

ECCLESIASTICAL WINDS

WINDS OF DOCTRINE 4



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Ecclesiastical Winds: Winds of Doctrine 4
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Welcome to *Ecclesiastical Winds*

As much as we might like to think it isn't so, certain ill winds of doctrine flare even within the Church. These can be particularly difficult to detect and steer clear of, because they often use the language of faith, tout their grounding in Scripture, or emerge from some useful practice or protocol that has been of benefit in the past.

But the winds of doctrine we will explore in this installment in our series, "Winds of Doctrine," are just as dangerous, if not more so, as the winds that come at us from the world or the sin that lingers in our soul.

We need to be always alert to every seemingly welcome breeze of teaching, checking everything by God's Word, and refusing a place in our soul for that which is merely innovative, popular, or ancient, testing all teaching by the Word and Spirit of God.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Syncretism

So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." Acts 15.3-5

Ill winds in the household of faith

Our adversary the devil will leave no stone unturned and no wind untried to keep us from sailing a straight course in our Lord Jesus Christ. God has given us His Spirit, Who blows us in the direction of love for God and His Word, hatred of all sin, increased desire for and delight in Jesus, and a fervent determination to make Him known. But the god of this age blows against the sails of our soul with contrary winds of doctrine. Some of these arise from the world and the times in which we live; others are more naturally at home in our soul, where the law of sin welcomes, harbors, and deploys them as opportunity permits.

We must keep on guard against worldly and fleshly winds of doctrine, for if we fail to recognize and tack against them, they will cause us first to drift, then to go awry, and finally to become shipwrecked in our faith – unfruitful, lacking joy and purpose, and little distinct from the lost people around us.

But we must also recognize that ill winds of false doctrine arise even from within the household of faith. They take the form of mixed winds, blowing in the Name of the Lord Jesus, having many features of the Wind of God, and using the same terminology as that true Wind. Or they blow falsely with respect to the whole counsel of God and how we must regard it; or the relative importance of secondary matters of faith; or the primacy of mere words; or a fixation with ways of doing things; or a primary commitment to traditions. All these false winds supplant the true Wind of God's Word and Spirit, and since they cannot truly move our souls along the course of sanctification, they slow us down, direct us into uncharted waters, and ultimately leave us in the doldrums of faith.

The first of what we may refer to as "ecclesiastical winds" is the false wind of syncretism.

Syncretism defined

Syncretism attempts to bring into the life of faith beliefs, views, traditions, and practices from other forms of religion, arguing that true faith can only be realized along blended lines. Syncretism wants to put faith in Jesus together with other practices or beliefs as the true means of salvation.

Already in the New Testament, syncretistic winds were blowing into the Church. Paul was beset throughout his ministry by those who insisted that believing in Jesus was not enough for salvation. One also had to keep certain Jewish traditions – such as circumcision and holy days – to be fully acceptable to God. The syncretists, against whom Paul preached and wrote, urged people to believe in Jesus; but they added to faith in Jesus practices imported from Hebrew religion, practices which sought to preserve cherished old ways of seeking and serving God – as well as the status such practices accorded those who held them – while benefiting from the new covenant preaching about Jesus.

John also had to deal with a syncretistic wind which insisted that Jesus did not really appear in the flesh. The "docetists" whom John challenged in 1 John believed it was beneath the dignity of God to take on flesh, and that Jesus – Whom they preached as Savior and Lord – only *appeared* (the Greek word, *δοκέω*, *dokeo*, means "to seem" or "to appear") to be garbed in flesh, even as He remained a most pure spirit.

Both Paul and John realized that these contrary and syncretistic winds would undermine the faith of believers and leave them ultimately with no hope. Paul argued that trusting in any of God's Law for salvation was just a

form of saving oneself. No one had been able to do that up to his day, and no one ever would be able to save themselves, given our inherent sinfulness and self-interest. We need a salvation that comes entirely from without, from a Mediator Who alone is able to fulfill the Law. In Him we are saved; and in Him all those aspects and features of the Law that pointed forward to Him were eclipsed and set aside, while the moral Law remains, though not as a means of salvation, but as salvation's guide for loving God and men.

John argued against the docetists by saying that he and the other apostles had seen, heard, and even touched Jesus. He argued that Jesus came in the flesh and died in the flesh, and anyone who said otherwise was a false spirit. He emphasized the physical nature of Jesus' incarnation and resurrection, and warned his readers against those who taught otherwise.

Syncretism has been a problem in every age of Church history; we see its continuing influence in our own day.

Problems with syncretism

Syncretism today takes the form of rationalism, which is a version of the secular faith of naturalism and materialism. Rationalistic syncretism insists that the Bible and its teachings should make sense and be reasonable to open-minded people. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Christian rationalists argued that the Bible is not inspired; rather, like any other book, it must be subjected to principles of analysis and understanding that are agreeable to human minds. This led to the view of Jesus as the product of human thinking, miracles as primitive attempts to explain natural phenomena, and salvation as little more than a psychological state.

