

The Modern Split and Church Leadership

Much of the church has become subject to what I have called a Kantian division without even being aware of it. It is possible for us—in fact, we see it on every side—to affirm the authority of Scripture in theory and to say yes to statements of biblical authority and biblical inerrancy and Scripture addressing every area of life but to still live in practice with what Schaeffer called an upper story and a lower story.

Let us look at some examples. What may happen—and this happens in many evangelical circles—is to say, “The Bible is true,” and to say this in theory. Thus we have a theory of biblical authority or a doctrine of it or an assent to it. But in practice, it only speaks in certain areas. What Os Guinness called the Trojan horse of psychology may bring the views of the secular culture into the church. Let us just think about some examples.

Os spoke about how you can go to many churches, and what you hear from the pulpit is simply the latest psychological theory. We have a tradition of not subjecting our thinking radically to the Word of God. You can take, for example, the theology of self-fulfillment or self-affirmation, which is so popular in much of the church. What you have there is two things coming together. The one is an idea from secular psychology. Self-affirmation became tremendously dominant in the 1970s. The 1970s were called the decade of narcissism. *The Culture of Narcissism* is the title of a famous book. The whole focus is on my fulfillment as a person; what am I getting out of life? Am I okay? Now, you have that tremendous influence on the church. As a result, much preaching is a barely diluted form of that kind of theology of self-affirmation. At the same time, you have people asking what the needs of people in our society are. And the answer from psychology is that their need is to be loved, their need is to be affirmed, so we will develop a message that simply meets those needs. I remember one humanist writer writing about a church that has this kind of teaching, this kind of theology. He said, “This is Christianity without commitment, faith without repentance.” Under the guise of psychology, an understanding of the human person and the human condition creeps into the church and replaces the biblical message.

Now, I would suggest that this is a very widespread problem. Take, for example, the great majority of seminars or Bible studies that are held on the gifts of the Holy Spirit—including in our Reformed circles. Almost all of them have as their focus the self, the individual. What are my gifts? How can I fulfill my gifts? What is my place in the church? They are very self-centered. Without any question, the biblical emphasis on gifts is entirely different. It is based on the needs of the church. What are the needs of the church? Not on how I can fulfill myself, contemplating my own spiritual navel and finding out what my gifts are. This is very self-centered. Or you can take other areas of psychology. Much of the psychology that is taught in the name of psychology is simply behaviorism dressed up with biblical language. For example, “What are the behavioral problems of people? Here are the six ways to solve those problems.” Such an approach misses the fundamental biblical solution to our problems of behavior, and that is the grace of God and the central motivation of thanksgiving, gratitude. It is no wonder that so many of our churches lack the teaching of a fundamentally biblical message, because it is replaced by psychology instead.

Let us take another area. Again, we may affirm that the Bible is true, and we may spend a great deal of our time attacking liberals. And yet what we put into the lower story is management principles. Now, there is nothing wrong with management principles. They are not the problem in themselves, though they all need to be subjected to Scripture very thoroughly, just as secular psychology needs to be subjected to Scripture to ask, “What here actually is valuable? What here is helpful? And what really is not? What does not conform to a biblical understanding of the human person, or a biblical understanding

of the human dilemma, or a biblical understanding of salvation?” We have to constantly ask ourselves those questions. It is the same when it comes to the issue of management principles in terms of running churches, sessions, presbyteries, synods, or church business meetings. Up here in the upper story we may say that we believe in the Holy Spirit and even that we believe in prayer. But if you actually look at the way most churches conduct their business, you have to say, “This really is not in the upper story. What dependence is there actually on the Holy Spirit?” For all practical purposes, our churches live with a Kantian split between realities—the reality of Scripture and the reality of our everyday lives. In many of them, the Holy Spirit is not asked or needed when it comes to making decisions and functioning.

