Praise

We usually think of orthodoxy as “right belief.” This is a true assertion, but it does not say all that needs to be said. *Orthos* means “right” or “straight,” as in “straight truth” or “right doctrine.” *Doxa* can mean “opinion” or “belief,” but just as importantly, it also means “glory” and “praise.” In the New Testament world, *doxa* was connected to the ancient value of honor, which involved giving someone the recognition and respect that he or she deserved. Christians all over the world sing “The Doxology,” giving God “rightful praise and worship.”

“Orthodoxy,” then, is “right belief,” but, just as importantly, “right praise.” Historically in the life of the Christian Church, this has been tied to the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Quite literally, this means, “the law of praying is the law of believing.” Put differently, our worship and our belief are inseparable from one another. Our belief shapes our worship and our worship shapes our belief. In our first lesson last week, we spoke of our theology being “normative and formative.” In our Wesleyan and Methodist tradition, doctrine is not used as a wall to keep people out, but it functions rather as the way to form us in Godlikeness.

# The Faith Once for All Entrusted to the Saints

In this sense orthodoxy and tradition functions hand in hand for us. The term “orthodoxy” describes the praise and belief of the Church catholic (or “universal”) down through the centuries. It has taken various forms and gone through various permutations. We sometimes speak of the “apostolic witness,” or the “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). During the second century we find this faith expressed as a “rule” for the churches, a statement of the doctrinal claims that should form proper Christian praise and belief.

The Rule of Faith is an early statement of basic Christian belief. It is not a creed, but its basic content will appear in the Old Roman Creed, which was the forerunner to the Apostles’ Creed. In the Nicene Creed of 381, this tradition would be given the definitive and elegant form that one hears today in myriad languages across the globe, in settings that range from grass huts to gothic cathedrals. This expression of belief and worship is often called the Great Tradition.

## Why Has the Great Tradition Thrived Through the Centuries?

Why is it that, despite so many attempts to revise it over time, the basic content of Christian orthodoxy has not only survived, but thrived? Well, one might say, it is because “the Church” has enforced its doctrine by whatever means necessary, using the power of the state when it could, and insisted that everyone believe the same thing. In some cases, this has been true, but much of the time it has not. Prior to the early fourth century, by which time the basic contours of Christian orthodoxy had already developed, Christians had no political power. In the eleventh century, we

encounter the first major schism of the Church [when there were rival Popes in Avignon, France and in Rome], but despite the fact that there were separate communions, the faith of the East and West remained remarkably similar with regard to their major affirmations. Likewise, in the sixteenth century, when the Roman Catholic Church exercised considerable political power and influence in Europe, the second major schism took place—the Protestant Reformation. Even though the Reformers departed in significant ways from the traditions and practices of Roman Catholicism, the major streams that emerged out of the Reformation were generally orthodox with regard to the set of claims they made about God, our salvation through Jesus Christ, and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. (So, for example, see the Westminster Confession, the Augsburg Confession, and the Thirty-Nine Articles, which Wesley abbreviated to twenty four, and was later expanded to twenty five.) They maintained with renewed vigor the divine revelation given to us in our Scriptures. They understood the Church, fractured as it now was, as the body of Christ offering salvation to the world. They maintained the Great Tradition's high Christology as the centerpiece of belief and worship. There have been plenty of opportunities for Christians to slough off or revise the Great Tradition, but even when it would have been easy to do so, we have generally preserved it. Moreover, Christian groups that have rejected the great tradition have in most cases not survived. There is life in the Great Tradition because within it are the seeds of life.

## The Generosity of God

The roots of orthodoxy are of course in Scripture, and even in traditions that precede the writing of Scripture. At its core, Christian orthodoxy is about the God who created all things out of a sheer act of love. God chose one people, Israel, to be a light to the world. God gave this people the law and the prophets. At times they abided by them, and at times they rebelled against God, as all people do. And yet this same God against whom we have rebelled came to us in person—in a *particular* person, Jesus. Speaking out of the beautiful traditions of Israel, he taught us how we should live. He healed the sick, proclaimed good news to the poor, and even raised the dead. For this, he was executed. He died on a cross,

taking upon himself all the sin of the world, and bridging the chasm created between God and humankind through sin. After three days, Jesus rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and he will come again in glory. [We will have more to say about this great truth in our Easter series, “We are an Easter People.”]

This tradition that embodies these claims—Christian orthodoxy—expresses the generosity of God, who has created us, offers us salvation, and abides with us through the Holy Spirit. We read in the Nicene Creed that it was “*for us and for our salvation*” that Christ “came down from heaven” and was made human. “*For our sake* he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.” The creed teaches us that the Holy Spirit is not just “the Lord,” but “the giver of life.” It teaches us that there is one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and that we will be raised from death and will have life in the world to come.

Recently, among Methodist and Wesleyan leaders, we have been appropriating a phrase from the great Yale theologian, Hans Frei, “Generous Orthodoxy.” This is not unlike what Wesley proposed in his sermon on the catholic spirit.

## Becoming a Generous People

I think what people mean when they refer to “generous orthodoxy” is that orthodox Christians should be kind and reasonable. To insist that we need a “generous orthodoxy” suggests that the tradition of orthodoxy is somehow particularly in need of greater generosity. We all know from personal experience that stinginess of spirit knows no ideological bounds. There are ungenerous people in every stripe of the Christian tradition and beyond.

It is important to understand that orthodoxy is not simply about praise and belief. It is also about the way we live. Thus, to the ancient maxim, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, some people add another phrase: *lex vivendi*. As we worship, so we believe, so we

live. The faith we proclaim should shape our lives. In fact, we believe, the God who has created all things and saved us from sin through an act of gracious self-giving offers us something greater still: the opportunity to become ever more *like God*. In the Eastern Orthodox and in the Anglican tradition this is called “theosis.” In the Western traditions, we usually call it “sanctification.” In either case, the faith we proclaim leads us into the divine life, and God shapes our character into the image of Christ. Just as God is generous and kind, and has brought all things into being through the divine *logos* (“word” or “reason”), we become a more generous, kinder, and more reasonable people.

Often those who speak of a “generous orthodoxy” seem to aim for the least common denominator among Christians, and the danger here is that we dilute the power of the orthodox faith received in its fullness. If it is true that orthodoxy is an expression of the generosity of God, and that the orthodox faith should make us more generous people, then to dilute this faith is not generous at all. As Christians, we know it is a sin to withhold water from the thirsty or food from the hungry. By the same token, may God prevent us from withholding spiritual food and drink from a world so desperately in need of them.

*W. Stephen Gunter*  
*Church of the Servant*  
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