More recently, rationalistic syncretism has given way to postmodern relativism, insisting that Christianity needs to be more in step with the times. It needs to adjust some of its teachings which people today find no longer acceptable. The origins and nature of the cosmos cannot be understood in Biblical terms; rather, evolutionary materialism must be allowed to guide our thinking about the origins of the universe, man, and God. In moral issues – such as the nature of marriage, human sexuality, abortion, and the use of wealth – syncretists argue that Christianity needs an upgrade, so that people in our day will be willing to hear the Good News of Jesus without being offended by “obsolete” teachings. In matters of worship and church life, syncretists insist that we must “do church” in ways “proven” by worldly experience, institutions, and culture.

Syncretism will always seek to secure a place in the sails of our soul. Using the language of Scripture and faith, it argues for a form of religion that fits the times but lacks true power to save. Syncretism unrecognized undermines the authority of Scripture, minimizes the role of Christ, turns its back on the history and heritage of Christian faith, and strives to please men more than God. For all these reasons, we must learn to recognize when syncretistic winds are blowing against us, and be able to resist them in the power of God's Word and Spirit.

For reflection

1. Why did Paul and John argue so vigorously against syncretism?
2. Syncretism wants to blend Christianity with the winds of doctrine blowing today, in the belief that this is how we fit the faith to the times. What's wrong with this way of thinking?
3. How might you be able to tell when any syncretistic tendencies are blowing in the sails of your soul?

Next steps – Preparation: Review your walk with the Lord in prayer – how you prepare for your day, what you do throughout the day, your witness for Christ, your calling to make disciples. Do you see any areas where syncretism has diluted the power of true faith in your life?

2 Experientialism

You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. 2 Corinthians 6.12

An experiential faith

The Christian faith is an *experiential* faith. That is, it's not merely a religion of the mind, nor of certain kinds of activities or times of the week. It's not just a matter of words, rightly confessed. Faith in Christ is true when it works into and through every aspect of our lives, all our daily experiences and activities. Whatever we do, no matter how routine or small, has the potential to express our faith in Christ and to bring glory to God (1 Cor. 10.31).

But this doesn't just happen. True and experiential faith flows from communion with Christ, being near to Him, gazing on the glory that radiates from His face, hearing His Word, knowing His Spirit at work within us to will and do of God's good pleasure for every aspect of our lives, and having our hearts grow in love for Christ and for our neighbors. To experience Jesus is to be filled with all the fullness of God, and the experience of this can be wondrous, awesome, uplifting, exhilarating, humbling, frightening, and exuberantly joyful, all at the same time.

Our experience of Christ is directly related to three things: Our *vision* of Him, exalted in glory (Col. 3.1-3); our *attention* to Him, as we commune with Him in His Word, and in worship, the world, and prayer (Jn. 17.17; 2 Tim. 3.15-17); and our *obedience* to Him unto righteousness and glory in everything we do. The clearer our vision of Christ, the richer our communion with Him; and the more diligent we are in obeying Him, the more His Wind will fill the sails of our soul, and His Presence will transform and affect every aspect of our lives.

The goal of the Christian life, therefore, is to know Jesus and to share in His life, sufferings, resurrection, mission, and reign. As we aim at these goals, we enter the pleasure, peace, passion, and joy of the Lord; our experience – whatever we're doing – is enriched by knowing Him with us; and our witness for Christ is powerfully expressed in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. We seek Jesus; we want to see Jesus; we long to have Jesus increase in us and our old selves to decrease; because *in* Jesus and *with* Him we know fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

Where we go wrong sometimes is in taking our eyes off Jesus and concentrating on the *experience* of faith, as though the *experience* of being a Christian were the proper end to seek. We become restricted in our faith by certain affections, and doing this can tangle the sails of our soul in the ill wind of experientialism.

Experientialism defined

Experientialism makes the Christian life a quest for the right affections. This can take several forms. In some instances throughout Church history, believers have insisted that the proper affections for a Christian are those of deprivation, want, discomfort, and even pain. You're not a true Christian if you haven't suffered, such people insist; and you only really know what it means to be a Christian when these experiences are your daily fare. So whether you have to flee to the desert, perch yourself on a pillar, go without the basic needs of life, deny yourself all beauty and pleasure, or constantly be seeking persecution at the hands of people you offend – this is the experience every true Christian should seek.

Others have swung the affective pendulum in the opposite direction, insisting that the true experience every Christian should know is some form of happiness and wellbeing. You should be happy all the time, if you're really following Jesus. Your worship of Him should be happy. Your times with Christian friends should be happy. You should avoid those things that drag you and others down and devote your time and energy to the pursuit of happiness and wellbeing. Such people expect their churches to provide activities and environments in which they may discover more of the happiness they believe Jesus wants them to know.

For still others, the proper affection of a Christian is a kind of pious stoicism. We mustn't get riled up or become exuberant about things; keep a stiff upper lip and a furrowed brow; be serious about everything; and don't let yourself be tossed around by changeable emotions. Steady as you go; stern as stern.

Whenever we take some form of experience – whether that experience is one of deprivation or excess, austerity or profligacy, glumness or giddiness – as the defining mark of our faith, we have made that experience the supreme end of faith, and we are sailing by the ill wind of experientialism, rather than by the Holy Wind of God.

