

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 2006

Can't We All Just Get Along? Reflections on my Experience at Faith & Order

This past weekend I had the opportunity to be a participant observer at a Faith & Order work session of the National Council of Churches. Theologians from many Christian traditions were there, divided up into groups to hash out ecumenical problems. I joined the "Justification and Justice" and learned a great deal about the dialogical process.

The most interesting thing to me from the weekend was not so much what agreements were made, but how they were made. Why? Because *how* people argue about doctrine reveals what they think about the nature of doctrine itself. The process of engaging people with different doctrinal commitments is a fascinating case study in different doctrinal theories. Beneath the surface of doctrinal division is the greater division over what we think we are doing when we profess a particular doctrine.

Let me briefly outline three different approaches to doctrinal agreement that I witnessed this weekend:

(1) The "Can't We All Just Get Along?" method proposes that the road to unity is to set aside doctrines-that-divide. Some folks desire to get past our disagreements by avoiding doctrine altogether. Usually some common political commitment is offered in its place. This seems to be the shallowest option, as our real differences are never really addressed, and persist under the surface.

(2) The "Aren't We All Just Saying the Same Thing?" method proposes that the road to unity is to find some common experience that lies behind the different doctrines. Some folks try to get to the bottom of doctrinal differences by claiming that doctrines merely represent different ways of expressing our diverse religious experiences. So the solution to doctrinal differences is to unearth the religious feelings that we do share, and just agree-to-disagree

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on what to call it. You call it justification by faith, I call it deification, but we both know we are talking about our loving encounter with God. This seems like a promising approach. But the problem comes with the simple fact that most people are merely expressing their religious experience when they make doctrinal statements. From time to time, people make actual claims about who God is and how God works. And to force them to reduce those claims to expressions of feeling does violence to the actual intent of the believer. So this road is ultimately a dead-end, despite its initial promise.

(3) The "Let's Be Honest With One Another" method proposes that the road to unity is to engage doctrines at face value precisely at our point of disagreement. Some folks realize that the conversation only gets good when we lay our cards on the table and acknowledge our disagreement. The point of dialogue is to really listen to the other person. To really encounter a different person, I have to listen carefully to exactly the things which make them different. In the process of this exchange, we might discover what we do have in common. We might also discover new things that we can assimilate into our thinking. We might also find places of utter disagreement. But in a spirit of persevering love, we can continue to discuss our differences even when we can't seem to overcome them by sheer will or ingenuity. This method may take long, but in the end it seems to be the most interesting and have the most integrity. Plus, agreement that comes through such a method will be genuine and lasting agreement, and therefore will be worth the wait.

Any thoughts?

Can you think of some other approaches to discussing doctrinal differences?

What do you think of these three options?

What is the nature of doctrine in your mind?

Labels: [Practice of Theology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 8:12 PM

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At [9:57 AM, March 23, 2006](#), [Amanda](#) said...

I was a #2 "Aren't we all just saying the same thing?" in seminary...partly out of my middle-child-I-want-everyone-to-get-along-syndrom, but also out of my own laziness to not want to take the time to truly listen and wrestle with issues.

As a recovering #2, thanks for lying these out so clearly...

Amanda

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At [8:38 AM, March 24, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I think you have forgotten several approaches which I will lay out now without much explanation because they are fairly self explanatory and presented mostly for a laugh:

"You are a heretic" approach - You disagree with me therefore you are a heretic, therefore you aren't a true Christian, therefore we don't need to agree. (See an evangelical approach to Catholicism)

"Sheer Weight of Proof Texts" approach (aka the Baptist method) - Let's get a scale and stack our proof texts on it and whoever's weigh the most win. Points system - OT = 1 point, Epistles = 2 points, Gospels = 3 points, Quoted in KJV = Bonus point, Frequently mentioned in the works of Calvin - 2 Bonus points.

"Theology is Arrogance" approach - Man if you think you can understand God you are arrogant. There's no way we could know Him - He's to big man!!! Response: There is that whole self revelation thing He does. Response: Hey man, quit trying to put God in a box man.

At [2:27 PM, March 24, 2006](#), [TAJ](#) said...

Good overview. I'd agree, #3 would be the best route, with a an emphasis on "in a spirit of persevering love, we can continue to discuss our differences." Otherwise, it's particularly difficult to dialog with someone from the "you are a heretic" crowd.

At [7:06 PM, March 24, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

#1 and #2 can be fun - I call these meetings ecumenical teas. Oh I think what you believe is lovely - would you like another scone. I do think there is some validity about unity happening on the mission field - so to speak - how does that fit with working toward doctrinal understanding? What about interfaith dialogue? Are the goals different? Glad you got to go to this - you'd be a great addition to the conversation there.

At [7:53 AM, March 28, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

John - Wow. Way to lay it out there. I think I've flirted with #1 and #2 before when in school... and just like flirting with the girls in school - it never really left me satisfied... just distracted.

All - I imagine the greatest barrier to living out #3 is NOT fear of

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being offensive, but secretly the greatest barrier is how so few of us really know our doctrine in the first place.

John - We need you, O Teacher. :-)

AJ - loved your list. Hilarious)

At [1:41 PM, March 29, 2006](#), [D.M.](#) said...

John, I have found that throughout my theological discussion the most heated points of tension are not over theology or doctrine but this exact issue of HOW people percieve doctrine (and how the percieve others percieving doctrine). Aren't our presuppositions always our most dogmatically defended positions because they are not WHAT we think but WHY we think it?

Great post and good thoughts.

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