

Dead Orthodoxy in the Church and Ministering to the Youth

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It was Sunday morning, and the members of Laodicea Reformed Church found their way to the pews. Eyelids were heavy and rested themselves, and many people were unable to subdue their yawns. Some, having consumed a few too many drinks the night before, quietly lamented the piercing headaches to which they had awakened. After the congregants had finished examining their visiting pastor, who had taken his place behind the pulpit to lead the worship service, their thoughts quickly wandered off. “What an unexpected outcome to yesterday’s baseball game that was!” “I really should have fertilized the lawn yesterday with all this rain in the forecast.” Seasoned latecomers found their spots in the sanctuary while the congregation stood singing the first Psalter number. As the pastor carefully recited the ten commandments, many did reflect how well they had kept the law the previous week, but their focus on the worship diminished when the prelude for the next song was begun. Movie scenes were replayed in their minds throughout congregational prayer, the latest shopping splurges during offertory. That morning the preaching was based on Amos 6. “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion,” the pastor declared, “and trust in the mountain of Samaria! People of God, let us heed this divine pronouncement of dire woe upon those self-proclaimed believers who thought themselves to be safe within the fortitude of God’s kingdom while disgusting God with continual lukewarm service in their lives. Being neither hot nor cold, God judges such people worthy of nothing more than to be spewed from his holy mouth.” Spasms of guilt shook the congregants, but rather than weep, they stopped their ears. Men and women muttered to themselves, “Does this man have any clue to whom he is speaking? Our minister knows we believe; he doesn’t need to waste his

breath on such irrelevant warnings!” The noxious gas of dead orthodoxy had filled the lungs of Laodicea. It seeped from her pores.

Though an exaggerated example of a fictional church service, the dead orthodoxy depicted above is a real danger for any professing Christian. It’s a condition typified by the figless tree that Jesus exposed to his disciples and condemned; a condition in which a person appears to be a thriving Christian, but when the branches are carefully examined it is uncovered that he bears no glorifying fruit to God. Because there is no fruit, it is manifest that he has not been engrafted into the life-giving Vine. Such a condition prevails *not* because this individual is uninterested in orthodoxy, for true teaching is to this man as straight teeth are to the orthodontist.¹ But rather, the source of a person’s dead orthodoxy is a perpetuating pride and sluggish satisfaction in mere confession of truth. Let us further consider this deadly condition, how it has manifested itself in the biblical church, and how a prospective pastor of God’s people ought to prepare himself, particularly with respect to the children and young people, for dealing with the pernicious disease of dead orthodoxy that very likely will threaten to spread throughout his field of labor.

To grasp completely what dead orthodoxy is, I will explain what stands in diametric opposition to the spirit of dead orthodoxy: a *living* faith.² A living faith is true faith, and it is rooted in a right knowledge (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 7, Q&A 21). It believes from the heart and confesses with the mouth that there is only one God, who is “eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good” (Belgic Confession, Art. 1). In addition to a complete understanding of this glorious

¹ Orthodoxy is from the Greek *orthódoxos*, *orthós* (straight, right, true) + *dóxa* (teaching, belief); orthodontics contains the same Greek prefix + *odoús* (teeth).

² The term “living faith” is selected carefully, using Canons of Dordt, Head 1, Article 4.

and holy God, a living faith also knows that natural man stands in opposition against God, for it believes that God created man in honor, “but [he] willfully subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death and the curse,” transgressing the commandment of life that he had received from God, separating himself from life with God by sin, corrupting his whole nature, and making himself liable to corporal and spiritual death. This living faith then plainly sees that man “hath lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God” in creation, becoming “wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways” (Belgic Confession, Art. 14). When the gospel comes and testifies that God “sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, to make satisfaction in the same [nature], and to bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death” (Belgic Confession, Art. 20), a living faith is kindled and awakened to these marvelous truths. Such a faith is deeply moved by this awesome knowledge and wonders along with the psalmist, “What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?” (Ps. 116:12). When God’s word responds, “Drink the cup of salvation! Offer unto God the sacrifice of thanksgiving! Pay your vows in the courts of God’s house among all his people!” a living faith exclaims, “I will, with all my heart!” When the word responds, “Love one another, just as Jesus demonstrated his love for you!” a living faith exclaims, “I will, with all my heart!”

Warring against this *living* faith are men of *dead* orthodoxy whom Paul, in his list of evil men that will arise in the last days, identified as “[h]aving a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5). Where such fools claim to believe in God, there is no deep and abiding fear of him. Where such corrupt minds claim to serve God, there is no purposeful glorifying of him in every department of life, no unrestrained speaking about his greatness and glory, nor a careful avoidance of any dishonor to his name. Although such men may be present

for every Sunday worship service, there is no frequenting the house of God in order to offer exuberant praise and to be refreshed with the pulpit's bread and water of life. Instead of weighty sorrow and fervent repentance for highly offensive sin against God, they boast about their abilities and worthiness. Instead of a prudent spiritual fleeing from the world's deceitful pleasures and practices, they relish sin. Furthermore, men of dead orthodoxy are not bothered by such crooked practices, for they assure themselves that a cold and mechanical assent to the truth is a sufficient testimony of their faith. They only wish to hear that there is peace for them in Zion.