Problems with experientialism

Experientialism is a kind of idolatry. It distracts us from seeking the Lord and His Kingdom and righteousness, and from engaging *all* our affections in the quest to know, love, and serve Him. Under the influence of experientialism, we end up seeking some particular experience as the true measure of our faith. This experience – happiness, austerity, sternness, or any other affection – replaces Christ as the end we seek and the goal of faith. We will pursue that which reinforces our preferred affections, and this will cause us to veer from our course in the journey of faith which is knowing God and Jesus Christ (Jn. 17.3).

This becomes a kind of addiction. We only want to sing certain kinds of songs, participate in this or that sort of liturgy, have our group experiences be of a particular type, and share our lives only with other believers whose affections, like ours, restrict their Christian experience to a narrow band.

The Christian life is a richly experiential faith. All the affections of our soul have their proper place in the pursuit of Christ and His Kingdom. Be we can only know those affections, and be freed to have them do their proper work in and through us, by concentrating on Jesus, seeking Jesus, hearing and communing with Jesus, and embracing whatever affection we see in Him as appropriate to our situation.

True Christian faith seeks Jesus, not the *experience* of Jesus. We will only become more complete in Him to the extent that we resist the temptation to allow some set of affections to restrict us in our faith, and keep our eyes on and our heart devoted to Him, in the true and full Wind of His Spirit.

For reflection

1. How many different affections are appropriate for Christians? How can focusing on Jesus help us to know more of all these affections?
2. What's the difference between seeking Jesus and seeking the experience of Jesus?
3. How can you tell when you have become entangled in experientialism? What should you do then?

Next steps – Preparation: Spend an extended time with the Lord Jesus, asking Him to show you each of the affections that is appropriate for your walk with Him.

3 Antinomianism

“Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”
Deuteronomy 4.5, 6

The blessing of God’s Law

When God gave His Law to the people of Israel, they were a people who had been chosen and delivered by the grace of God alone (cf. Deut. 7.7, 8). God had graciously promised to Abraham that He would create from him a people to know His blessings, and to share those blessing with all the families of the earth (Gen. 12.1-3). When He brought His people out of Egypt, He gave them His Law so that He might preserve them in life as He defined it (Deut. 7.24; Lev. 18.4, 5). Boiled down to its essence, all the Law of God – the commandments, rules, precepts, statutes, judgments, and testimonies given through Moses – directed Israel to love God with all their soul and strength (Deut. 6.4) and to love their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19.18; cf. Matt. 22.34-40).

There is no sense – none whatsoever – in which God intended that His Law should be for Israel’s attaining salvation. He saved them before He gave them His Law. His Law marked out the spiritual, personal, social, and cultural parameters for a life of goodness, beauty, truth, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Lord. That is, God gave His Law so that His saved people might increase in the experience of salvation, knowing fullness of life in Him, according to His Word, and bearing powerful witness to the nations of the world.

Later, when Israel would ask for and God would grant a king, the king’s first duty was to write in his own hand a copy of all the Law of God, which he was to read from every day. The purpose was that “he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment *to* the right hand or *to* the left, and that he may prolong *his* days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel” (Deut. 17.19, 20). Sadly, we have no record of any king of Israel or Judah ever undertaking this most foundational mandate.

However, our Lord Jesus Christ, when He ascended to glory, took His seat at the Father’s right hand, and was given His Kingdom (Dan. 7.13-18; Ps. 110), He poured out His Spirit into His chosen and saved people, and continues pouring Him out, for the express purpose that the Spirit should write the Law of God *on the hearts* of those who are being saved, that they should understand and do all the will of God therein revealed (Ezek. 36.26, 27). Believers in Jesus Christ are not saved by keeping the Law; however, they are not truly saved without keeping it. The Law of God remains holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). It defines the terms of love for God and neighbor (Matt. 22.34-40; 1 Jn. 5.1-3); and keeping and teaching the Law is crucial for fruitful living in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5.17-19).

It is thus a great tragedy to see the widespread indifference to, neglect of, and even scorn for the Law of God among Christians in our day.

Antinomianism defined

Antinomianism is the ill wind of doctrine that downplays, and in some expressions, completely eliminates, the Law of God as part of the divine economy inaugurated through Jesus Christ. Antinomian pastors and teachers explain that the Law of God has been rendered useless or at least unnecessary to Christians. They quote a distorted excerpt from Paul by insisting that “we are not under law, but under grace” (cf. Rom. 6.14). Paul was explaining that the Law is of no use for saving us; antinomians extend Paul’s meaning by insisting that the Law has no place whatsoever in Christian life. The Law has been supplanted, antinomians explain, by

the “new commandment” of Jesus, that we should love one another as He has loved us (Jn. 13.34, 35), as if by this word Jesus were somehow negating His previous words concerning the ongoing validity and Kingdom necessity of learning, obeying, and teaching the Law of God (cf. Matt. 5.17-19).

Antinomians thus reject the Law of God and replace it with a vaguely defined ethic of love, which encourages a kind of Christian situational ethics grounded in feeling right and hoping for the best. They ignore the fact that all the writing apostles appealed to the Law of God in all its expressions, thus demonstrating that they believed the Law had continuing validity and important applications for their day.

