

Where Do I Stand When the Foundation Gives Way?

From the series: Good News Then and Now

Jeremiah 7:4; Luke 20:2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We are on a 2000-year journey, a 2000-year survey of the history of Christian doctrine, or as it is called, the history of dogma, and we are looking at the history of doctrinal development because I want to demonstrate to you that, if we are about the re-imagining of the faith for our day, we are only doing what has always been done, not always voluntarily, but out of necessity, the need to continue to reinterpret the event of God in Jesus Christ in every new age and historical context in order that it might make sense, in order that it might be meaningful, in order that it might be transformative.

We noted three weeks ago that the formation of Christian doctrine arose out of that first great crisis of the Christian Church, the Jesus movement poised for the imminent return of Jesus as the Lord of Glory to judge the earth, which didn't happen. And that early Church, confident that the end of the age was so near, had never contemplated having to live in history. What did the event of Jesus Christ mean, if history was ongoing? What did it mean, then, to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus in a world that obviously wasn't ending? Out of that initial crisis came the formation of the early Catholic tradition, which did not come about easily. To read those stories of the post-Apostolic Church is to read of tremendous conflict, tremendous division, great tensions, outstanding leaders on respective sides of issues trying to hammer out what in the world God had done in this Jesus. The Church eventually regularized itself. It took some centuries, and finally it established what it believed about what God had done in Jesus: thus, the appearance of orthodoxy, that is, proper belief, correct belief. And also, the possibility of heresy, for now there was a line set down, there were boundaries drawn, and those who were outside of the pale were marked as heretical to the established, accepted faith of the Church.

That early Church, we noted a couple of weeks ago, began to take on some stature and it was greatly enhanced when the Emperor Constantine converted and when a successor established Christianity as the religion of the empire. The establishment of Christianity, which I was taught was a great providential act of

God, might well have been the point at which the Church began to lose its soul because, with its establishment, now having the power of the throne behind it, it grew not only in its faith understanding, but in power, and with power came eventual degeneration and decay and corruption (you learned about that last week), an institution that became so insensitive to the needs of people that it could no longer deal with the human experience of one like Martin Luther, whose experience was the catalyst for the shattering of the institution and the emergence of the Protestant tradition. Now we have three major Church families.

In 1054, Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic Latin tradition came apart; the Pope excommunicated the Patriarch, the Patriarch returned the favor, and from that point on, 1054, the 11th century, the Christian Church, which until that time had been one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, became Eastern and Western. Now in the 16th century, with the shattering of the Western Church and the emergence of Protestantism, there was born a third major family and we have it to this day, three major groupings, Protestantism having continued to splinter until we could sing the song, "It's a Many-Splintered Thing."

But, while there were differences between those three bodies, they maintained the core that was arrived at in those early centuries, the doctrine of the Trinity, the two natures of Jesus Christ, truly God, truly human, and much else they shared. But, there were differences, as well, and good reason for division, of course. But, there was one thing in which Orthodoxy, the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism were totally agreed, and that was that they were institutions with absolute authority. If you ask an Orthodox Patriarch, he would say the authority is in the ongoing tradition of the Church. If you would ask the Pope in Rome, he would say the authority is in the teaching office of the Church which he embodies. If you would ask John Calvin or Martin Luther, they would have said the authority lies in the written word of God.

Whether it was tradition or Church or Bible, the whole Christian Church in the 16th century was a Church that was marked by authoritarian claim, the claim that the content of its faith was the consequence of a supernatural revelation from heaven, and what the Church taught was to be accepted on the basis of authority, believed, and obeyed, not questioned. You did not need to think; you only needed to understand what was already given, what was proclaimed, what was declared, the dogmatic foundation of the Church.

