

Begin with Orthodoxy, Conclude with Orthopraxy

The children of white evangelicalism have a propensity toward a theological kind of entitlement. Kay Wills Wyma in her book *Cleaning House* describes how entitlement happens when we consume without contributing. As the offspring of fundamentalism, conservative evangelicalism has long loved her prophecy conferences, Bible studies, and family camps—accompanied by celebrity teachers—where a culture of consumption has bequeathed to her a genetic predisposition toward spiritual obesity.

Yet her consumption has historically been devoid of a contributive activism, thus causing her to be entitled. If the impetus for the divorce was fundamentalists wanting to hold fast to the truth, then there was bound to be a gorging of sorts at the table of God’s Word, resulting in a just condemnation that they are hearers but not doers of said Word in all of its magnificent facets.

And while any historian will point out the mission-mindedness of white evangelicalism, this was nothing more than *spiritual* colonization, where souls were cared for, while bodies and felt needs went generally neglected. Sure, there’s been a recent tidal wave of urban engagement seen in the new vocabulary of such phrases as *incarnational living*, *missional communities*, and the like; yet it cannot be denied that this is recent and not historical. Outlier examples always exist, but these exceptions prove the rule that white evangelicalism has historically been more concerned with *knowing* right than *doing* what’s right, especially with respect to the ethnically other.

If you are searching for proof of the entitlement associated with the offspring of white evangelicalism, notice how many people bristle when asked to engage in issues of cross-ethnic justice. Watch the anger some of them display when a minority preacher reminds them of their historic culpability in systemic injustice, gathering in a three-point stance as the preacher concludes so they can bombard him with their theological justifications. And when we talk of proactively seeking minorities for certain positions, catch the hesitation and pushback as they cry, “Unfair.”

As one who has raised teenagers, I know entitlement when I see it. They love watching television but hate contributing to the well-being of the house by taking out the garbage or raking leaves. Teenagers hate to be inconvenienced. Many are consummate consumers. Consuming is easy; contributing is something altogether different. The children of white evangelicalism have been paralyzed by a perpetual adolescence.

I discovered these things the hard way when we set anchor in Memphis. Almost immediately, I was chastised by my white brothers and sisters for preaching a “social gospel.” It didn’t take me long to realize how that phrase was code for *liberal* and *unbiblical*. My reflex reaction was to dig in and fight back, but this is not why I had come to Memphis. If I were to pastor my white parishioners, I had to divest myself of any vestiges of white idolization and fear and with great Pauline courage and patience show them “the most excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31).

My years at Bible college and seminary equipped me to see that there was a way to approach this, but I would need to take a few steps back in my preaching. If the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, then the best route to eulogizing white evangelicalism is by showing her members the plain truth of Scripture that their whiteness had blinded them to.

Despite all of her shortcomings, white evangelicalism has maintained a high view of Scripture. This was to be my “in” with them. As I counsel any pastor who is seeking to transition a church into a multiethnic trajectory, never begin by preaching on race relations; always begin by *preaching the gospel*. Soon enough, congregants will see that the two are inextricably linked.

When our Lord was crucified, it happened, of course, upon a cross. The cross was constructed of two beams, one vertical and the other horizontal. The vertical beam was rooted deeply into the ground, thereby providing support and stability. The horizontal beam was tethered to the vertical one, making both beams essential for his death and our salvation. What is true in the natural is also true in the spiritual. The validity and vibrancy of our faith

necessitate a staunch refusal of the either/or dichotomy that the church of the early twentieth century settled for, and it demands the both/and approach that our Lord and Savior espoused. The gospel is *both* vertical and horizontal.

Now, Paul is clear when he says that our vertical reconciliation to God is “of first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3). There can never be any true reconciliation horizontally without our first being vertically reconciled to God. This is a point our modernist friends missed. Truth must be firmly buttressed in God; without this, we are but a stone’s throw away from doctrinal error and spiritual malpractice.

Any fair reading of the Bible will reveal the conjoining of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our faith. In Matthew 22:37–40, Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with the totality of our being (vertical) and to love our neighbor as ourselves (horizontal). In 1 John 4:20, the apostle John posed the rhetorical question of how we can claim to love God, whom we don’t see (vertical), while hating our brother or sister, whom we do see (horizontal).

In Ephesians 2, Paul begins with vertical reconciliation when he says that the Christ follower has been saved by grace through faith, and not by works. Yet for so many years in the halls of white evangelicalism, I never once heard a sermon on the rest of Ephesians 2, leaving me to think there were really only ten verses in the chapter. But right on the heels of our vertical reconciliation, Paul talks about the ethnic implications when he says that Jesus’ death has taken a sledgehammer to the dividing wall of hostility, allowing Jews and Gentiles to rush in together and worship as one family. Seen against the backdrop of the totality of the Pauline corpus, Ephesians 2 is merely a microcosm of the vertical and horizontal aspects of our faith.

In almost every letter, Paul begins with orthodoxy and concludes with orthopraxy, with doctrine and then duty, and much of the orthopraxy has to do with the horizontal accoutrements of the cross—how we relate to one another. The Bible knows nothing of a vertical reconciliation that is not evident in

horizontal reconciliation with others. An unforgiving Christian is an oxymoron. So is a racist one.

But we haven’t pushed the envelope far enough. We must ask the question, “Who exactly was Paul writing to as he revealed the vertical and horizontal elements of our faith?” My own reading of Acts left me winded, wondering why I had never heard these things in my New Testament Survey classes. Read it for yourself. When Paul walks into a city he asks two questions: (1) Where is the synagogue?—because he wants to preach the gospel to the Jews—and (2) Where do the Gentiles hang out?—because he wants to reach them.

These questions arise out of Paul’s missiological philosophy of ministry seen in Romans 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” If you grew up in the church, you no doubt heard this verse—and maybe even were forced to find it quickly in some sword drill competition—but don’t see it so much with evangelistic eyes (though appropriate to do so) as with sociological ones. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, because to him it represented God’s power to *both* Jews and Greeks, the very ones Paul was called to comprehensively reach.

With conversions happening rapidly among both groups, Paul does not go the pragmatic route, starting two churches for the two distinct ethnicities. This would have been the easy thing to do, of course, but Paul would have none of it. To Paul, vertical reconciliation required nothing less than horizontal reconciliation, and the theater in which this was to be enacted was the local church. In case you missed it, most of Paul’s churches were multiethnic, which is exactly why he deals with such issues as food and circumcision. If Paul was ever asked if the gospel was social, he would nod his head yes, like a bobblehead doll.

These are gospel issues. Is the gospel social? Of course it is. Like the word *evangelical*, the term *social gospel* has become politicized. But any fair reading of the text of Scripture will uncover the social implications of the gospel. Because Christ first loved us, we are to love others (1

Corinthians 13). Having been forgiven by God, we are to forgive (Matthew 18:21–35). Having been reconciled to God through the bloody cross, we are to, as best we can, live at peace with all people (Romans 12:18). And the generosity of Jesus extended at Calvary is to inspire generosity among his followers toward the marginalized (Matthew 21:33–46). There is no getting around the social requirements of the gospel.¹

¹ Bryan Loritts and John Ortberg, *Insider Outsider: My Journey as a Stranger in White Evangelicalism and*

My Hope for Us All (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).