Antinomians do not typically mount a direct attack on the Law of God. Their approach is more subtle and episodic. They neglect to unpack the Law in their preaching and teaching. Whenever any aspect of contemporary culture seems to be finding widespread acceptance among believers, even though it is contrary to explicit teaching in God’s Law, antinomians explain that the Law was “then”; now we have to be more loving, you know, like Jesus. And when they cannot avoid the Law in their preaching and teaching, they explain it as God’s “former way” of saving His people, a way that has now been replaced by merely believing in Jesus Christ.

Problems with antinomianism

Antinomianism eviscerates Christian ethics, withers Christian spirituality, and discourages consistent Christian living. Because the Law of God speaks to every aspect of life – spiritual, personal, interpersonal, social, and cultural – taking the Law away leaves the Church with little in the way of consistent, effective, and Biblical foundation for living in the world. It drains all meaning out of the word *love*, and thus cuts all Christian instruction off from its proper end (1 Tim. 1.5). It fails to embrace the lawful uses of the Law of God which Paul explains in his epistles (cf. 1 Tim. 1.8; Rom. 7.7-12; Rom. 8.5-9; etc.). Neglecting the Law of God – in our reading, meditation, study, and obedience – and teaching others to do the same makes the prayers of all who sail on this course an abomination to the Lord, which might help to explain the shriveled and pitiful state of prayer in the Church in our day (Prov. 28.9). Because such neglect creates a vacuum of consistent, energetic, transformative love throughout society and culture, it encourages lawlessness, lovelessness, and the spread of every kind of wickedness (Matt. 24.12; Prov. 28.4).

Setting aside the Law of God for a poorly-defined ethic of love-like-Jesus denies and bypasses the work of the Holy Spirit, rejects the teaching of Christ and the apostles, departs from the historic emphases of the Christian tradition, undermines the authority of Scripture and all the counsel of God, and promotes a form of experientialism that twists in whatever shifting winds of doctrine may blow against the sails of our soul.

Get grounded in the Law of God. It is the acorn to the oak of all Scripture, and the spiritual jet stream of the Wind of God.

For reflection

1. Why must we not neglect the Law of God in our walk with and work for the Lord?
2. What makes antinomianism such an appealing ill wind of doctrine?
3. We’re not saved by keeping the Law, but we’re not saved without keeping it. Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: If you have not done so before, memorize the Ten Commandments, which are the rock bottom foundation of the Law of God.

4 Doctrinalism

But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. 1 Corinthians 4.19, 20

The evidence of God's Spirit

Those who come to faith in Jesus Christ experience two extraordinary events which launch them onto a new plane of existence.

First, the Spirit of God comes into their heart – their soul – and engages their own voice to cry out that God is now acknowledged as Father (Gal. 4.6). Immediately, the Spirit begins the ongoing work of writing the Law of God on the heart of the believer (Ezek. 36.26, 27), and setting in place the *power* to bring about obedience to that Law and a life of righteousness, peace, and joy (Acts 1.8; Rom. 14.17, 18).

Second, the Spirit conveys the believer out of the realm of darkness, unbelief, and sin into the Kingdom of God's dear Son (Col. 1.13) – a realm of holy spiritual power that operates from the throne of Christ for the purpose of bringing the Kingdom of God on earth after the same manner that it exists in heaven (Matt. 6.10).

The key common denominator of both these events is *power*. Power is energy and movement engaged for work; and in the case of holy *spiritual* power, *Kingdom* power, the work God energizes and moves us to do is that work which He before ordained in His Law, and which issues in love for God and neighbors (Eph. 2.10; Matt. 22.34-40). That work is the *evidence* and *proof* of salvation (Heb. 6.9, 10); and the Lord's desire is that all believers should continually tap that power to "show the same diligence to the full measure of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb. 6.11, 12).

The Holy Spirit brings *power* from on high and conveys us into a *domain of power* that works to equip us for every good work, to make us zealous, ready, and constant in good works according the Law of God and all His Word (2 Tim. 3.15-17; Tit. 2.14; 3.1,8, 14).

If we are saved, if the Spirit of God dwells in us, if we are citizens and ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, then the proof of that is the active and increasing presence of *power* for loving God and our neighbors. That power takes the form of increasing fruitfulness, giftedness, and consistency in bearing witness to Christ, as well as in all the tokens of holiness and love that characterize our Lord Jesus Christ.

Or as Paul put it, the Kingdom of God does not consist in mere words, but in the many and varied manifestations of *power*.

Doctrinalism defined

A widespread problem in contemporary Christianity is that many people have missed this crucial point. They fail to seek, tap, and exercise the indwelling power of God's Spirit and the expansive power of His Kingdom; and they have settled instead for *mere words* as the *bona fides* of their faith.

This is the problem of doctrinalism, the view that insists that merely espousing right doctrine is the hallmark and object of Christian faith. The problem of doctrinalism shows up in various forms. First, and perhaps most common, there are those who at some time in their lives spoke words of belief in Jesus. They confessed some form or degree of faith in Him, and were assured that this was all that God requires for them to be saved. They do not seek to work out their salvation, become equipped for every good work, or even attend the Spirit's school as He works to write the Law on their heart.

