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K. Nicholas Yoda

Xavier University - Cincinnati

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A New Set of Spectacles: An Apologetic for the “Logos”

Written by: Dr. K. Nicholas Yoda

NOTE: All Biblical citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version

INTRODUCTION:

Strasbourg has been described as the “ultimate European city” where France and Germany collide. This should really come as no surprise since the Rhine River is at the city’s edge acting as the only divider between these two countries. If you go into the city center, there is another collision that you might just recognize - the collision of theology. In one moment, you might enter the sanctuary of St. Thomas where the Reformer Martin Bucer preached and then turn around to view the pulpit of John Calvin at the Church of St. Nicolas. And while they had similar views of the Eucharist (departing from Luther and Zwingli), we cannot ignore the writings of Calvin that spoke of Bucer’s theological shortcomings. Again, the collision of theology. Perhaps the great theologian H. Richard Niebuhr was right after all about what he called “the enduring problem”. Niebuhr stated, “...more frequently the debate about Christ and culture is carried out amongst Christians and in the hidden depths of the individual conscience, not as a struggle and accommodation of belief with unbelief, but as the reconciliation of faith with faith.”¹

That reconciliation of faith with faith - that can be an interesting conversation. It just so happens that I was walking the cobble stone streets of that “ultimate European city” talking to a self-described evangelical pastor from California named Larry around the issues of ordination that

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951) 10.

the Presbyterian Church (USA) has struggled with in years past. Larry, finding out that I hold a much more inclusive ordination standard than he, asked me, “Is that Biblical?” My response was, “Larry, I tend to ask, ‘Is it theological?’” His response was simply: “You are from the Reformed tradition. Then what about ‘sola scriptura’?” He had to go and invoke that one, didn’t he?

So, what about “sola scriptura” - that long held Reformed understanding (ascribed to Martin Luther specifically) that we live “by scripture alone”? What about the doctrine that claims that the Bible contains all the knowledge that is necessary for holiness and salvation? What about the fact that the opening statements of the Second Helvetic Confession claim that, “We believe and confess that the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men.”² What about the reality that John Calvin himself felt that the scriptures are actually “spectacles” to see the world with? As theologian Garrett Green would observe about Calvin metaphor, “The scriptures are not something that we look at, but rather look through, lenses that refocus what we see into an intelligible pattern.”³ Is not the logical conclusion of all of this that the Bible is self-authenticating, clear to the reader, its own interpreter (“scripture interprets scripture”), and sufficient of itself to be the final authority of all the doctrines of Christianity? **I would have to say no.**

² The Book of Confessions of the PCUSA (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2007) 53.

³ Garrett Green, Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989) 107.

Allow me to regress, if for but just a moment, and go back to a time in 1992 in order to put some possible parameters on the issue. I was sitting in a classroom on the campus of Berry College in Rome, Georgia. Dr. Jorge Gonzalez (the brother of the great church historian Dr. Justo Gonzalez) entered the room and handed a table full of students a sheet of paper, told us to translate the passage into the English from the Greek, and walked out of the room. This was to be my final examination in my first semester of New Testament Greek in my undergraduate years. As I started to stare into the world of these words (εν αρχη ην ο λογος και ο λογος ην προς τον θεον και θεος ην ο λογος) the English started to emerge. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

It was in that moment that the terminology of “logos” went from being just another philosophical, psychological, rhetorical, and religious word. “Logos” was and is so much more than a plea, an opinion, an expectation, a speech, an account, a ground, and a word. The sophist would use it as discourse, the Stoics with the divine animating principle that pervades the span of the universe, and Aristotle himself would apply it as “reasoned discourse” and “the argument”. This gospel according to John though not only identifies the “logos” as through which all things are made, but even more so as divine (“theos”) to the point that the Christian understanding of the incarnation (Jesus Christ) is actually identified as the “Logos”. Jumping ahead a few thousand years as Puritanism and Calvinism washed up on the shores of Plymouth and beyond, a central problem begins to arise. We have the “Word” of God (the “Logos” as the Christ as John describes) starting to be replaced with the “word” of God (the “logos” as the Christian scriptures).

As mentioned before, Niebuhr would suggest that such a problem is, “the enduring problem”. This is not the struggle of “proselytising the pagan” or dealing with the person who quotes the reality of cry of the boy’s father in the gospel of Mark (9:24), “I believe; help my unbelief!” This is the struggle of a spectrum of persons of faith under the umbrella of Christendom where faith has come into direct conflict (two ideas sharing the same space) with another faith. As theologian Robley Edward Whitson stated, “There are as many Christianities as there are Christians.”⁴ With this in mind, having a clean house of orthodoxy or a agreeable list of essential tenets can get messy. Again to quote Niebuhr in concern for “the enduring problem”, “When Christianity deals with the question of reason and revelation, what is ultimately in question is the revelation in Christ to the reason which prevails in culture.”⁵ I would add, specifically the revelation to the theological culture of Christendom concerning the “logos/Logos”.