Let me give you an illustration I came across a few weeks ago. This is from a church that is facing the question—as many churches here have also—of whether it should move out of the city to the suburbs in order to grow, because in the city they are restricted with building space. The pastor decides, with his hand-selected planning committee, “This is what we ought to do.” Does he go to his session? Or does he go to the church and say, “Let us seek God’s direction as to what we should do, whether we should move or whether we should stay, whether we should plant a new church out there or whether we should all go.” Does he ask his session? No. He does not even communicate with them at all. He does not even call a congregational meeting. What does he do? He examines how a business company sells a product. And he writes three letters over a period of two or three months that soften the congregation up, and his elders as well, in fact. It is the first they have heard of it. The first letter says, “We have done this study of this situation and that situation, and what do we find?” And of course what they find is what he wants people to find. A month later a second letter follows, taking up a different aspect of the issue. Another month later a third letter follows, taking up yet another aspect. At that point he has not done anything biblical in terms of his practice. He has not practiced subjection to his elders, mutual submission like he vowed in his ordination, asking, “What do you feel is God’s will for us as a church?” He has not asked the congregation, whose money will be spent when the move is made. He has simply decided that this is what he will do. He has basically adopted a set of manipulative methods to work his will. In terms of the running of the church every day, there is a solid wall between what he perceives in this situation as sound management principles—the management of the church as a business, management of the people in the church as a group to sell a product to—and what the Bible says. That is a second example of how in practice we may live as totally secular persons while affirming in our upper story the authority of Scripture, the reality of the Holy Spirit, and so on.

Let us now take another sort of area. Let us think about the church growth movement and point out a particular problem there. Again, we may say that we affirm the authority of Scripture. We may affirm the reality of God’s truth speaking in every area. But we ask how to plant a church by simply examining the culture and asking, “What works?” The particular thing I want to point out is the homogeneity principle. It has been discovered, apparently, that churches grow faster if you have people who are like each other in them. For example, they could be all middle class, all wealthy, all poor, all black, all white, or all whatever they happen to be. Now, that is an interesting reflection on human nature, to say that this is so. And it is evidently so that people prefer other people like themselves. It is less intimidating, it is less challenging—it is less of many things. One just gets along more easily and more comfortably. One does not have any cultural boundaries to climb over. But then we need to ask the question, should we establish that as a positive principle of church growth or church planting? It may be a reality in society. But I would say we have to take away this barrier and ask, “What does God’s Word actually say?” And what it teaches us is that one of the mysteries of the Gospel is that it overcomes the barriers that exist between people. “In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female” (Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11). I am sure Paul was perfectly aware in his day that it would have been much simpler to plant Jewish churches and Gentile churches. He would certainly not have had the same kind of conflicts that the New Testament is filled with, in the letter to the Galatians, the letter to the Colossians, etc. But

either we have to say that Paul did not understand our modern sociological methods of church planting or we have to say that Paul actually did not approve of such an approach. And I think we have to say the latter, because Paul is clearly operating under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, this raises all kinds of difficult questions. We have to recognize that, in practice, if we go plant a church somewhere, the way American society is structured, it will probably be mostly one kind of people who live there. That is the way this society is made. But one must never accept that, either as the basis for one's work or as an end we are trying to achieve, or as anything else, for that matter. From the very beginning one has to preach that God has not only reconciled us to Himself through Christ, but that He has also reconciled us to one another through Christ. Paul sees that as one of the glories of the Gospel. In Ephesians chapter 2 he expresses it in that way very, very strongly. He says that God has destroyed the wall of hostility, He has taken down the barrier that existed between Jew and Gentile and, we could say, between every other human division. And that has to be taught from the very beginning. I would say it is one of the scandals of our moment in history that the church in the West is more racially divided than any other segment of the community on Sunday morning, when it ought to be exactly the opposite. It ought to be seen by the culture that the Gospel actually unites people rather than divides them, and yet this has now been put forward as a positive principle of building, planting, and growing churches—even though it is actually something that is fundamentally against the teaching of the Word of God. But again, it is a way in which we basically live as those who have accepted a Kantian split. The Bible speaks in theory in our upper story, but in practice, in our lower story, this is what sociology teaches, and so that is what we will do.