In other words, they have come to believe that the Kingdom of God consists of words, not power.

At the other extreme are those who measure the veracity of their faith not in the *few words* of some long-ago profession, but in the *many words* of accurate doctrinal expression. The more doctrine such people know, the more convinced they become of their salvation. The more of the Bible they memorize, the more of its teachings they affirm, and the more immersed they become in the doctrines of the faith, the more they persuade themselves that this torrent, this warehouse of words is where the Kingdom of God exists. And they look at those who do not possess such a thesaurus of doctrine, as in some manner or other, still babes in Christ.

To them, the Kingdom of God consists in doctrine, in words about God and teachings derived from Scripture; power to love God and neighbors is not essential to such a journey of faith.

Problems with doctrinalism

The problems that such doctrinalism can create should be obvious: spiritual listlessness, leading to complacency; indifference to the opportunities for good works arising throughout the day; negligence of our calling as witnesses; failure to make disciples; desire for a faith that is comfortable and convenient rather than one characterized by self-denial and cross-bearing; love of self more than love for God and others; and impatience with those who insist that they work out and work at – not *for* – their salvation in fear and trembling.

The apostle James scorned doctrinalism. You might claim you have faith, expressing it either in the form of few words or many. But if your faith does not issue in works, it is not true faith, but dead faith; because true faith issues in Kingdom power for good works (Jms. 2.14-26). A day is coming, James warned, when God Himself will inspect the way His power has – or has not – been exercised in our lives. We should be living toward that day, with a view to standing before God and giving an account of our faith, and seeking the filling of the Spirit and the Kingdom of God for the *power* we need to live according to the Law of liberty (Jms. 2.12; Eph. 5.18-21; Matt. 6.33). Words are cheap, James insisted: the devil has all the right words – more than any of us will ever have (Jms. 2.19).

We deceive ourselves and mislead others when we try to fill the sails of our soul with words rather than power. Of course, right doctrine is essential. A true confession of faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord is indispensable for salvation. But unless that confession and those doctrines lead to holy spiritual God-and-neighbor loving power, then our “faith” is in vain, we are still in our sins, and we are sailing toward either the cataracts of unbelief or the doldrums of spiritual stagnation.

The Kingdom of God consists not in words, but in power.

For reflection

1. Why are words so important as part of true faith in Christ?
2. Why are words alone not enough to validate faith in Christ?
3. How would you counsel new believers to “work out” their salvation in fear and trembling?

Next steps – Transformation: Ask the Lord for specific works giving evidence of your love for Him and for your neighbor for the day ahead.

5 Denominationalism

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 1 Corinthians 1.11-13

Our great sin

Every true Christian understands that Jesus has commissioned the Church to be His witness to the lost world (Acts 1.8). We are called to seek the Kingdom and righteousness and glory of God (Matt. 6.33; 1 Thess. 2.12), and a primary means of fulfilling this calling is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom to the lost, and to lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

This is completely in line with the teaching of Scripture, Old and New. Both Isaiah and Micah saw the Church as God's city on a hill, chief in splendor and beauty and influence, her citizens dispersed throughout the world to live and proclaim the Word of the Lord, with the result that multitudes of lost people would make their way up to the Church to learn about the Lord (Is. 2.1-4; Mic. 4.1-8). Consequently, righteousness, peace, and joy would pervade the earth as Christ, through His Church, filled all things with Himself (Rom. 14.17, 18; Eph. 1.22, 23; 4.8-10).

Thus, whatever impedes, hinders, compromises, and obstructs our witness for Christ should be anathema to us. We have been sent to the world as Jesus was sent, to bring near and proclaim the Good News of Christ and His Kingdom (Jn. 20.21). We are ambassadors of the Kingdom which is not of this world (2 Cor. 5.20, 21), to represent our Lord for righteousness and to call the world to be reconciled to Him. The Church is the sign to the world that the Kingdom has come, and it is the outpost from which that Kingdom advances on earth as it is in heaven.

As Jesus set His face like flint to fulfill His calling (Lk. 9.51-53), so we must set our face to fulfill ours, undeterred, undistracted, undaunted, and unflinching in our mission to show and tell the Good News to the world.

But if we are to realize success in this calling, we must work hard, with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, to maintain visible unity of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4.3), as one people with one common mission, devoted to one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; for if we fail to realize such visible unity, we will not be persuasive in our witness for the Lord. Jesus Himself said it: "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (Jn. 17.20, 21).

This is nowhere the case in the Christian world today. And we have no one to blame but ourselves.

Denominationalism defined

The Church today is fragmented. In the unity of the Godhead, there is continuous communication, constant cooperation, and ongoing mutual enrichment. In the Church of Jesus Christ, no such unity exists. Indeed, what the world sees, when it looks at the Christian movement, is not a unity that expresses the unity of the Godhead, but a divisiveness marked by hypocrisy, jealousy, taking advantage, indifference, and one or another form of spiritual self-interest. Denominationalism is that spiritual ill wind which recognizes the dividedness of Christ's Body, but accepts it as inevitable and nothing to get exercised about.