Then the modern era dawned. Whenever one does a periodization of history, there will be fuzzy boundaries and some disagreement, but I think that we can say without too much fear of refutation that the modern era of which we are still a part, although people talk about the post-modern phase we're in, nonetheless, we are modern people and the modern era began about 1650, the middle point of the 17th century to the present, and the modern period was marked by the throwing off of all forms of authoritarian claim and the insistence on the empirical observation and investigation of all truth claims. While that modern movement

began with the advent of the natural sciences, and Francis Bacon formulated the scientific method in the early stages, those scientific investigations did not seem to challenge Church doctrine, but what happened immediately was a new way of thinking, a new way of knowing, and the movement from the medieval world to the modern world represents a seismic shift in human history and human culture. Modernity, of which we are a part, is marked by critical thinking. We don't take statements, dogmatic statements or claims just because they are uttered on the basis of some authority, be it tradition or Church or Bible. We investigate; we experiment; we think critically about the question, and this is so much a part of us that we don't even think about it. It is that which marks the whole modern period and it marks you and me in all the rest of our lives, except not always in our religious experience. But that seismic shift in culture, in the way of knowing and what could be known, marked the beginning of a serious challenge to the Christian tradition.

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher of great fame, demolished the proofs for the existence of God, the philosophical proofs for the existence of God. His purpose was positive; he was not anti-religious, but he wanted to show that that way of thinking, thinking then that we had proved God's existence, was a dead end. He said, "I have destroyed knowledge in order to make room for faith." There was a young preacher in Berlin at that time who read Kant, imbibed Kant, and recognized that the nub of the problem for the Christian tradition, now that the modern age had dawned, was the question of authority. Friedrich Schleiermacher was a brilliant, witty, socially desirable kind of an individual who was assigned to be the preacher in a great hospital in Berlin, and was invited into the social circles of that great city. He was a preacher, he was a Christian, he was brilliant (sounds like an oxymoron, but in this case, that was true), and the cultured, educated, sophisticated society of Berlin invited him to be a part of their circles. They enjoyed him, and he ran with them very well. But he was a Christian, he was a preacher, and on his 29th birthday they surprised him with a party and they gave him a challenge and said, "Write an account of how you can still be religious, Christian, a preacher."

He accepted the challenge and at the age of 31 published what is now a classic, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers*. He knew his friends. He knew what they thought of him; he knew they thought religion was passé, and he took the challenge right to them. He began in the first speech, of which there are five, by saying to them, "Look, relax. I'm not going to quote the Bible; I'm not going to quote the Church; I'm not going to quote the tradition. I am going to speak to you as a human being; I am going to speak out of my experience, and what I am going to say to you is rooted in my own being, in my own experience." Then he took off, and in so doing, what Schleiermacher did was to turn the whole tradition of the Christian Church 180 degrees for, up until that time, until the modern era, and even at his time and even to the present, the Church, by and large across the board, has operated on the basis of authoritarian claims, some divine revelation that has come out of heaven embodied in a tradition, in a Church, in a book.

Schleiermacher gave all of that up, stood, as it were, naked before his friends, and claimed his faith and his religion as the authentic and deepest expression of his humanity. Schleiermacher recognized that Kant had blocked the road to dogmatic speculation and therefore if one was going to be religious after Kant, the ground of that religious experience would have to rest in the believing individual. And in very brilliant and sophisticated fashion, he argued for the rooting of religion in the human subject. His claim was that to be human is to have the feeling of absolute dependence. We didn't create ourselves; we can't sustain ourselves; we are totally dependent, totally dependent on some gracious ground that has given us life and supports and keeps us, and it was Schleiermacher's contention that, in those moments when that sense of dependence comes into focus, one knows oneself to be in communion with God. God is that foundation, that infinite mystery that upholds all, the origin and foundation of all that is and, in the moments of our human dependency, almost mystical moments of awareness, one knows oneself dependent which, Schleiermacher says, is to know oneself to be in communion with God.

That synopsis hardly does justice to what Schleiermacher did in a very profound fashion, but what he had done was radical, for he had moved from an authoritarian claim for religious truth to a personal testimony to its reality in his own experience. He is called the Father of Modern Theology because, in that significant shift, he made the whole game new, and he paved the way for the theological development of the last 200 years. You can cite all of the great names of the theologians who have spoken and written and you will find traces of Schleiermacher; he was the initiator. Of course, there was a counter to him; he was rejected by many. There was a reaction, a conservative reaction and an orthodox, confessional Church reaction against him, but nonetheless, he had sounded a new note and he had put his finger on the problem of modernity, an era in which we, as naturally as breathing, think, use our heads, use common sense, and he said that goes not only when you are sending a rocket to the moon or structuring a community education program, but that goes, as well, when you are seeking the communion of God. He would have agreed with the statement we used here a few weeks ago, that the heart cannot finally find true what the mind finds false.

