

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### Excursus: Justification Revisited (Part VI)

**D**o you remember the Columbine shootings ten years ago? Do you recall how amazed people were that the students were using cell phones to call their parents from *inside* the school? The proliferation of cell phones was a new development, and we were all stunned at the capability of communications during a hostage situation. Nowadays we have text messaging and twitter! Looking back, our previous astonishment seems quaint now. The leaps and bounds of technology in the past ten years are unprecedented. Here are a few examples of how the communication available through the internet is changing our world:

- A middle-aged frumpy Susan Boyle auditions for *Britain's Got Talent*, shocks the judges, and then becomes a sensation on YouTube. This Fall, her debut album sold more copies (700K) its first week than the new releases of Whitney Houston (305K) and Mariah Carey (168K) combined.
- An unusual wedding entrance becomes a YouTube sensation. Weeks later, the nation's top-rated comedy, *The Office*, incorporates the idea into the wedding for main characters, Jim and Pam.
- A young woman in New York named Julie Powell decides to spend a year cooking every recipe in Julia Child's famous book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. She starts a blog as a journal. The popularity of her blog leads to a book deal and eventually a popular movie that tells the story of her life and Julia Child's in parallel.
- More and more companies are cutting back on travel and starting to use Skype for conference calls and job interviews. Skype is also changing the way immigrants think about their new country. The USA and EU are no longer "melting pots," but more like "mosaics" as people from other cultures move in and maintain close ties and frequent video communication with friends and family at home.
- Politicians are utilizing Twitter as a way of keeping lines of communication with their constituents (and fans). Sarah Palin has more than 35,000, Karl Rove 95,000, and Barack Obama 2,800,000. The prevalence of social media has caused the Gridiron Club to lift the "off-the-record" rule for its annual dinners. There is no stopping the flow of information!
- Vast amounts of religious materials are now available online. What used to be hard to find (early Christian writings, ancient sermons, commentaries) are now easily accessible and helpfully categorized.
- Thousands of sermons – audio, video, manuscripts – from pastors are available for free. The upside? Prominent pastor-theologians like John Piper, Philip Ryken, R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, as well as the White Horse Inn (that our Church helps sponsor) and Todd Friel on Wretched Radio (which my family listens to daily), and others whose materials are a gift to the church. The downside? Rants from people like Steven Anderson (of YouTube fame) who prayed for the president's death, as well as professionally designed websites and blogs for sects like Mormons, Scientology, Jehovah Witnesses – you name it, they're *all* out there, spreading their message.<sup>1</sup>

The massive amount of information available to us today has an upside as well as a downside. Error can be spread just as easily as truth. Theological heresy can be packaged and disseminated today in a way that makes it even more attractive than ever. The danger of deception is greater than it has ever been. Here are some of the key New Testament passages that deal with the deceptive appearance and words of false teachers.

Matthew 7:15-16 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.”

Matthew 24:4-5 “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.”

Romans 16:17-18 “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.”

2 Corinthians 11:3-4 “But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.”

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.”

Galatians 1:6-7 “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:14 “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

Colossians 2:4 “I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.”

Colossians 2:8 “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way.”

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false. In order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

1 Timothy 4:1-2 “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”

1 Timothy 6:20-21 “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.”

2 Timothy 3:12-13 “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”

2 Peter 2:1-3 “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.”

1 John 4:1 “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

2 John 7 “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.”

## **I. REASONS PEOPLE EMBRACE ERRORS**

### **A. Inheritance**

This is what they have been taught as the truth, and they have received it from people they respect, trust and love. Having an inheritance is a blessing or a curse depending on what we inherit. Timothy inherited sound teaching and living examples of godliness (2 Timothy 3:10-13), nevertheless Paul still directs him to the more sure and solid foundation of sacred Scripture (3:14-17). Some people inherit serious theological errors (e.g. they are raised to believe that Christ was no more than a man).

### **B. Ignorance**

They don't know any better. This is what they have been taught and they haven't had anything that has challenged their initial assumptions and convictions. They are not really aware of any alternatives.

### **C. Prejudice**

They are aware of other view points that would make them question their assumptions but foster prejudice against them, or have been taught to foster prejudices against them. This can be divided into two categories:

#### (1) Prejudice due to misinformation

Examples of this would be the accusation that amillennialists have a faulty hermeneutic borrowed from liberals or Roman Catholics, that they don't take the Bible literally. This kind of prejudice can be exacerbated by misrepresenting the views of your opponents, or choosing their worst representatives rather than their best. In this way you can, without sufficient warrant, dismiss anyone who holds to that view (e.g. all Calvinists are against missions and evangelism). Prejudice is always difficult to overcome, whether it has been created by caricatures or by people whose behavior has been inconsistent with their profession (and doesn't that describe all of us), e.g. I met an inerrantist once and they were narrow minded and bigoted (they would probably be narrow minded and bigoted if they denied inerrancy and believed that the Bible was shot through with error).