I think it is a tremendous challenge we face. Going back to the previous example I used about management, how do we conduct the affairs of the church in a way that is biblical? We are all so easily influenced or shaped by the ways of the culture in which we live, with its secular approach to everything. By "secular" I mean that in its literal sense, that everything is just here and now, and that is all that matters. What matters, according to secularity, is not a word from God who dwells in eternity or the perspective that we have an eternal life and are called to live before God in obedience to Him. Rather, secularity is entirely shaped by the confines of the culture in which we live at this present moment.

Now, I think this is a tremendous challenge. I would say at the beginning of every church business meeting we ever had, and at the beginning of every session meeting, "We have to stop and remind ourselves of what we are doing, consciously," or "Whose chair are we sitting in?" as Schaeffer said in his little essay, *The Universe in Two Chairs*. Whose chair am I sitting in? Am I sitting in the chair of a secularist, of a materialist (or of a post-Kantian, one might say, though you do not need to say that)? Or are we sitting before the living God? Are we having this meeting before the living God? I would say that to remind ourselves of this reality. Prayer is not some holy water that we sprinkle on the beginning of a meeting to get it out of the way and then go on with the meeting, which is what it often becomes. Rather, this is the most important thing we are doing. It is more important than anything else to ask God for His wisdom as we sit and meet together. And if we genuinely do this it will alter the way the whole meeting will be conducted. It will alter the way people speak to one another.

It is a sad commentary, but church meetings are notorious for outbursts of anger, of slander and gossip, of pride and jealousy and envy. Well, why? Sometimes it is because people feel it is their only chance to say anything. They have never had a chance to tell the pastor what they think about anything before. And that is just disobedience to Scripture on another point. But there is a much, much deeper issue involved, and that is that are we reminding ourselves that the Scripture calls us to be slow to speak and quick to hear, that every word we speak is uttered before the living God, and that we are called to seek

His mind and not our own particular fancies in this situation. This is a very profound thing. And it is fundamentally a matter of teaching and then of practice. It is a matter of reminding ourselves over and over again of where we stand. There is no formula that will safeguard us. It is just like the doctrine of grace; it has to be recaptured by every generation, otherwise you end up with formalism. That is true of church meetings as well. Unless you recapture the centrality of the Holy Spirit and the centrality of prayer, both in session meetings and in congregational meetings, in presbytery meetings or in synod meetings—or in any kind of church meeting—you simply end up with a business meeting. You will be looking at the appropriate techniques to resolve the problem that you face rather than asking what the vision is that God wants us to have.

Our meetings ought to be prayerful and worshipful, asking, “What is God calling us to? What is central to our purpose here? Why are we here at all?” And the answer is to love God, to live by His grace and power, and to serve Him. And that ought to be at the heart of any business meeting we ever have, about any kind of subject. And if it is not, then those meetings will just become manipulative. There are so many things that betray this kind of attitude. For example, if you hear people say, “How can we get people to do what we want them to do?” That is a pretty good indication that someone is not thinking right and that they have simply adopted a kind of business model. “I have this product to sell (which, in this case is my particular idea about how something should function). How will I sell this to the congregation?” Rather than saying, “What is the will of God? What is pleasing to God here?” Of course, one can have visions, and of course, one can have plans and ideas. But they must be constantly subjected to God and to His people.

You see, if we really believe the power of the Holy Spirit, we will respect the people of God. Many pastors do not respect the people of God. They only respect their own understanding. But then I ask them, “If you only respect your own understanding, and you think of your plans as a product that you have to sell to the congregation (by the kinds of means I outlined earlier—softening them up with these letters that push everyone in one particular direction and do not even raise any alternatives)—you have to ask, do you really believe in the Holy Spirit? Do you really believe that the people of God are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as Scripture says? Because if you do, then you ought to have no fear whatsoever of including the people of God in decision making. If it really is God’s desire to do what you think is right, then God will make it known to His people. You can trust Him.” It is really as basic as that. Do we really believe in the power of the Spirit, or do we not?