The Christian movement today is comprised of more than 35,000 different denominations. Most of these are Protestant, but even Catholicism and Orthodoxy are splintered in various ways. The *fact* that there are so many different denominations is not inherently evil. Denominations form around theological emphases,

cultural and ethnic distinctives, cherished traditions, and charismatic individuals. I want to say again, this is not in itself evil, and it need not be a hindrance to maintaining visible unity of the Body of Christ in the bonds of the Holy Spirit.

But denominationalism erects boundaries and barriers between congregations of believers, set up out of hubris, scorn, distrust, self-righteousness, and a lack of love. In Corinth in Paul's day, the various house churches that constituted the Body of Christ in that city boasted of their superiority over the others by their identification with one or another of the apostles; one group even boasted the "No creed but Christ!" mantra as their unique distinctive. What Paul denounced and labored to overcome as a small-scale, local aberration has today become a tragic universal norm.

And almost no one seems to mind.

Problems with denominationalism

In our lifetime there have been some notable efforts to overcome the disunity that exists between congregations and denominations. The Vatican II Council, the Lausanne Movement, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Gospel Coalition, and Evangelicals and Catholics Together have all sought, in a variety of ways, to address and overcome the barriers of disunity which denominationalism sustains. They all bear witness to a reality we sense within us – that need to be one in Christ as Christ is One in the triune God – but they all have amounted to little more than well-meaning words, which are easily ignored by most believers and church leaders.

Denominationalism – not denominations – fragments the Body of Christ in local communities and throughout the world. It prevents us from seeking common experiences of public worship. It encourages mere ecclesiastical self-interest, promotes disharmony and a lack of cooperation at the local level, and robs the lost world of the warm and illuminating light of Christ, shining through the lighthouse of His one Body.

Denominationalism promotes a competitive mindset among local churches. It stifles cooperative efforts to show mercy to those in need in the local community. It diminishes the power of united, extraordinary, and public prayers for revival (cf. Acts 4.23-31). And it obscures any common vision of the Kingdom of God in the local community and the world, and thus promotes a skewed and shrunken view of the new not-of-this-world realm that has been given to us and into which we have been conveyed by our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Dan. 7.13, 14, 18-27; Col. 1.13).

Scarcely a believer or church today has escaped the influence of this ill wind of doctrine. Indeed, the sails of our souls have become so filled with the winds of denominationalism, that we think them to be normal, inevitable, and in some weird and dangerous sense, welcome. But denominationalism is ruining our witness for Christ and leaving the lost world to languish in its unbelief.

To the extent that we suffer the ill wind of denominationalism to guide our journey in the Lord, we fail in our mission, exacerbate the lostness of our neighbors, and thumb our noses at the clear and unchanging teaching of our Lord.

For reflection

1. What forms does denominationalism take in your local community?
2. How have we come to believe that denominationalism is just normal?
3. What can you do to encourage more visible unity with other believers?

Next steps – Preparation: Pray, like Jesus, for the visible unity of the Body of Christ. Pray for your church, the churches in your community, churches all over the world, and for your own role in flushing this ill wind from the sails of your soul.

6 Functionalism

But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Matthew 16.23

A tenacious root

Jesus' rebuke of Peter might seem a little harsh. After all, He had just commended the apostle for his confession of faith. He emphasized the change of Peter's name from "unstable" to "the rock." He set him forward as the example of the kind of foundation on which Jesus would build His Church.

And now He's in Peter's face, calling him Satan, telling him to get in line behind Him, and humiliating Peter by exposing the folly of what the disciple surely must have considered a noble, even heroic, gesture. What's going on here?

Jesus had just unfolded for the disciples the next phase of the work of God. He was going to Jerusalem, where He would "suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day" (Matt. 6.21). This was the work of God, and this was how it must proceed.

But that scenario didn't sit well with Peter. Of course, Peter wanted Jesus to get glory. He wanted all the world to believe in Him and be saved. He wanted Him to be exalted as King over Israel and all the world. Peter sincerely wanted the best for Jesus, and for the world through Him.

What was so wrong about what Peter said?

Functionalism defined

Peter's offense was to insist on doing the *work* of God in a manner other than according to the *Word* of God. The Lord had just told Peter what was going to transpire, but that did not seem "reasonable" to Peter. He certainly could not see how what Jesus had just described would accomplish Peter's vision of what was best. Although clearly well-meaning in wishing to propose another course, Peter actually became an instrument of Satan by thinking a man's way rather than according to the Word of God.

Peter needed to "get behind" Jesus and follow Him in faith, nothing doubting – not try to correct the Lord's way of carrying out His work by proffering a more "reasonable" and efficient path.

Peter was wanting to do God's work man's way – the easier way, the more comfortable, convenient, familiar, and less troublesome way. The way Jesus proposed seemed difficult, even dangerous; and Peter could not see how that was going to accomplish the end they were seeking. Peter had not exactly lost sight of the goal; but he considered that *his* way of achieving that goal was better than what Jesus had clearly revealed.

Peter was not thinking according to revelation; he was thinking according to *functionalism*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines functionalism as the theory that "the design of an object should be determined by its function rather than by aesthetic considerations, and that anything practically designed will be inherently beautiful." Put in terms of Peter's misguided suggestion, whatever Jesus had in mind accomplishing, He needed to do so according to more reasonable and familiar protocols and procedures. The way of getting Him to become King and Lord and Savior should be practical and agreeable, and not in any way difficult or inconvenient or fraught with suffering.