Now, to return briefly to my conversation with Larry on those cobblestone streets of Strasbourg, there were (from my personal theological perspective) two very specific areas to be mentioned with a final conclusion to be lifted up for thought and process. Though we did not get that far in our conversation (as we headed into a restaurant to break bread and change our conversation to other avenues), I will make a feeble attempt to theologically exposit these musings accordingly. The first to lift up is my personal and theological understanding of “ordered ministry” as defined as the theological cadence of authority set by our reformed theological understanding as Presbyterians and a closer look at the relationship with the “solas” of the historical “Reformers”.

⁴ Robley Edward Whitson, The Coming Convergence of World Religions (Bristol, IN: The Cloverdale Library, 1992) 55.

⁵ Niebuhr 11.

Where this circumnavigates on is the ultimate virtue of Christ extracted specifically from the Christian scriptures as defined by H. Richard Niebuhr.

A LOOK AT ORDINATION IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA) AS A LENS IN CONCERN FOR AUTHORITY:

As a person who is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), my personal context for ordination and beyond recognizes that responsibility and authority specifically within the bounds of ordered ministry are to be understood Christologically. To look at the first five ordination questions that ordinations calls for is to recognize that there is a clear understanding of the hierarchy of authority that embodies an understanding for the entire church. Rather than starting with the scriptures, our launching point is instead Jesus Christ. We are to live in obedience to Christ under the authority of scripture guided by the confessions governed by the church's polity within a collegial ministry. This order is faithful and explicit: Christ, scripture, confessions, polity, ministry. This is not an ordering that is open for manipulation.

To see it in descending order, I would put it in this way:

- Obedience to Jesus Christ
- Under the Authority of Scripture
- Guided by the Confessions
- Governed by the Church's Polity
- Within a Collegial Ministry

This order is not only faithful, but it is explicit. There is a clear sense of theological hierarchy that is meant to guide a gathering of people and their leaders within the bounds of their calling of faith. And to notice that the "Logos", the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, is first and foremost in this the premier foundational understanding of obedience, we can again understand Niebuhr's further reflections as he writes: "They will not contend that it is the whole truth and nothing but

the truth, and they will not become dogmatist unwilling to seek out what other men have seen and heard of the same object they have fragmentarily known. Every man looking upon the same Jesus Christ in faith will make his statement of what Christ is to him; but he will not confound his relative statement with the absolute Christ.”⁶ In other words, Christ by definition sets the “absolute” as the “Logos” and not the written word of scripture. Where we go from here is not only redefining how we approach “Sola Scriptura” (in light of all the “Solos” of the Reformers), but also attempt to describe the ethics of the Incarnate “Logos” as a pattern of reflection and application for theological belief/discourse and faithful praxis.

THE REVERSAL OF CALVIN’S GLASSES (SOLA CHRISTUS TO SOLA SCRIPTURA):

In order to allow us all to start at the same point of reference, allow me to lift up the five Latin phrases that emerged during the Reformation to summarize the basic beliefs of the Reformers (this is often referred to the “pentagram” of the Reformers):

- Sola scriptura (“by scripture alone”)
- Sola fide (“by faith alone”)
- Sola gratia (“by grace alone”)
- Sola Christus or Solo Christo (“by Christ alone”)
- Soli Deo gloria (“glory to God alone”)

This “pentagram” was intended to act as the legs of a stool. All are needed to make certain that the seat of the stool did in fact stand on a solid foundation. Be that as it may, within the reality of the church in America (particularly in the Protestant arena), theological fundamentalism began to take root in the early 1900’s (please see addendum on “fundamentalism” in America) and there grew as a result an unequally yoked polemic between the apologetic specifically around the inerrancy of the scriptures and the theology of the incarnation that is within history and lies

⁶ Niebuhr 238.

beyond history. The apologist would argue on one hand (according to the written text) that liberal theology was removing its theology of the scriptures from testability. In other words, we are to weigh the evidence (a line of reasoning based on probability to absolute certainty) in order to come to a logical and historical conclusion of truth. The “word” of God written was in fact without error and to be a lens for a worldview (orthodoxy) and the life lived (orthopraxis). On the other hand, persons such as Karl Barth were theologically suggesting that such realities as the resurrection were that of “hyper-history”; it happened but we have no accessibility to proof of this as a historical event. And as the divide grew, so did the chasm between two very different theological and biblical approaches to the way that Christianity is discoursed and practiced. In a limited attempt of trying to draw together the collision of ideas, I would describe it in this fashion:

- Evidential versus theological
- Probability versus possibility
- Arrogance versus humility
- History versus mystery
- Exclusivity versus inclusivity
- Humanity versus Divinity

An overarching reality is the foundational starting point of a quest. Is this about humanity’s search for God or just the opposite? Perhaps it is really about God’s search for humanity - specifically in the unique reality of Jesus the Christ - the “Logos”.

