

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, 2006

Generously Orthodox

What does the label "generous orthodoxy" really mean? Although I have applied this attractive yet elusive moniker to myself for years, I am still searching for an adequate definition and/or description of it. Well, just a few weeks ago one of my [teachers](#) humorously offered the following quote as a "mission statement for generous orthodoxy." I must admit, it may be the best statement on offer. Check it out:

"To become obedient to Jesus is actually to become obedient to God, not a conceived and imaginary God, but to a God as he is in his inmost essence, the gracious God, the god in whom we may believe. Jesus himself is the divine demand which confronts us as a genuinely compelling demand and which is also rigorous in the sense that it can be fulfilled only willingly or not at all; the demand upon us ourselves, which claims our heart, and therefore the fulfillment of which really brings us ourselves into harmony with the will of God. Nothing that we can do in fulfillment of the will of God is higher and deeper than to love Jesus and therefore to keep his commandments - just because they are his, just because we cannot love him without keeping his commandments. We definitely fulfill the will of God when we do this. And whatever is done in line with and in the sense of this action even where Jesus is no longer or is not yet known; whatever bears in itself something in the nature of this action and is therefore an actual witness to the fact that Jesus lives and reigns and conquers, is definitely a fulfillment of the will of God. In all ages the will of God has been fulfilled outside the Church as well. Indeed, to the shame of the Church it has often been better fulfilled outside the Church than in it. This is not in virtue of a natural goodness of humanity. It is because **Jesus, as the One who has risen from the dead and sits at the right hand of God, is in fact the Lord of the whole world, who has his servants even where his name is not yet or no longer known and praised.** The Church can know and praise him. The Church can live in the consciousness of what is said to us. The Church can call all human beings to the consciousness of what has force and truth for all humanity. How great, then, is the Church's primary task and

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obligation: to realize for itself that the only thing which has truth and force is that in the fact that Jesus lives and reigns and conquers humanity is claimed by God!"(Karl Barth, [Church Dogmatics II/2](#), pp. 568-569 translation revised and emphasis added)

This quote indicates that generosity is not some addition we add to our orthodoxy. Rather, **we are generous because we are orthodox**. The cosmic claim of Jesus Christ implies that he has servants outside the walls of the church. Therefore, as orthodox men and women, we actively and openly seek out his unwitting witnesses wherever they may be found.

Any thoughts?

Is this a minimally adequate description of generous orthodoxy? If not, what are some other alternatives?

If so, what are some other insights that can be gleaned from this quote?

Labels: [Barth](#), [Practice of Theology](#), [quotes](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ [2:21 PM](#)

[14 comments](#)

14 Comments:

At [3:11 PM, April 19, 2006](#), [millinerd](#) said...

Of course, no label is perfect, but this one seems comparable to magazines that claim to be for the "thinking Christian," which unfortunately implies the mindlessness of other publications.

Orthodoxy is necessarily (and I think appropriately) defined against heresy, but by adding "generous" can one avoid the implication those *other* orthodox are stingy Scrooges who mutter bah humbug between their alleluias?

I prefer your suggestion of an implied generosity that unfolds itself the more one examines what it means to be orthodox.

At [9:08 PM, April 19, 2006](#), [ap](#) said...

When you said, "Rather, we are generous because we are orthodox," you hit it exactly. Within Christian theology is the impetus to see the Spirit's work in all of creation; after all, what part of it does Jesus not reign? And when we see his work beyond the walls we've set up, we are forced to worship and simply accept that he is unbounded. Too often we have forgotten that theology is for the church--not for God. He is quite free to be who he is in ways we may not expect.

I think being generously orthodox is, therefore, only lived out. So, I say: Generous orthodoxy is Tom Wright calling Marcus Borg a Christian.

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At [1:59 AM, April 20, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

Yes I like this - It is not about our generosity - our generosity would never sustain - our generosity seems always to bend toward greed - we always seem to end with a manipulative orthodoxy. Orthodox should come first not the adjective.

At [2:01 AM, April 20, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

Yes I like this - It is not about our generosity - our generosity would never sustain - our generosity seems always to bend toward greed - we always seem to end with a manipulative orthodoxy. Orthodox should come first not the adjective.

At [4:09 PM, April 20, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

I like your thinking here, John (as usual). However, I wonder if part of the dynamic of defining what having a "generous orthodoxy" involves are two other factors:

1) Orthodoxy is a slowly but surely moving target. The line is not static, but has taken a journey over the years. Yes, we may trust the older more than the younger in this regard, but overall you can't pin it to the wall that well.

2) Genrouosity, other applied adjectives and sub-movements within it have a crucial role in pulling Orthodoxy back onto it's destined path. Sometimes this comes as a corrective to an over-emphasis or as a reform of a corporate sin, or I suppose misinterpretation (the omission sin of distraction). Sometimes this comes as new territory to explore and so it is not getting "back on track" but perhaps just continuing the corporate journey of following Christ in an orthodox manner.