There is a wonderful sermon by Schaeffer on this called *The Lord’s Work and the Lord’s Way*. How are we doing the Lord’s work? Are we doing the Lord’s work in the world’s way or in the Lord’s way? I am really thankful for my own years in L’Abri. I was able to live in a situation where Francis and Edith were constantly reminding us of this. We have together a member’s meeting every year for a week, which is really the body of directors for L’Abri. And a vast amount of that time is spent in prayer together. We spend time in prayer, looking back at what God has done in the previous year, rehearsing the goodness of God to us. That is a very good place to begin any kind of meeting—with the reality of prayer, praise, and of gratitude to God for what He has done. Then you can turn your attention to what He has set before you now. Pray not just at the beginning and at the end, but all the way through, seeing this as the fundamental reality. That is what we are here for.

How do we deal with, for example, the approach within the church growth movement that says if we plant a church in New York, we ought to send a New Yorker, and if we want to plant a church among the cowboys in Texas, we should send a cowboy there, and so on. Well, there are two ways I want to respond to this. First, there is an obvious rightness about it. If you look at Paul’s practice in the New Testament, many of the churches were actually planted by the local people. When Paul preached in

Ephesus for three years, or however long it was, he kept himself to the city and preached there, and people who were converted there went back to their own communities, like Epaphras, who started a church in Colossae, his own hometown. There is something natural and appropriate about that. What one must not do, though, is to then erect this into a principle of how we ought always to operate in every circumstance. Obviously, it is easier for people to speak to their own people. They know the same language, they are familiar with the culture—communication is simpler. The New Testament clearly recognizes that. But we have to go further than that and ask whether this is something we always ought to do. We must ask this question before we make this a principle of planting churches. And my response to that question has to be no. Paul was used by God to plant more churches than anybody. And he came from a very specific and restricted kind of culture. And yet God used him to plant churches in many different contexts. And we can see why. Because of the theological insights Paul had, he was able to transcend the divisions of boundaries of culture. That is something we must teach people.

For example, when we train people here at the seminary and talk about biblical mission principles, we must teach one another how to go about transcending cultural barriers. And the whole church needs to be taught that, not just a few elite people in a seminary, but the whole church. Every part of the body of Christ is called to proclaim the Gospel in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And that means not only in my own culture but also beyond my own culture. At the very heart of the Gospel message itself is a message that overcomes the barriers between cultures, which is exactly what Paul is saying in Ephesians chapter 2. He sees this not as something that is incidental to the Gospel, or as something on the periphery of the Gospel, as if it were, “Oh yes, the Christian Gospel makes us a little more tolerant toward other people.” Rather, Paul sees it as the very heart of the Gospel, that God has reconciled us to Himself by taking away our sin, and He has reconciled us to one another by taking away our sin and by tearing down the barriers between people. Thus we do not any longer have to find our identity in our culture, but now in Christ. And that is the very heart of the issue. What is my identity as a Christian? Is it that I am English and come from a working class family that was Marxist? No, it is not. My identity is that I am a Christian. Does that mean that because this was my background I should spend my life working among Marxist-background English people who are poor? No, it does not. In fact, the more we understand the Gospel, the more we ought to be able to work in any context at all—in any context at all. While we will take advantage as Paul did of the ease of communication between those of the same culture—he stayed in Ephesus and converted people from the surrounding area there in the city, then they went and planted churches in their own hometowns—he did not stop with that. He then took Epaphras from there and traveled with him all over the ancient world. And he took Timothy from there and traveled with him all over the ancient world. He immediately got these people to understand that the Gospel is trans-cultural and cross-cultural rather than simply accepting the reality of barriers between cultures. Thus he worked within cultural boundaries, and yet at the same time he saw the need to transcend them.