So, in order to synthesize this into an intelligible pattern, what I would suggest (to return to the “Solas”) is that as John Calvin would often use the metaphor of the scriptures as “spectacles” where “sola scriptura” became the lens to see and discover the other “solas”, we need to change the lenses within the 21st century church. I would argue instead that “solus Christus” should in

fact be the “spectacles” to see and discover the other “solas” - specifically “sola scriptura”. Even though we might acknowledge the reality that the scriptures on some level can be that which we look through to “refocus what we see into an intelligible pattern”, we must recognize that Christ must be the “spectacles” which we look to read and apply those texts. “Sola scriptura” is still alive and well in the “Reformed Project” (term used by Dr. Michael Jenkins, President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary). Let us never forget though that this was never intended to be applied in isolation as this is but one of a group of “solas” of the Reformers. Solus Christus (through Christ alone) stands within the same company and according to my theological understanding of authority, must remain the prelude of this concert of movement in the reading and application of the Bible.

TRANSITIONAL THOUGHTS:

If Christ is to be the lenses (the “spectacles”) that we look through in order to read the Bible, what must be taken into consideration about Christ? Realizing that this is a question that could easily produce a laundry list of theological opinions, allow me to ground it in the passing thought of a colleague and friend. The Reverend Chandler Stokes looked at me and stated one day over breakfast, “The Bible was neither intended to exclude nor wound anyone.” This coupled with the reality of Emmanuel (God with us) in the incarnation of Christ, we can comfortably lift up the virtue of Christ as defined by H. Richard Niebuhr. The great theologian Dr. Shirley Guthrie would note: “‘God is with us’ (Matthew 1:23) is not just a beautiful idea or an abstract theological truth. It happened! John also tells us that it happened when he says that the ‘Word’ (God’s self-communication, the Word that was with God) ‘became flesh and lived among

us' (John 1:1-14)."⁷ To have this as our foundation allows us to "risk the courage to ask what he says, what he asks, and what he demands. Only if we do so will we be able to move, however cautiously and imperfectly, from the Bible to the gospel."⁸ Beyond that, "At the deepest level the gospel is not threatened, and it is not our role to defend and protect the gospel. The gospel is the truth; it can take care of itself. But when we remember that the gospel is not just a set of truth claims but a way of being in the world, then at the pastoral level the gospel is imperiled every day, and it is indeed the role of church leaders, preachers, teachers, and pastors to enable people to hear the good news rightly and to trust it and live it out."⁹

THE ULTIMATE VIRTUE OF CHRIST:

We can talk about many virtues and ethics that the incarnation possesses for the purpose of consideration at such a junction as this. Niebuhr, in discussing the ethics of Christ, lifts up specifically but does not limit these to:

- The ethic of hope: specifically in reference to eschatology
- The ethic of freedom
- The ethic of obedience: obedience even unto death
- The ethic of humility: Christ emptied himself taking on the form of a servant

All of these ethics are built upon the foundation of what I will refer to as the ultimate virtue of Christ. It has been stated that the mathematician and philosopher Archimedes stated, "Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough and I will move the world." The ethics listed above are levers to move that world, but the virtue upon which all of them stand is the virtue of love.

⁷ Shirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 234.

⁸ Peter J. Gomes, The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus (New York: Harper Collins, 2007) 23.

⁹ Thomas G. Long, Preaching From Memory to Hope (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 67.

Niebuhr would reflect, “There is no virtue save the love that is in Christ, inextricably combined with faith and hope. From this all other excellence flows.”¹⁰

And knowing that the usage of the word “love” can be a swath meanings within our own context (I love ice cream and yet I also love my wife) and within the *Mare Nostrum* of the times of Christ, had an even more varied usage of the word (“eros” at erotic love, *philia* as “brotherly” love, “*storge*” as familial love), I would synonymize the word “love” with the Greek word “agape” for our intents and purposes. “Agape” is perhaps best defined as: divine, unconditional, active, volitional, self-sacrificing, and thoughtful love. Within the Christian writings, this is reflected on in such texts as:

-John 3:16 (one of the most well known pieces of Bible verse): “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

-Matthew 5:43-46 (Sermon on the Mount): “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?”