I find it fascinating, as I in my 64th year visit Schleiermacher seriously, that no one ever told me that the long and tortuous pilgrimage that has been my own to try to be a true believer with my mind engaged, was engaged and set forth powerfully and eloquently 200 years ago. There has been in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, and the Protestant tradition, and all of its forms, mainline and fundamental (this is my contention now), there has been a continuing within a medieval mind set never yet facing the acids of modernity. I do not think the institutional Church as a whole has ever come to terms with the modern era marked by critical thinking, even though it was done beautifully 200 years ago.

Why didn't Schleiermacher carry the day totally across the board? A question well worth contemplating. I really don't know, but I know this matter of authority is absolutely critical and it's not a new issue. The Hebrew prophets spoke a word from God, a word that possessed them. Jeremiah stood up on the Temple steps and said, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, you repeat this like a chant. You think your safety and security lies here. Let me tell you, God doesn't need this institution. God doesn't need your religious ritual. Go to Shiloh and see its ruins. See what I did there, and I'll do it to your temple, too, because of a lack of authenticity in your religious life."

Jesus was in the line of the prophets, and when he was engaged with the leaders of the religion of his day, they began to cross-examine him. They were lying in wait to catch him in everything he said. He cried out against the sterile formalism of that institutional religion and he became a very threatening voice in the midst of Jerusalem, coming finally to that last prophetic action when he cleansed the temple and that triggered the religious authorities to come and say just that, "By what authority do you do this?" And Jesus said, "Well, tell me about John the Baptist. What was his authority?" They didn't dare answer because if they said from heaven, he would have said, "Why didn't you follow him? Why didn't you believe?" And if they said it's a human authority, they would have been stoned by the people because John the Baptist also had a voice that had authenticity that resonated with people's experience, that spoke to them where they were and they believed that he was a prophet of God. If you read through the Gospels, you find more than one reference where Jesus is spoken of as having the people spellbound because he spoke as one who had authority and not as the scribes and the Pharisees.

Of course, it's not an easy question; it's not an easy problem, my friend. If you have an institutional church and you are responsible for the institution, then you can't let any crackerjack come rolling through who has a vision. Or, at least, you have to discern whether or not this voice is a voice that rings with authenticity, or whether it's just some fanatic. The question of authority is a critical question. How do you know?

I submit to you that the problem of authority was dealt with in the only way it can be dealt with in a healthy fashion by Schleiermacher 200 years ago, whose authority, he said, rested in his own religious experience. Anything other than that will tend to sterility and rigidity and will end up killing the prophets. Schleiermacher is a marvelous figure, one of a small handful of truly great spirits in 2000 years and, as he spoke to his friends, the cultured despisers of religion, he laid his heart bare, and he said to them "You've rejected something, but what you have rejected is not the real thing. The real thing is that which makes you human; the real thing is that which gives depth, dimension to life; the real thing is that which unifies your experience and creates meaning; the real thing is the verve and the center and the joy of life. Without religion, you are simply an animal with reason." And he also believed in preaching; he was a great preacher,

a loved preacher, and he filled the Church in Berlin. He said to his people, "My preaching is simply my testimony, and that testimony triggers in others who desire a like kind of experience, and there is formed a community," and that very positive sense of his Christian experience and the shared experience of the community for which he was the preacher was so dynamic and so powerful in his day, and when at the age of 66 he died of a lung infection, there was weeping throughout the city; 20,000 to 30,000 people lined the streets as his coffin was moved through the streets, and they wept from every window and every balcony because this man had spoken to them, not of some hollow religious experience, but something that touched them in the depths of their being, enabling them, in a modern age marked by critical thinking, yet to find experience of that intimate and mysterious ground of all being, full of grace, which for Schleiermacher and the Christian church was embodied in Jesus.

Why? Why have we not been able in 200 years to do as he did? Why, out of fear and reaction, do we trundle back into fundamentalism and absolute claims, when if we would only trust our experience, we would know the touch of grace of the living God and live with hope and joy?

References:

Friedrich Schleiermacher. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers*, 1797.