

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

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Matthew 21:23-32

A couple weeks ago I did a political survey by phone. It was mostly harmless. I had no trouble with most of it. On most topics I either had a very strong opinion or didn't know anything. Towards the end of the survey, my inquisitor began asking demographic questions; the types that give news anchors hours of material to dissect: "Oooh, white males between 27 and 29 are 2% less likely to vote for former pro-Bowlers!"

I get the feeling that such surveys are really designed to confirm pre-conceived notions about the population rather than allowing individuals to accurately describe themselves. The religion questions in particular were rather narrow. First I was asked if I was Catholic, Protestant or other. I presume "other" included Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Animists and Zoroastrians. I didn't feel like explaining that Anabaptists are neither Catholic nor Protestant, so I just said Protestant.

It was the next question that really bugged me. A yes or no question: "Are you Fundamentalist or Born Again?"

I'm not a big fan of the way the term "born again" has been co-opted. I believe in being born again; however, I believe that it is a continual process, sort of like growing up. Many people have a discrete experience that they can point to as their "re-birth," but many faithful Christians do not. There are many other Biblical ways of describing the process of becoming a follower of Jesus.

“Fundamentalist” is a bit tougher. I have a hard time seeing that in a positive light. Of course, I believe in the fundamentals of the Christian faith ... but that doesn't necessarily mean I would agree with a fundamentalist about what those are!

At any rate, I responded “yes.” Partly just because that should really mess with their demographics — this answer probably looks like it contradicts most of my other answers!

A few years ago I was speaking with someone who was trying to figure out if I was really a Christian. He knew I was a Mennonite, and that made him suspicious. So he asked if I was an Evangelical. I said that depended on the definition. I forget what he said, but in my mind Evangelicals believe in and share the “Good News.” Never mind, again, that my definition of what that “Good News” is would be radically different from those who generally label themselves Evangelical. So I said I could be an Evangelical, and that satisfied the questioner.

So there you have it, Hyattsville; one of your pastors is a born again, fundamentalist evangelical.

These labels are really messy things. Like any word, they carry the baggage of experience and assumed definitions. And beyond their rhetorical messiness, their underlying assumption is that Christianity boils down to being able to tick the right boxes in a doctrinal survey: that is, being a Christian is about what you say you believe.

That's why today's parable is so useful. It is all about the disconnect between orthodoxy and orthopraxy — orthodoxy is believing the right stuff, and

orthopraxy is doing the right stuff. Jesus, in talking with the born-again, fundamentalist evangelicals of his day, votes for orthopraxy. The son who said the wrong thing (that he wasn't going to do the vineyard work), but did the right thing "did the will of his father." For Jesus, belief isn't just a doctrinal affirmation, but it is doctrine put into action.

Much of church history was devoted to getting people to believe and say the right stuff. Ruth Kitchin Tillman sent me a great paper she wrote on the creeds of the church; she makes the point that they were designed entirely with orthodoxy in mind; they didn't extend into the action, or praxis, of the community of believers. I think that when the creeds were written the assumption was that if you came to believe the right things, belief would prompt you into right action. This reflects a particular understanding of humanity — that we are governed by our brains, and by modifying our thinking we can modify our behavior. That is to some extent true; however, I think that a greater truth is just the reverse — that modifying our actions can lead us into greater belief. The exercise of faith is what increases faith.

In human interaction, it is not what I think about you that determines our relationship. My attitudes do not shape your definition of me unless those attitudes are matched by my action. If I think that you are really annoying but treat you really nicely, then to you, I am a nice person. If I am having a rotten day and feel like a jerk but still manage to behave in a civil manner, then I am not a jerk. Our self within community is not defined by our interior, but rather by our interaction.

Gerard Manley Hopkins is one of my favorite poets. In one of his most famous poems, he writes about calling and definition. What we do is, in his mind, who we are; it reveals our true nature. He talks about the “being indoors,” the interior dimensions of an object — that are “dealt out” in action. After using various images to explain this concept, he applies his thinking to humans. Christ, he writes, is seen wherever justice and grace are dealt out.

I’ve given you a copy of the poem so that you can take a little more time with it if you’d like, but his work is really meant to be spoken and heard. In fact he quite often made up words because he enjoyed the way they sounded. Here is the poem:

AS kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: 5
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

Í say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces; 10
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.

--Gerard Manley Hopkins, ca. 1881

It feels a bit strange to claim that “What I *do* is me: for that I came.” In our Western context we often conflate “What I do” with “How I make money,” and so reduce a person’s identity to their career. Hopkins has a broader view than that. For him, “What I do” is a relational thing: in other words, “Who I am” is who other

people encounter me to be. I am me in relation to you. The person is defined within community.

What would happen if you asked several people who know you well to describe who you are? Chances are, they will describe the way you interact with them. They will describe how they observe you treating other people. Their description will be relational. Our being is defined by doing.

Of course, there is a “me” that only I know — an inner self, that influences the relational self. Perhaps the relationship between the inner and relational is part of what determines our mental health.

If doing, being and relationship determines our identity, then, is being a Christian so often reduced to a set of doctrinal affirmations? Why do we privilege the doxy over the praxy? Partly because it is so much easier! Someone can decide whether I’m a proper Christian or not simply based on the labels I choose to use or not use. Labels make things black and white. I can decide whether it is safe to have a conversation with you based on whether you are a Republican or a Democrat, or a liberal or a conservative, or a Mennonite. Or even which *kind* of Mennonite. We get more wrapped up in Teaching Positions than in putting the Good News of Jesus into action!

Our actions are what define our participation in Christ’s body. A person can be filled with doubt about the doctrinal claims of the Church and still feed the hungry. A person can chafe against authority structures and still do justice. A person can be troubled by the difficult stories in scripture but still participate in them through worship on Sunday morning.

In today's parable Jesus brings sharp focus to the saying versus doing question. And whole denominations have been founded based on disagreements over faith versus works. But like Paul says, faith and works go hand in hand.

If a community is defined according to who says the right stuff, it is fairly easy to expand the community. If it is defined according to who acts justly, loves mercy and walks humbly with God, well, things get a whole lot more messy. Jesus proposes an upside-down way of forming the community — he created a community of praxis. His closest followers were doubters, outcasts and sinners. But in proximity to Jesus, they practiced feeding the hungry, healing the sick and reaching out to the rejected. They exercised the disciplines of prayer and community. It was through all of these practices that they came to understand the person and the divinity of Jesus. It was the praxis that led them into the doxy.

It is one thing to state "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, fully human and fully divine, and that the Church is his incarnate body in the world today." It is quite another to discover through acts of mercy that you can find the face of Christ among those you serve; or through worship that you stand in the body of Christ when you sing together; or through peacemaking that we participate in God's work of restoring creation. Even by repeating the old creeds together, whether we whole-heartedly claim them or not, we practice joining ourselves to centuries of Christ followers.

It is when we live according to Christ's call that we can learn and relearn to claim God's story as our own. As Menno Simons said, "True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, feeds the hungry and comforts the

sorrowful. It shelters the destitute, serves those that harm it and binds up that which is wounded. It has become all things to all people."