My problem with so many of the church growth principles is that they seem to simply accept these kinds of things and then use them as a basis for operation, rather than asking the question, “Do they really conform to what Scripture teaches?” You see, there is a difference between recognizing the hardness of people’s hearts and the reality of the sinful human condition and knowing that we have to work with it. There is a difference between saying that and saying that is in fact the hardness of people’s hearts and the reality of the human condition, and it is really a consequence of sin. Therefore while working with that, we have to seek to overcome it from the beginning. We should seek to overcome it both in terms of who these people are when they become Christians, that they become people who would immediately want to welcome someone from a different race, a different class, a different culture, or a different educational background because they see that the Gospel is a uniting thing in the person of Christ. And

they will from the beginning see that their calling is to preach the Gospel to people in totally different contexts and not only in their own context. That is the challenge.

So yes, there is a reality here that we recognize. But we should never be confined by it. And my problem really is that so many of the church planting or church growth principles that have come out of that school take the human condition and say, “That is what we should do.” But we need to take Scripture—which is God’s Word—into that abnormal, fallen human condition and say, “*This* is what we should do.” It is another illustration of Schaeffer’s little pamphlet in response to the first Kinsey Report in 1953. He entitled his pamphlet, *Sin is Normal*. Kinsey was examining the moral views and practices of the American people and said, “This is what we should do.” But this is what can happen with such principles, either in terms of church management or in terms of church growth. We examine the broken, abnormal, and fallen human condition and say, “This is what happens.” And then we say, “And this is what we should do.” And we should never get principles of operation from the sinful human condition. We have to get our principles of operation from Scripture, which then come into this situation where homogeneity is normal and say that there is something wrong with that.

Many churches and Christian organizations are affected by image management. The important thing according to this management technique is projecting a good image to other people, whether it is in order to sell our church or to sell the Gospel, or to sell our particular product, or whatever it is. We have to be very careful. We are not selling an image. We have a reality to sell. And when we communicate the Gospel, that means not simply preaching what people want to hear or what they feel they need to hear at this moment in history, though that is where we may begin. The Gospel always condescends to people, just as Christ condescended to us by coming and living among us. Thus we may start where people’s needs are, where their felt needs are. But we never stop there. The Gospel always has a cutting edge. Therefore we must never manipulate the message according to the image that will be acceptable. And that is what is done in the theology of self-affirmation. If you read the books on that, they have abandoned half of the Gospel. An element of what is said is true; yes, we can affirm ourselves in Christ. He accepts me completely, just as I am. I do not have to change first. That is the most powerful self-affirmative statement you could ever make. So there is an element of truth there. But by itself it is not sufficient because the Gospel also challenges us to repentance. And you cannot communicate the Gospel without making that challenge to repentance, without that element of the Gospel that cuts across the way you think and the way you live and exposes the wrongness of your ideas and the sinfulness of your life. And if you have not done that, you have not communicated the Gospel; you have only communicated an image—one that is not even a fair image.

Now, it is the same with anything else. Obviously a Christian organization, for example, the seminary, wants to communicate its strong points well to people, such as prospective students. But what one has to work on all the time is making sure that we are not communicating a false image but that we are actually communicating the reality of what we are trying to do. Of course, it is never perfect. These are the things you are striving for. But there has to be a measure of reality there. Otherwise we are doing something very false. It is a real challenge to us that Jesus never got into the numbers game. That is what can happen, you see, if you use as your basic method of approach, “What will get the greatest numbers?” You will then end up selling an image rather than the reality and having principles that come entirely from the reality of the fallen world. But that is not what we are in the business of doing. And Jesus did not hesitate to tell people really difficult things so that they turned away from Him—not because He wanted to turn them away but because He wanted to make the truth of the Gospel message absolutely plain so that people were not following Him under false pretences. To go around telling people, for example, that if you become a Christian you will have health and wealth is unfaithful to Scripture. It has taken an element of truth and distorted it out of all proportions. It becomes a false image rather than the

reality. And the fact that you have 500 people respond to it does not mean that you have 500 Christians. Rather, you have 500 people who have responded to a false image. There may be a few Christians among them, but that is not because of the false image you have communicated. Rather, it is because of the power of God, who is able to work despite the falsities and problems in our communication. But we always have to judge what we do by what is right and biblical and what is principled in the proper sense of the word “principled”—that is, in obedience to the Word of God.