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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 26, 2006

Taking the Long View on Doctrinal Positions

I am currently in the final stages of the ordination process in my [denomination](#). I just finished filling out a detailed form concerning doctrinal and ethical positions. I will soon have an interview with my ordaining board. Let's hope it goes well.

The interesting thing about this process for many of us is the **struggle between integrity and submission**. On the one hand, we want to have the integrity to voice our divergence on the substance or wording of denominational doctrinal statements. On the other hand, we want to communicate clearly an attitude of submission to the ecclesial community and its governing bodies. How do walk this tight-rope without falling off?

I realized something this time around. As I answered the question on baptism, I felt the waters of dissent bubble up inside me. I still found a way to word my answer in a submissive yet honest way. This was not the first time I have expressed dissent regarding my denomination's views on baptism. I even had a candid and fruitful discussion with my ordaining board two years ago. But here's the funny thing: **this time I found myself questioning our position from the completely opposite perspective**. Two years ago I was complaining that our statement was not sacramental enough. Now I am wondering if it is too sacramental. This just goes to show that my "views" about which I desire to have "integrity" are a moving target. I am still "in process" on some of these things. How arrogant of me to judge these statements against my own constantly developing views.

So I came to the realization that submission to the spirit of my denomination's doctrinal statements does not undermine my integrity. Rather, **it is a sign of deeper integrity to admit one's own lack of integrity over time**. As I twist in the wind of new ideas and arguments, my tradition provides an anchor. Maybe the path to integrity can be found in submitting to one's tradition and learning to be taught and guided by it.

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Any thoughts?

Have you experienced similar realizations?

Why are we so obsessed with integrity and so averse to submission?

Am I just "selling out" or is this a genuine approach?

Labels: [Practice of Theology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:18 PM

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7 Comments:

At 4:01 PM, April 27, 2006, [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Hard question. Your Dad told me that the Wesleyan Church has this great policy--you can be in and disagree with the ethos *if* you are in the process of working to change it.

In your case you have the added problem of knowing more about each issue than the people interviewing you. I agree with you that this fact doesn't necessarily mean you're right and they're wrong. But I personally find this kind of situation immensely frustrating. So much of it comes down to power and sociology.

My personal philosophy is that we can submit with our minds in some cases without denying what we think we know by submitting to the gap between evidence and truth. Since almost every belief involves some degree of "faith" (except for the claim that what I am now calling thought exists), we could be wrong on virtually everything. I can't change the fact that I think my car is black. But I can submit to the church if they say it's white on the basis of the gap between my perception and reality...

Well, I suppose that's a black and white issue... not really close enough to submit with integrity.

At 7:41 AM, April 28, 2006, [Scott David Hendricks](#) said...

John,

Thanks for this post. In 18 days I will go before my DBMD for the first time, although the doctrinal questions probably won't be as copious as in the future.

I have been thinking quite a bit about this issue lately, what to say to the board if I take a slightly different view. I appreciate your thoughts because I find myself humored by the fact that my views on some doctrinal issues may not become concrete for many years. And in fact, baptism has been one of the most frustrating issues for me lately (but I only mean as far as musings go; I have not been emotionally and spiritually stressed about it).

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AND if you don't mind sharing, what has brought you to a less sacramental view recently?

At [5:10 PM, April 28, 2006](#), John Mark said...

I cannot answer your question. But I find myself wondering if your use of the word integrity might be replaced with certainty and not change what you are trying to say. You are aware of the shift in thinking that is chronicled in A Century of Holiness Theology, discussed in your Dad's blog. You may or may not be aware that the book tells of how many young ordinands in the COTN almost were denied approval because they could not answer the district boards with the "right" answer after having been to NTS. I remember being in on a conversation with my pastor and a missionary who was very concerned with what was going on at NTS 30-35 years ago. I say that to point out that the boards, even if wrong, may be rightly concerned about the future of their church.

My thinking, at least at this point, runs like this. There is some latitude in our views on the major tenants of the faith- not being Wesleyan (denominationally) I don't know how rigid or precise your answers on some questions are required to be-but given today's theological climate I assume there is some wiggle room on certain issues. So, my question would be, "Can I hold to this position and still be an honest Wesleyan?" (Very subjective, I know). And I think it helps all of us to know that what we are certain of today we may question tomorrow.

Ken Schenk may be right that much of this comes down to power and sociology. But I would assume that your credentials board is comprised of people just trying to do their job, unless they prove otherwise. I remember all the horror stories of interviews, then finding out that my own was very mild and low key.

Your situation may be far different from mine because of your name, and your educational background, if I can hazard a wild guess. I hope I'm wrong.

The best bet may be to simply seek a lot of prayer support before you face your interview, and trust that the Spirit can guide both you and those you face. That may seem terribly simplistic, but I have found that such an approach has been the best for me.

God bless-

At [12:25 PM, May 01, 2006](#), [pastorchris'place](#) said...

Chris said...

I totally understand your concern for integrity and submission. I was ordained in a hyper-conservative district of TWC whose DBMD was more concerned about my conformity to behavioral issues. I was hardly asked a theological question except my view of entire sanctification.

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

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It is tough to be true to your conscience and yet not offend the powers that be. Yet, with my personal experience there had to be a call to the broader community of faith outside my immediate district. I tried to demonstrate submission to this and not the individual opinions in the room, while still treating them as my elders and advisors.

Sadly, like Ken, I honestly think much of this process comes down to power and sociology.

At [3:27 PM, May 01, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

I think your question: "Why are we so obsessed with integrity and so averse to submission?" is perhaps the most interesting to me.

I found myself in a similar situation as yourself years ago coming up through the ordination process. Eventually I just determined to "not make a mountain out of a mole-hill" since 90% of what I thought about theology, the church, and ministry aligned with my denomination.

I now find myself on the other side of the coin. I am now a member of my district's board of ministerial development. Talk about selling out! :-)

From this perspective I think this issue of submission/integrity is important. But I know that we board members are **MOST CONCERNED** about candidates that are bucking the system and claiming "integrity" when they are really just pushing back on any authority at all in their lives. We're also concerned when a candidate won't agree with a position taken by our denomination but they also can't adequately formulate their own position and why it is different. I know in this past year we have voted unanimously on candidates who disagree on some positions with some different language and nuancing that in the end we were comfortable with. Most candidates forget that the questionnaire form (at least in the Wesleyan Church) is the start of the discussion, not the end all of jumping through the hoops.

At least that's the case here.

At [11:19 PM, May 05, 2006](#), [Tony Myles](#) said...

As a bit of my own experience, I found that the ordination board prefers candidates who are willing to discuss things from their own wrestlings versus just quote the discipline.

Perhaps that says something to your question, eh?

At [9:18 PM, May 14, 2006](#), [Thinking in Ohio](#) said...

I hope your interview is tough! Seriously, I've been ordained twice,

once through the Nazarnes and now with a much smaller holiness denomination (but one more concerned with "holiness" doctrine).

Neither review was the least bit challenging. Maybe because I went to a conservative college and seminary... I don't know. But really, both denominations were more concerned about what I thought of Rick Warren and Bill Hybels than John Wesley or infant baptism.

I hope your board both cares immensely about your doctrinal stands and also gives you the space you need to wrestle with scripture and tradition.

I really appreciate what you have to say about "anchoring" in our denomination, I think there's a lot of wisdom there.

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