

Dead Orthodoxy

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The Christian church has been fighting for nearly two thousand years: battling heresy, writing canons, forming creeds. What more could the devil throw at us? It may not seem like it here in the United States of America, but we are under a severe attack, an attack crafted ever so slyly by our adversary the devil that we hardly even notice it. Try as we might, our human strength, writings, and intellect cannot win us this victory. This is not a battle Satan levels at just any Christian church. It is a temptation set only before those who have extensive knowledge, right theology, and a firm belief and understanding of the doctrines contained in the holy scriptures. This battle we fight today as Protestant Reformed believers is that of dead orthodoxy. Dead orthodoxy is a lifelong battle of every member of the instituted church that can only be fought and won by the power of Christ in one's heart.

To discern and understand the danger of dead orthodoxy, it is important to define it properly. Orthodox, by definition, means "sound or correct in...doctrine, especially theological or religious doctrine." ("Orthodox") Professor Gritters defines orthodoxy by dividing its common definition into two words, orthodoxy and orthopraxy. He defines orthopraxy as "living uprightly" and orthodoxy as "straight doctrine." He does this to show that being a Reformed believer is both confessing truth and living rightly. This is orthodox, correct and sound doctrine. Being an orthodox Reformed believer is confessing truth and living in accordance with it. *Dead* orthodoxy, then, is faithfulness to the doctrines by way of confessing them, but not living those doctrines confessed.

It is an easy trap into which a person can fall. Being raised as we have in the Protestant Reformed Churches, we have been taught Bible stories and doctrines in our homes, in catechism,

and in our schools since our earliest ages. Whether we be age 16, 20, or 57, we have learned so much. Being raised in the Protestant Reformed Churches with this knowledge equips any young person for college or the work world. We know what we believe and are convicted of Biblical truths that many other young people do not even begin to consider until they are older. The devil does not like this. He sees how much we know, and it makes him angry, maybe even a little afraid. So Satan uses this knowledge against us.

He cannot direct us away from God's truths by way of fragile beliefs, because we stand on firm ground rooted in biblical truth. Instead, he tempts us to think that knowledge is enough. "You know quite a lot," he says, "and that is enough to make you a Christian. You really don't have to do anything else." And so many give in. It is easier to assume salvation based on our own pitiful knowledge than sacrifice our comforts to live for God.

Rev. Bruinsma refers to dead orthodoxy as "mere head knowledge." Intellectual knowledge is a necessary part of knowing God and being a believer, but with no heart knowledge, it is mere lip service. God knows this is a problem for his children. Look at 1 John 3:18: "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in *deed* and in *truth*" (emphasis added). In a sermon Rev. Slopsema preached on this verse, he said that love is the fruit of God in us. Only in loving do we live our theology. We love by *action*. If our actions show love, and love is living our theology, then head knowledge is not an option for God's people.

The knowledge we have in the Reformed churches stems from hundreds of years of searching scripture, battling heresy, holding synods, and writing canons, all by God's amazing grace. These victories strengthened our knowledge of God and gave us foundational creeds and

doctrines on which we are able to stand and teach truth. We have truth! Do we live it? Are we different than anyone else because of it? We should be!

We have so much knowledge, but if this knowledge does not inspire us to live differently, we have fallen into dead orthodoxy (Bruinsma). But it is not so easy as to say, “Knowledge and right living makes a Christian.” Someone may seem to know God’s truths and may seem to live according to them, but we do not know all whom God has chosen to be his children. Romans 9:6 comforts and warns, “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” God’s word does not fail to accomplish his will, but not every person in the instituted church is a true believer and a chosen child of God.

This fact makes dead orthodoxy a much more dangerous threat. We do not always know, perhaps may never know, that someone in the pew beside us is only there because it is tradition. In the face of this attack, how can we know true believers from those who are guilty of dead orthodoxy? It begins by looking at our own hearts.

How do I view God? What do I profess? What do I believe? These are questions we ought to ask ourselves often. Most of the articles of the Belgic Confession of Faith begin with, “We believe...” Do you believe? “We believe... the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith...” (Art. 22). “We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake...” (Art. 23). Page through the back of the Psalter before church. Is this what you know and believe?

Rev. Decker preached a sermon on the virgin birth of Jesus. In this sermon, he explained faith not as simply believing that the events of the Bible took place, but as believing they happened for *me*. I know my sins. I know my evil thoughts, deeds, and motives. I know I am

dead in my sin and cannot and will not reach up to God, but I believe Jesus, the sinless Son of God, came down for *me*.

As I am aspiring to be a teacher in our Protestant Reformed schools, it is necessary first for *me* to know, understand, and believe this. *I* must really believe it and live it. I must strive to make it a subjective part of my life. It is my faith. It is what I believe. To be able to teach about the threat of dead orthodoxy, I have to live my life showing the living word in me. I will teach rooted in the objective truth of God's word but live it subjectively. The knowledge with which we are blessed in our churches ought to inspire us to live according to it, but I know it is the work of the Holy Spirit that inspires us. I cannot teach God's covenant children without the work of the Holy Spirit in my heart.

In his book *Humble Orthodoxy*, Joshua Harris writes about sharing truth. "We must care deeply about truth, and we must also defend and share this truth with compassion and humility" (p. 5). I know the truths I have been taught since I was young. I know many of our creeds and doctrines, and I believe them as well. In order to teach them, though, I must have compassion and humility. No one can properly learn from a proud and arrogant teacher.

With compassion and humility, it is necessary for me to share these dangers of dead orthodoxy with children in the classroom. However, I believe it to be equally important to manifest the goodness of a life lived with God. It does not fall only on the teachers and ministers to educate the youth about dead orthodoxy. It is the responsibility of every Christian, young and old, to battle this temptation the devil sets before us. It is easy to go through the motions, but the youth and young people are watching, and many can tell the difference.

This threat of dead orthodoxy must be fought in each individual's heart. The battle can only be won by the power of God's transforming grace. I know the truth preached in the

Protestant Reformed Churches. You know it, too. But what good is this knowledge if it remains only in our heads? By the work of the Holy Spirit, this knowledge transforms our lives and inspires us to “confess His name, and present [ourselves] a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him...” (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 12, Q&A 32).

The purpose of our lives is not money, happiness, or greatness. We are not here for ourselves. Our purpose is to magnify Jesus Christ in our daily living, to praise him in the morning, to speak of him and to him throughout the day, and to meditate daily on his words to us (Deut. 11:18–19). The only way to battle dead orthodoxy is to renew our minds each day (Rom. 12:2), set our eyes on God above (Col. 3:1), and rest in his strength alone (Ps. 46:1–3).

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