Such a gross unrighteousness is unfortunately very familiar to the church even now, as it has been throughout its history. As with all sin, the terrible grip of dead orthodoxy seized man through his willful heeding of the serpent's lie in the garden. While Eve pondered the serpent's sly twisting of God's word, her view of God's prohibition not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was distorted and separated from his good command to trust and obey him. She then became suspicious of God's gracious character, "abstracting His law from His loving and generous person," which consequently resulted in her adding "neither shall ye touch it" to God's good command and ultimately in her rebellious disobedience³ (Ferguson, 82–86). This manner in which the human race was plunged into depravity is very significant, for it testifies that wickedness inevitably results when man claims in pride to know what is better for himself and discards God's revealed will.

This disregard for God's revealed will was exemplified by the practices of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus exposed in Matthew 23. Those Jewish rulers were master intellectuals in the law, "sit[ting] in Moses' seat" (v. 2), yet Jesus commanded his disciples and the multitude

³ The root of both legalism and antinomianism are evidenced here when Eve added to God's command and then disobeyed his command, respectively. See Ferguson for a more thorough study on this matter.

around him, “[D]o not ye after their works.” Why? “[F]or they say, and do not” (v. 3). The scribes and Pharisees revered the law not as a mirror that revealed their iniquity before the radiant reflection of God’s righteousness so that they found salvation in the Messiah, not as a means of justice against the lawless and disobedient so that there could be a deterrent to evil, nor as an excellent instrument for knowing what was honorable and glorifying to a God whom they aspired to follow ⁴ (Calvin, 222–25). Rather, their knowledge of the law was used to honor and glorify themselves, while they bound grievous burdens of guilt upon their nation’s shoulders and shut up the kingdom of heaven against their brethren (vv. 4, 13). The most esteemed places at feasts and the chiefest seats in the synagogues they sought; homage to their own name in public places they lusted after (vv. 6–7). Being experts in the law and the prophets, they taught orthodoxy, but behind their long prayers, precise tithing, and careful avoidance of ceremonial uncleanness, they devoured widows’ houses and scorned true religion (vv. 14, 23–28). So Jesus exposed their dead orthodoxy with these words: “[Y]e are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (v. 27).

A vigilant prospective pastor of God is militant against this historical threat, knowing its fleshly ease within himself, and he prepares himself in several ways to be able to defend against such wily wolves that would seek to devour the life from his Savior’s little lambs. First, so that these little ones might come to a true knowledge of the Father and Jesus Christ by his preaching and catechetical instruction, this man consumes and commits to memory the word of God and the wonderful things that Jehovah has done to maintain his covenant. He pleads with his heavenly Father to bestow upon him understanding, sound judgment, and sanctified utterance, so

⁴ I am making use of Calvin’s “Threefold Use of the Law.”

that he might capably teach (Martin, 127–59). Second, he strives as a good disciple of Jesus to glorify God in all his thoughts, words, and deeds. In doing this, he not only keeps himself blameless for the ministry, but also provides for the eyes of all the young ones a dutiful example of godliness and sobriety. Finally, even before he is ordained to the ministry or receives an official call, he seeks to befriend Jesus’ precious children and young people, learning their names and acquainting himself with their struggles, desires, and temptations. He is not haughty but rather speaks together with his Master, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not,” so they may see and receive the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13–15). The prospective pastor might then teach Sunday school and chaperone at young people’s conventions.

In doing these things, a prospective minister cultivates an ability to speak *through* the mind *unto* the heart of a child or young person. In his teaching, he is not interested in merely filling the minds of these little ones with doctrine *alone*, for then he has left them yet blind to the gospel, serving a very subtle idol consisting only of words *about* the Christ, and forsaken his calling to show them the love of their Father through Christ, stripping them of the very weapons and armor with which to combat dead orthodoxy (Wangerin, 102–5). Yet he trusts that the pure preaching of the gospel is sufficient of itself to stir up all of God’s elect unto living faith and against dead orthodoxy (Bekkering, 5). “Abide in your life-giving Vine!” he instructs them. “Depend on Him *alone* for the strengthening sap that you need in times of discouragement, fear, or pride. Know that His promise is that He will abide in you! Know that He will make you fruitful!” (McGeown, 7–8). He keeps his focus and the focus of the youth upon Jesus Christ, and by the grace of God he will be able to apply to their hearts and demonstrate by example all the blessed benefits of their Savior.

May God bless this prospective pastor and, if he is called to labor in the word, prosper his field of labor, that it never may be said to him and his congregation, “Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

Originally published in Vol. 78 No. 12

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