Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

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Omega Graduate School

10/17/2024

Professor

Dr. David Ward

1. Select One (1) Core Essential Element from the Syllabus Outline:

a. Create a 350-word original discussion paper (with cited sources) during the week

of the residency. Be prepared to discuss and engage with other students during

the live sessions. Post this document in DIAL.

b. Professor will check for quality of content and word-count requirements. Grade

assigned will be Credit or No Credit (CR/NC).

In the culture of a particular Christian denomination or even congregation, there is a defining intersection of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, though it is recognized the increasing tendency toward heterodoxy an unorthodox practice among many denominations. So, in a broad view we can speak of the intersection of doxy and praxis. Certainly, the Christian church is called to “ortho” or to have a confession and practice that is faithful to Holy Scripture. This is not my focus here, but rather to speak of the intersection of teaching and practice as it relates to the inheritance, application, and formulation of a tradition as part of our church culture.

The Lutheran faith expressly communicates that our theology is taken from Scripture alone. However, we still have a strong respect for much inherited tradition. In my own church body, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, an assembly of various documents that publicly proclaim essential Christian beliefs, is required. The current president of our church body expresses it this way. “Our LCMS holds a “*quia* subscription” to the *Book of Concord*. That means we subscribe to the Confessions *because* (*quia*) they are a faithful exposition of God’s Word, not merely *insofar as* they contain the Word of God.” (Harrison, 2024, para 2) These confessional documents help our pastors and congregations hold to the “ortho” of Scripture. “I won’t be part of a church that can willy-nilly yank biblical certainty away from me or my loved ones based on a single pastor’s varying predilections. I want a pastor and a congregation sworn to uphold the truth of the Scriptures, and that means the truth of the scriptural assertions of the *Book of Concord*.” (para 2)

This helps to convey that while Lutherans do not subscribe to “tradition” as a source for doctrine in addition to Scripture, we also deeply respect and appreciate the inherited traditions of our forefathers that faithfully communicate the truth of God. This extends beyond the confessional documents to various practices of worship and life. These are practices that in many cases have been created by faithful Christians in the past which became part of an inherited culture. “These humanly established ceremonies and rituals are referred to as adiaphora; that is, they are practices, ceremonies, and rituals that are neither commanded in Scripture nor forbidden in Scripture but are established by the church to convey the Gospel within a particular context. Put another way, they do not belong to the essence (esse) of the Church (as does Word and faith) but to the well-being (bene esse) of the Church (for promoting the Word).” (Arand, 2023, p. 310)

It is common for the question to arise about the transformation of practices or even within my church body the reintroduction of practices that were not as popular post reformation but are increasingly seen as desirable by a new generation of pastoral leadership within my denomination. For instance, in a former congregation, a newly minted pastor insisted on introducing chanting into his performance of the liturgy. For him, it was a matter of conscience, not so much a matter of liberty, as he was taught and convinced that this practice conveyed an essence of holiness to the Divine Service. It is certainly true that our Lutheran Confessions in the Formula of Concord permit the continuation or introduction of practices that are not forbidden if they are fitting and provide good order for the life of the Christian community. “…we unanimously believe, teach, and confess that some ceremonies or Church practices are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word, but have been introduced only for the sake of fitting and good order.” (McCain, 2005, p. 671) But it also says the following. “We believe, teach, and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more outward ceremonies than the other, for those are not commanded by God. This is true as long as they have unity with one another in the doctrine and all its articles and in the right use of the holy Sacraments.” (p. 672)

People can become quite attached to practices. Much of our praxis flows out of our doxy, reflects our doxy, is generated by our doxy. Thus, the temptation arises to see such an intrinsic connection between the practice and the teaching, that to question or disregard the practice is taken as questioning or discarding the teaching. In some cases, this may be putting the cart before the horse, the tradition driving the teaching. Orthopraxis should serve to support orthodoxy, that is practice and tradition exist to serve the proclamation of the Gospel.

This term for this course I will be considering a substantial issue of controversy that arose in a previous parish regarding the consideration of every Sunday communion. Certain elders supported by the newly minted pastor insisted on changing the existing church culture of communion every other Sunday to every Sunday. Here I will not dive into all the dynamics that were in play and how it all turned out except to say not well but provide this to give some context for the following. Arand writes, “In the end, we, as a church, seek to do things together in a collegial and collaborative way. On the one hand, we seek to use the best of what we have inherited from those who have gone before us as long as these ‘can be kept without sin or great inconvenience.’ On the other hand, we have freedom to change our practices when there is ‘good reason’ to do so. Even then we may moderate our freedom in the use of adiaphoristic practices out of love for our neighbor…” (p. 312) Certainly there is that within the realm of orthopraxis that is required or commanded. Even here the application often generates controversy around interpretation. This can be more difficult in matters of practice that are not commanded nor forbidden, where the church or any community must make decisions about how to live together, decisions that impact the shape of shared culture. In the realm of the intersection of orthodoxy and orthopraxis it is not even always agreed that a particular matter is free or falls into the spectrum of not commanded or forbidden. This was the case in the matter of every Sunday communion with many saying the practice was required to be considered a confessional Lutheran. I will explore this in more detail over the course. The main point here being that diligence is required not just when considering essential teaching but when considering right practice that lines up with essential teaching, especially when the matter is free, that is God has not required nor forbidden a particular practice, because free does not necessarily mean free to impose or demand what I personally prefer, for these matters are for the community, they shape the community, impact the community and reflect and shape a shared culture and tradition.

**Dave, this is a wonderful three plus page mini-essay on both orthodoxy and orthopraxis that is contextualized in an excellent way to the issue of orthodoxy and orthopraxis as it applies to your Lutheran denomination in manners of worship practice. The change from communion every other Sunday to every Sunday sounds like it generated unfortunate controversy. It sounds like it was led by a faction of elders and did not turn out well. I am sorry. But it is clear that you are going to enjoy this PHI 943 course and have plenty for your ministry to explore and apply! Geat job!**

**Grade: A**

WORKS CITED

Arand, C. (2022). The third commandment: Word, worship, and adiaphora. In J. Pless & L. Vogel (Eds.), *Luther’s large catechism with annotations and contemporary applications*. Concordia Publishing House.

McCain, P. (Ed.). (2005). The formula of concord epitome. In *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (2nd ed.). Concordia Publishing House.

Harrison, M. (2024). “Not to depart ... a finger’s breadth”: Unconditional subscription to the “Book of Concord.” *The Lutheran Witness*, *10*. <https://witness.lcms.org/2024/not-to-depart-a-fingers-breadth/>