#### (2) Prejudice due to a refusal to accept the truth

Instead of being prejudiced against a position that has been caricatured, or prejudiced because of bad experiences with people, this kind of prejudice is against a position. It is more than intellectual, it is deeper seated than that. It is the kind of prejudice displayed by John Wesley against the Calvinistic view of predestination. Wesley was bold enough to say that whatever the locus of authority has switched from Scripture to the individual (e.g. I won't believe in a God who sends people to hell forever).

### **D. Dissatisfaction**

Specifically dissatisfaction with the truth. This is a little different to the last point. Again, let me subdivide it:

#### (1) Dissatisfaction due to a love of novelty

Some people identify with a position, a label, a group, but never seem to get their roots down into the truth. They are, perhaps, caught up with the moment, riding on the crest of a wave (e.g. cool culture affirming new Calvinism) but not anchored personally in the truth. Their interest is a phase, and then they move on to something new and have a testimony about how they too were once a Calvinist. Some people are restless spirits. Imagining that they really did hold to a position they can wax eloquent about its deficiencies.

#### (2) Dissatisfaction due to the limits of revelation

God has given us all that we need to know about his works and ways in his Word. That Word binds our thoughts and sets the limits of our investigations. But the issue is not only eschatological, it is also about the limits placed upon us as creatures. What we know is sufficient, but even what we know we cannot fully fathom or work out (Romans 11:33-36). We may then seek to resolve things that cannot be resolved, to rationalize beyond the limits set by revelation, to draw inferences that are not warranted. This is part of the attraction of heretical solutions. They seek to make their teachings palatable and easily understood at the expense of what is often times complex, i.e., the doctrine of the Trinity.

### Dissatisfaction due to being unregenerate

Quite simply, the person without the Spirit will not receive the things of the Spirit, they are foolishness to him (1 Corinthians 2:14). Paul's castigation of the false teachers on Crete included a devastating assessment of their spiritual state (Titus 1:15-16). We expect this of people who are agnostic or atheists, we ought to expect it from those who are Christianized but not really converted.<sup>2</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** When you hear someone say things like “doctrine divides but love unites,” a red flag should go up. We do well to be concerned over doctrinal apathy within evangelicalism. This general indefiniteness in doctrinal construction is coming upon us like a flood. The outlines of doctrinal statements are becoming more and more blurred in the hands of our more recent guides. We are hearing more and more frequently sharp complaints of the “intellectualism” that is assumed to be inherent in any clear conception of doctrinal truth. But if we read our Bibles thoughtfully, we will come to the same opinion as Paul in Galatians: that it is not a matter of small importance whether we preserve the purity of the gospel. If the history of the church teaches us anything, it is that a corrupt form of Christianity itself menaces, from time to time, the life of healthy Christianity. We are sadly experiencing, on a rather large scale, a subjectivism that betrays its weakened hold on the objective truth and reality of Christianity by its neglect or even renunciation of its distinctive objective character. Nowadays men cheerfully abandon the whole substance of Christianity, but they will hardly be persuaded to surrender the name. They really wish to have a creedless Christianity. “Creeds,” they shout, “are divisive things; away with them!” If there must be such things, at least let us prune all their distinctive features away and give ourselves a genial and unpolemic Christianity, one in which all the stress is laid on life, not dogma. Where does this leave us? An *undogmatic* Christianity is no Christianity at all. We are often told that “Christianity is a person, not a doctrine.” How true! Christianity is a person; but on pain of reducing it to magic, which would no longer possess any ethical and, consequently, any religious quality, we must grant that Christianity, precisely because it is *essentially* a person, is also a body of facts and ideas. When the apostle Paul declared, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and *Him crucified*” (1 Cor. 2:2; italics added), he was defining a special doctrine of Jesus as the essence of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur recently wrote: “With increasing frequency nowadays, I hear people say things like, ‘Come, now, let’s not bicker about what we believe. It’s only doctrine. Let’s focus instead on how we live. The way of Jesus is surely more important than our arguments over the *words* of Jesus. Let’s set aside our disagreements over creeds and dogmas and devote ourselves instead to showing the love of Christ by the way we conduct our lives.’ Many people these days evidently find that suggestion appealing. On the face of it, it may sound generous, kind-hearted, modest, and altruistic. But the view itself is a serious violation of ‘the way of Jesus,’ who taught that salvation hinges on hearing and believing His *Word* (John 5:24). He said, ‘The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life’ (John 6:63). To those who doubted His truth-claims, He said, ‘If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins’ (John 8:24). He never left any room for someone to imagine that the propositional content of His teaching is optional as long as we mimic His behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> This list is taken from <http://trevinwax.com/2009/12/07/9-examples-of-the-internet-changing-our-world/print/>

<sup>2</sup> This analysis is by my Welsh friend Martin Downes who contributed to the book I co-edited [Reforming or Conforming?](#) (Crossway, 2008) and is available at <http://against-heresies.blogspot.com/2009/07/encountering-false-teachers-appearances.html>.

<sup>3</sup> This section is taken from my chapter, “Does Theology Still Matter?” in [The Coming Evangelical Crisis](#) ed. J. Armstrong (Moody, 1996) p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> J. MacArthur, [Truth War](#) (Crossway, 2007) p. 32.