

"BEYOND ORTHODOXY"

The church is often between a rock and a hard place. We are in a bind. In order to be faithful to the gospel of Christ we must have boundaries, there must be some limits to what some people can believe or disbelieve and still be Christian. The same of course it true of how we live our lives; there must be boundaries about what is right and what is wrong. Somehow a judgment has to be made about who is in and who is out. This classic debate about orthodoxy has been a thorn in the side of the church since its inception. The problem is deciding who gets to make up the rules and who gets to enforce them. I would be much more comfortable with orthodoxy if I got to make up the rules.

I don't want to over simplify the issue but much of what has become "orthodox" in the church was decided by a bunch of men sitting around a table in the third and fourth centuries. They interpreted the events of Jesus' life death and resurrection drawing certain conclusions. They chose what gospels would be included in the canon, what letters from Paul, and what other content to include from hundreds of choices they had. There were hundreds of letters attributed to Paul and many more than four gospels to choose from. Now I am sure they were devout men, earnest and maybe even inspired by God. But as far as I am concerned they do not speak for God or for me. The same is true for church doctrine since them. The church has not always been correct. One of the most glaring mistakes was the way the church handled Galileo. He hypothesized that the earth rotated around the sun. This was heresy because according to scripture the earth was the center of the universe. Galileo was excommunicated from the church and died an outsider until just a few years ago when the Catholic Church apologized, finally letting him into heaven. Wasn't that nice of them?

Orthodoxy is not just the problem of the Christian church. It is true of every organized religion. The passage from acts this morning is a challenge to orthodoxy. Judaism went through an evolution much like Christianity, over time interpreting scripture, setting up a very complex set of rules and regulations that dictated communal and individual behavior. Peter believed in limits. He believed in the validity, the biblical basis of Jewish dietary laws. Israel had endured centuries of scorn and persecution by its pagan neighbors by lovingly adhering to these laws. Laws about food in scripture were not only clear but a life and death issue. Yet Peter discovered what I think is the key to a living religion; to be faithful to the gospel we will be pushed beyond our limits of thinking and acting. There is always a nagging voice whispering, "Are these stated limits your stated limits or are they God's limits?"

Peter had a strange vision in Joppa. A sheet was let down containing all sorts of animals---Peter caught sight of his comfort level in a hurry. The voice said "*Rise, kill, and eat!*" Peter had indignantly replied that he had never been guilty of eating "*unclean food.*" But the voice came to him three times. Three times the voice said the same thing: "*Rise, kill and eat!*" When he awoke there were men sent to him from a Roman army officer, Cornelius; he was a gentile and a member of the very army that had so terribly oppressed an occupied Israel. Peter went and met Cornelius and was surprised to learn that the risen Christ had sent him there. He baptized Cornelius. He ate with Cornelius. Peter saw that the vision was not so much about unclean food as about unclean people. "Don't call anything that I have created unclean," said the voice. Clearly Peter's actions were unorthodox, the act of a dissident.

I think this story gives us all food for thought for dealing with limits. The apostles asked Peter, "What were you doing with shoes unclean, oppressive Gentiles? You know you shouldn't have anything to do with them. Who gave you the right to eat with them and baptize them?" Peter told them about the vision. Such intermingling was not his idea and probably the last thing he could have imagined himself doing. It was an idea so bold, so disruptive, and so unsettling it had to come straight from God. This was quite a shock. Israel had been chosen, suffered terribly for that chosen ness and how suddenly others were to be chosen as well. It is clear why his compatriots responded the way they did. That kind of change is unsettling. It is the same kind of reaction many Christians are having today. It is about fear, and fear has a way of making people dig in their heels. Fear is great for orthodoxy.