-Matthew 22:37-40 (the greatest commandments): “He said to them, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

-John 15:12-14: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

And this only begins to scratch the surface of what is revealed on the scriptures about “agape” as the ultimate virtue of the “Logos”. It is even stated that “God is love” in John’s first epistle (4:8)

¹⁰ Niebuhr 166.

where, by simple philosophical reasoning, we can assume that if God ceases to love (by virtue of being love), then God would theologically cease to be God. This is what writer Paulo Coelho is lifting up when he defines “agape” as “the love that consumes”: the highest and purest form of love that surpasses all other types of affection.¹¹

It is from this posture and understanding of the ultimate virtue of Christ that we can begin to confidently turn to theology and the words of Paul so often lifted up at the reality of matrimony within the context of the church in application for the praxis of reading and applying the “logos” (the scriptures). If we do not read the scriptures and apply them looking through the lens of Christ’s love (the agape of the “Logos”), then we are nothing more than “a clanging gong...a clashing cymbal...nothing...receiving no benefit whatsoever.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-2) To reverse the spectacles through which we view the world and beyond (again going against what Calvin believed and stated), we begin to uncover and rediscover the reality that, “The great reversal that we are suggesting is that in the story of Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Word become flesh, God with us, we see the self humiliation of God and the exaltation (making great) of humanity.”¹² To read and apply the scriptures through that particular prescription - well, from this all other excellence flows.

CONCLUSION:

William Stingfellow, an American lay theologian once stated: “In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word. Amidst babel...speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God.

¹¹ Paulo Coelho, The Pilgrimage (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 119.

¹² Guthrie 247.

Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, love the Word. And more than that, in the Word of God expose death and all death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience."¹³ "The truth and the potency and the efficacy of the Word of God": these are powerful words that we are intended to live by (the same issuing of the "solas" of the Reformers). We are to know it, teach it, be nurtured by it, incarnate it, do it, and love it.

Ironically, this is not a direct reference to the "logos" written but instead the "Logos" lived. The God incarnate known as Jesus the Christ who came to set the captives free by "agape". Our very salvation becomes a crescendo of the movement from bondage to liberation, from exile to homecoming, from sickness to healing, from woundedness to wholeness, from blindness to seeing, from death to life, from preoccupation with the self to compassion, from a world of injustice to a world of justice, from a world of violence and war to a world of non-violence and peace. All of this due to the simple reality: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

I am reminded of the quote from Red (Morgan Freeman) in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. "I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singin' about...I like to think they were singin' about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapping into our drab little cage and made these walls dissolve away...and for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank

¹³ William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973) 142-143.

felt free.”¹⁴ May you be free to look at the scriptures through a new set of glasses. May you be free to soar higher and farther in the beauty of God beyond where you would dare to dream. May you even for the briefest of moments, as you pour over your readings and applications of the scriptures (the “logos”) feel free because of the love of Jesus Christ (the “Logos”)...

¹⁴ Frank Darabont, The Shawshank Redemption (Screenplay written for the movie of the same title in 1994).

Addendum on Fundamentalism in America

Allow me to start by saying that this is some random notes based on my own personal thoughts and theology mixed in with a bit of fact and history...

Anyway, fundamentalism is a scary reality to many a Presbyterian (of the PCUSA flavor). In fact, a good friend of mine and the former Vice Moderator of the denomination, often refers to himself as a recovering “fundegelical...a fundamental evangelical”...

Ok, to start out with, what I am not talking about is:

Sociological Fundamentalism

Political Fundamentalism

What I am talking about.: Theological Fundamentalism...

Apologist Craig Parton of the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church would state that:“This began as a response to Protestant liberalism.” And though no one statement of history can be held in a vacuum, what he is saying holds much weight. Interestingly, it was the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, that met in 1910, that officially listed the “five fundamentals” of the faith in reaction to what they considered to be a growing presence of “liberal theology”. They are as follows:

The verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scripture

The divinity of Jesus

The virgin birth of Christ

Substitutionary atonement by Jesus

The bodily resurrection and future return of Jesus

From there, the term “fundamentalist” was released into the popular culture.

Add to this the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 in Tennessee that started passing laws in the arena of ideas. Darwinism and Marxism were alive and well and the town square of philosophy (the love of wisdom...) started to get a little uncomfortable. As far as the scriptures were concerned, higher criticism from Germany and beyond made the discipline of exegesis turn into critical explanation. From the fundamentalist viewpoint, to enter into the discipline of “high criticism” was to have a low view of scripture. You were to have a high view of scripture instead by practicing “low criticism”. In other words, if the Bible says it, it is good enough for me...