Whatever plan Peter may have concocted to replace that which Jesus revealed – and we don't know what that might have been – was *in his mind* more to be desired for its ease, efficiency, and smoothness – its real

functionality – than the terrifying scenario Jesus had just outlined. In Peter’s thinking, something other than what Jesus revealed would accomplish a better outcome.

We hoist the sails of our soul and our church into the ill wind of functionalism when we consider that the *easy* way, the *less troublesome* way, the *smoothly functioning* and *more familiar* way of doing the Lord’s work is the *more practical way*, and will lead to better results. Indeed, we choose what we’re willing to do, or what we consider ourselves capable of doing, and we make that the focus of our efforts, vaguely hoping that it will achieve a worthwhile end. Functionalism tells us to look around for the greased gears, the ordered means, the proven techniques, the familiar paths, and the agreeable forms, and then to pursue them earnestly. The result may not be exactly what it ought to be, but it will be the best we can do.

Problems with functionalism

The primary problem with functionalism is that it balks at the revelation of God concerning the ends He seeks and the means by which those ends must be sought. Instead, it proffers other means to realize outcomes which might not be exactly what God has in mind, but which will be good enough.

Let’s be blunt: The Scriptures teach that discipleship means laying down our lives for others, taking up our cross, and putting ourselves forward as living sacrifices for Jesus. All that seems rather extreme to many of us. So we define being a Christian in more familiar and acceptable terms: Believe in Jesus, go to church, be in a Bible study, try hard not to sin. Will that make us the kind of disciples Jesus has in mind? It will not; but we’ll settle for what we can get by those means.

The Bible offers a pattern for corporate worship – how it should proceed, what elements it ought to include, the forms that should be used, and the ends that worship seeks. In many churches today, we want to worship the Lord, but we prefer orders of worship and forms of worship that are more in line with what *we think* than what *God has revealed*. We like our worship the way we do it – whether formal or informal, traditional or contemporary – and it works well enough for us. We never consider whether such worship is what God wants and prescribes.

Or take the work of making disciples, to which we are all called (Matt. 28.18-20): Jesus said this should be done by an active ministry of shepherding – church leaders shepherding all God’s flock according to the example and teaching of Jesus, and church members shepherding one another as the natural overflow of their growing in the Lord. Instead of this, however, we run programs, and most of the programs we run are neither focused on helping believers grow as disciples – since we have not adequately defined that term – nor comprise all the disciplines and structures Jesus and the apostles taught as to how we should fulfill this calling. But running programs is what we know how to do, and it’s good enough for at least some “discipleship” outcomes.

In other ways as well, we try to do the Lord’s work our way, in familiar and practical ways that we find agreeable and efficient. And it’s no wonder that the outcomes we are realizing in our churches, while they may be good enough for us, continue to fall short of the promise of such passages as Micah 4.1-8, Psalm 48, Matthew 16.18, and Ephesians 4.11-16. It’s the *functions* we focus on, not the *outcomes*.

We must discipline our minds in all things to submit to the Word of God. It may not always seem the “reasonable” thing to do – because we cannot square its teaching with our experience or logic – but it is always the Word of God. Our duty is to get behind it and order all our steps accordingly. We must learn to think with God’s mind and not our own, and to keep the sails of our souls hoisted to the Wind of God, and not the wind of functionalism.

For reflection

1. Why is it only ever right to do God’s work in God’s way?

Ecclesiastical Winds

2. Can we hope to achieve the ends God has revealed for us, His Church, and His Kingdom, if we insist on pursuing those ends in ways other than what God has revealed? Explain.

3. What can we do to avoid coming under the ill wind of functionalism?

Next steps – Preparation: Spend time in prayer asking the Lord to reveal any ways the ill wind of functionalism is blowing in the sails of your soul.

7 Traditionalism

Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" Matthew 15.1-3

The inescapability of tradition

The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thess. 2.15). He was reminding the Thessalonians of their calling to seek the Kingdom and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to the Gospel he taught them. He said that, while he was among them, he taught them many things, some of which are recorded in his first epistle, others which consisted only in his teaching ("by word"), but were not written down as Scripture.

Each of these – Paul's spoken words and his written words – amounted to "traditions" which the Thessalonians must hold to if they were to fulfill their calling. Not everything we need to know is written in the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the indispensable foundation of our faith; but there are matters of everyday Christian faith and practice which are not *directly written* in the Scriptures, but which *derive* from the Scriptures and therefore can be very important to growing in and serving the Lord.

What might some of those traditions be?

The Scriptures command us to gather with other believers for worship, and to use certain forms and elements in worshiping the Lord (Heb. 10.25; Ps. 50; etc.). We must use those forms and elements to arrange our worship and pursue it according to the Word of God, in the Spirit of God, for the praise, honor, and glory of God (Jn. 4.24; Ps. 115.1).

But the Scriptures do not tell us what *time* to gather for worship, or *how long* a service of worship should be, or what *style* of worship we should follow. Each church has its own traditions, and holding those traditions makes it possible to worship fruitfully, when worship traditions are according to the Word of God.