In an article in *Bible Review* Anthony Saldarini writes, "Ironically, heresy and conflict can be healthy for a tradition. Settled ways of thinking and acting are often sloppy or unresponsive to human needs and cultural change. Disputes often mark areas for productive growth. New views force both conventional and daring members of a community to define sharply who they are and what they stand for. The very struggle to think through the complexities of infinity and ultimacy reminds religious communities of inherent human inadequacy in the face of profound religious truth." (December 1997) Conflict can be healthy for a tradition and a country, but the style of discourse is also terribly important. It means speaking, but also listening. And it rarely works when the tone is hateful. Particularly in the Christian church if our debate forgets words like Paul's about love being patient and kind, conflict turns into destruction.

One of my favorite people at East Church invited me to a religious lecture sponsored by the Acton Institute just before I left Grand Rapids. A history professor, Dr. Reeves, spoke on the decline of the mainline church, which of course both the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ are a prominent part. We have had problems there is no doubt about it. In the UCC we have lost thousands of members in a several decade decline. The reasons are complex. I knew the Acton Institute was a very conservative organization and I was prepared to be challenged and maybe uncomfortable. I was not prepared to be insulted. I was shocked to hear him say that all mainline clergy were uneducated, lazy, immoral and the last words that I heard were "And their preaching---that's a joke!" I got up and walked out. I was so angry I was shaking. It was not only insulting; it was just plain bad scholarship. His evidence was anecdotal. His priest was divorced and therefore could not be a role model. His priest molested a child so therefore all mainline clergy are immoral. Any reasonable person knows that there are both liberal and conservative clergy who have been caught with their proverbial pants down. This kind of extremist rhetoric is tearing our society apart.

We need an extremism of a different sort. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote this from the Birmingham city jail: "I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love---'love your enemies and pray for them that spitefully use you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice---'let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream?' Was not Paul an extremist for the Gospel of Jesus Christ---'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus?' Was not Martin Luther an extremist---'Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.' Was not John Bunyan and extremist---'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience?' Was not Abraham Lincoln and extremist---'This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.' Was not Thomas Jefferson and extremist---'We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal?' So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist we will be. Will we be extremist for hate or will we be extremist for love?"

That Dr. Reeves was an extremist in the worst sense of the word. His remarks were divisive and inflammatory. The worse part was the crowd laughing and shaking their heads in agreement as he slashed someone like me to tiny bits. His position at least in his own mind was holding to Christian orthodoxy. It is orthodoxy at its worst. The Spanish Inquisition was the physical version of his mental bashing of others with a different perspective. I think it is a sign of spiritual maturity to be able to disagree, even disagree vehemently, but to do it with respect. We are rapidly reaching a point in this country where dialogue has been completely replaced with ideologue. The two extremes are shouting at each other with such inflammatory rhetoric that it has become farce.

I think everyone will agree that we face a moral crisis in this country but we will all disagree on who is to blame or what the solutions might be. One thing is clear to me; we need a different spirit to our conversations. What we are hearing from many of our leaders is unacceptable. Jim Wallis in his book *Who Speaks for God* writes, "The old political categories of liberal and conservative, Left and Right, are completely dysfunctional now, and helpless to lead us into a better future." This book is a direct challenge to the religious right, who Wallis claims does not speak for even the majority of conservative Christians. Wallis is an evangelical who is just tired of the divisive rhetoric. He is calling for the "radical middle" to stand up and be heard. Again he writes, "Religious values can help us find the path to a new politics. The spiritual politics that we need must be rooted in values of **compassion, community, and civility**. These three can be viewed, in fact, as religious **tests** of politics."

How do we know which voices to listen to? I wish there were an easy answer to that question but there isn't. We just have to muck our way through it, testing constantly by the words and actions of Jesus. If the

language is defensive, hateful, full of vengeance, there is a good chance that person is not speaking on God's behalf. If the voice is speaking on behalf of those who have no voice, those who are excluded and oppressed by the majority, then we might suspect that those voices echo the gospel. And I hope that more and more those without a voice in this culture will hear our voices on their behalf. I also hope that we will all stand up against those voices that are like a cancer, full of hate and half truths. We need a new politics of compassion, community and civility. And like Peter we need to be prepared to be pulled beyond our comfort level, never letting orthodoxy keep us from hearing our true calling from God.