In this sense we might approach being generous (as the great Barth quote you gave us shows) in Millinerd's "unfolding from orthodoxy" paradigm. We might see it as simply raising an aspect, a word, a nuance that we have all forgotten and omitted from who we are becoming. In our rebuilding efforts so often the scrolls are found in their hiding place, brought out and read among the people. And we repent. This is the journey of the orthodox.

At [8:15 PM, April 20, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

I'm looking forward to Hunsinger's new book:

"Orthodox Generosity"

(if he doesn't hurry up and write it, I might!)

At [2:52 PM, April 21, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

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I have been thinking about this some more.

Is the generosity of orthodoxy a generosity from the content of the orthodoxy - or is it a generosity from the nature of orthodoxy? It seems that Barth could be read either way here - while they seem very different.

Is it that we recognize that the nature of orthodoxy requires an amount of humility and an admission of not knowing - as in not knowing why God's will is sometimes better fulfilled outside the church than within it? Or is it the vastness of the implications of Jesus' lordship?

At [12:14 AM, April 24, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

"...we are generous *because* we are orthodox."

Be *very* careful of spiritual pride.

At [10:03 AM, April 25, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

John, I love this post. So much of what dissapoints me about the theological blogging world could be solved by a full application of your thoughts.

(funny note, at first I thought your professor made these quoted comments. I was reading thinking...this professor is brilliant. :) Then I realized your prof was quoting Barth...probably still brilliant though.)

Most blogs which think theologically seem to be laced with hubris, pound away with anger, and are stingy in their grace and mystery. I long for more generosity.

Thanks for being different, Converse friend.

Sam (wish I could see you face-to-face again) I think it is both. Can the content even be separated from the nature? Can the mystery of the subject be divided from the vast implications of the Lordship of Christ? Can we ever fully exhaust those implications? But you are a better thinker on these things than I am...whadya think?
dave ward

At [11:29 AM, April 25, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

"So, I say: Generous orthodoxy is Tom Wright calling Marcus Borg a Christian."

hmm...I wonder if generous orthodoxy is Tom Wright not calling Marcus Borg anything other than a fellow seeker of truth (however misguided he may be at times). There has to be some core essentials to grow from. You can't be generous unless you have a starting point and personal convictions. But we have to still hold on to the core,

and I'm not sure Borg does.

I think a Generous Orthodoxy is simply the state of recognizing what the core really is (the very person and work of Christ) and going from there with an open mind. A generous orthodoxy is not "turning a blind eye" to heresy or those beliefs outside our own sphere. Rather, it is recognizing the core wherever it is found, and being willing to dialogue about those "extras" that are held within traditions outside of my own.

I can dialogue with Borg until I'm blue in the face. I can affirm where he is right without ever pointing out where I feel he is misguided and we can point out to each other where our paths separate on the essentials. The spirit at which it is done determines whether this is truly a Generous exercise or not.

At [12:01 PM, April 25, 2006](#), [ap](#) said...

i don't think tom wright saying borg is a Christian is affirming he's right or orthodox. in fact, i think wright saying that borg is a Christian may indeed include that he is seeking truth in the Christian faith (but, i don't want to put words in the good bishop's mouth), as you suggest.

At [5:35 PM, April 25, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

Dave - (me too)

I think you are right that it is hard to separate content and form and this seems especially true in theology. I guess I am trying to get my mind around the fine but seemingly significant difference between generosity as part of the content of orthodoxy - that is we can be fully "orthodox" and part of the fullness includes our being generous - is this generosity condescension leading to pride as mark pointed out? Or is the generosity a description of the sense that orthodoxy is never closed or never fully attainable based on its relationship to the object. Orthodoxy includes an acknowledgment of the mystery and so it necessitates generosity by its form - or to use Barth's imagery - there can never be a solid line around our "system" of theology. Our line is dashed - our system open - the only solid line is around the word of God as proclaimed in Jesus Christ - but as the object JC is not fully attainable - generosity is a function of our recognition that our line is dashed. Maybe.

Thanks for the discussion - I am trying to work through this point. Where's drulogion to solve all of our problems?

At [10:26 AM, April 26, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Ah, yes, Sam... I like that: a dashed line encircling but a line no less.

When the line is dashed you are less worried about "crossing the line" and become more worried if you're just no where near the whole

circle. And the circle calls you back to it's fold.

I like, yes, I like. (Said studiously while stroking chin-hairs.)

I'm going to go think on that.

At [2:53 PM, April 26, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

RE: Content or Nature of Orthodoxy?

I would concur that both the content and nature of orthodoxy can and should result in generosity. Furthermore, they are related. The reason the content is generous (as argued in the post) is that Jesus Christ is the living Lord of the universe and therefore has servants outside the walls of the church.

The reason the nature is generous flows from this content: that we worship a living God, the one who raised Jesus from the dead, and therefore a God who cannot be locked into the walls of our ecclesial sub-culture or doctrinal language. Because God is a living God (material content of orthodoxy) we practice a living theology (formal nature of orthodoxy). Thus Sam's aptly cited "dotted line" is there not because of some epistemic principle but because of the living Lordship of Christ.

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