The Scriptures command us to glorify God in our eating and drinking (1 Cor. 10.31). But they do not instruct families as to when they should gather to eat, who should set the table and clean up after the meal, or what kinds of conversations are appropriate at dinner. Family traditions direct us in such matters, and they can obviously be very important, when done for God's glory.

Similarly, the Scriptures command us to pray and read God's Word daily. But they don't tell us *what* to read, *how long* to pray, or *when* during the day we should engage these disciplines. Each of us should seek patterns and practices that will allow us to be consistent and fruitful over time in pursuing these important disciplines. These become our own *traditions*, and as long as we hold them – or some form of them – we may expect to benefit.

There are traditions surrounding the holy days of the Church – Easter, Pentecost, and Advent – which vary from one Christian community to the next. These traditions have Scriptural *grounding* but no specific Scriptural *guidance*; thus, we are free to adapt and adjust such traditions over time, if it is spiritually profitable for us to do so.

In short, traditions are inescapable, and they can be very helpful in enabling us, as individuals and churches, to fulfill the requirements of Scripture for our sanctification. The problem comes in when traditions stop *servicing* the requirements of Scripture and begin to *replace* them. At such time, the ill wind of *traditionalism* has begun to fill the sails of our soul.

Traditionalism defined

Jesus confronted the problem of traditionalism in the religious leaders of His day. Over the years, they had developed ways of doing things that had taken the place of Scripture as the way God's people should follow. They tried to enforce those traditions as litmus tests of true faith; thus, they set the Scriptures aside as the normative guide to faith and life, and they clung to their traditions above all. Whenever it seemed to them that Jesus was encouraging *change* in their traditions, they went after Him publicly.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines traditionalism as “the upholding or maintenance of tradition, especially so as to resist change.” So strong were the Jewish traditions of Jesus' day that, even after many Jews had become believers, they clung to their traditions, and even tried to make Gentiles take them up as well (cf. Acts 15.1). Paul labored against such traditionalism throughout the course of his ministry.

Traditionalism can be difficult to spot, since it usually begins in traditions that are, for the time, helpful. But helpful traditions that become more important than the plain teaching of Scripture, or that become oppressive rather than enabling and edifying, have devolved into the ill wind of traditionalism.

Problems with traditionalism

We can know that we have lapsed into some form of traditionalism when any of four processes is discovered to be at work within us or our churches.

First, traditionalism *obscures Biblical teaching*. This was Jesus' complaint against the Jewish leaders. They misled the people they served into thinking that their *view* of Scripture in certain matters was more to be relied on than *the plain teaching of God's Word*. When we prefer our own ideas and practices about Christian faith and life, morality and culture, worship and church growth, to those which are taught in Scripture, we are following traditions that make it difficult for us to embrace the plain teaching of God's Word.

Second, and this follows from the first, traditionalism *adds to Biblical revelation* by making words and ways of practicing the faith Scriptural add-ons. Scripture says believers should be baptized (Matt. 28.18-20). The tradition of the Church over the centuries has acknowledged various views of how that practice is to be observed. For a church to insist that its practice is the *only proper way* to baptize is to add to Scripture in a way the Church for two thousand years has been reluctant to do.

Third, traditionalism can *lead to practices that are neither fruitful nor God-honoring*. This was the situation in the 15th century when, both within the Roman Catholic Church and among Protestant theologians, Church traditions were stifling full and abundant life in Christ rather than nurturing it. Both the Catholic Reformation and the Protestant Reformation sought to clear those ill winds from the Church's sails.

Finally, traditionalism unnoticed or unchecked invariably *leads us into the doldrums of near-Christianity*. By clinging to traditions rather than Scripture, following inherited protocols and practices rather than the Wind of God, we end up with a “form of godliness” that lacks the power for fruitful Christian living (2 Tim. 3.5).

We must always seek to pursue the life of faith – as individuals and churches – according to the Word of God. Where traditions can help us in doing that, we must not be reluctant to adopt them. But we must take care lest our cherished traditions morph into traditionalism. And we can only do this by holding fast to the teaching of God's Word, and reviewing our lives and practices regularly to make sure that the Wind of God, and none of the ill winds of the world, the flesh or the church, are directing the course of our journey.

For reflection or discussion

1. Give some examples of helpful traditions that you hold to. How do these help you in fulfilling the teaching of Scripture?

Ecclesiastical Winds

2. How might you be able to tell when a tradition is calcifying into traditionalism?
3. How does maintaining strong traditions of Scripture reading and prayer keep you from falling into traditionalism?

Next steps – Preparation: In prayer, review as many of your traditions as you can. Make adjustments where needed, to make sure your traditions are serving you according to the Word of God.

Ecclesiastical Winds

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What makes these “ecclesiastical” ill winds especially treacherous?
2. How can we know when our churches have veered off into one of these winds?
3. What steps can you take to protect yourself against these or any ill winds blowing you off course in your journey with the Lord?
4. How can believers help one another to keep these ecclesiastical ill winds out of the sails of their soul?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this fourth part of our study, “Winds of Doctrine”?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.