

# Yes, Virginia, There is Such a Thing as Fundamentalism or The Subject Matter of Christianity is the Subject Matter of Christianity



Much of what I have written on my blog has been addressed against what is called either (depending on which side of the Reformation one hangs one's hat) Liberal Protestantism or Catholic Modernism. (One of the advantages of being Anglican is that one can embrace either heresy. When Anglican Evangelicals go bad they become liberal Protestants. When Anglo-Catholics go bad, they become Modernists.) Within the parameters of the church, I consider liberalism to be the greatest heresy today because it denies the central subject matter of the Christian faith as taught in the Scriptures, and summarized in the ecumenical creeds: the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation of God in Christ, the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Numerous essays on my blog address this heresy in one way or another. Even the issue of same-sex sexual unions, which is the key issue of controversy dividing the Western churches these days, I regard as church dividing precisely because I see an inherent connection between affirming same-sex activity and denying key doctrines of Christian faith. It is not a

coincidence that the leading advocates of SSUs have also been functional unitarians and/or panentheists. (I think of people like retired Bishop John Spong, the late Marcus Borg, and Sallie McFague. Despite a caginess that makes her hard to pin down, I think it clear that Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori is solidly in this camp.) There are, of course, exceptions, including some theologians whom I have admired and who have influenced me: Stanley Hauerwas and George Hunsinger, in particular. However, they really are exceptions. Precisely because Scripture is so clear on this issue and it is tied so closely to the doctrine of creation (and, I would add, even the doctrines of the Trinity and ecclesiology), where one stands on SSU's predictably indicates where one stands on creedal issues.

Advocates of theological liberalism/modernism in the church regularly refer to those who disagree with them as "fundamentalists," and I have been the recipient of this accusation myself. John Spong's book *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* is a typical example. The joke is, that for theological progressives, a "fundamentalist" is anyone who believes more of the Christian faith than the one using the epithet. For Spong, Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham were "fundamentalists," but so was Karl Barth, and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright. If a fundamentalist is anyone who believes more than Bishop Spong, then the term is vacuous. To refer to N.T. Wright as a fundamentalist is just another way of saying that one disagrees with him, and, because he does not affirm one's views, he must be either evil or foolish or both. The fundamentalist accusation saves the time of actually having to address the arguments of someone like Wright. (I have used Wright as an example precisely because his position is ambiguous. Wright's "New Perspective" work on the apostle Paul has led him to be labeled a dangerous "liberal" by some advocates of a traditional Reformation reading of Paul.)

That a term can be misused does not mean that it cannot be

used meaningfully at all. That Karl Barth and N.T. Wright are not fundamentalists does not mean that there are no such people. What is a fundamentalist? Historically, the term originated early in the twentieth century with the publications of a series of books entitled *The Fundamentals*, written by a number of conservative Protestant theologians in response to the rise of liberal Protestantism. With the separation of J. Gresham Machen from Princeton Seminary, the founding of Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, fundamentalism became associated with conservative separatist Protestantism. In the mid-twentieth century, the rising movement then known as Neo-Evangelicalism (associated with Billy Graham and institutions such as Fuller Seminary and *Christianity Today* magazine) distanced itself from fundamentalism as a conservative Protestant movement that was more academic, more ecumenical, and open to aspects of the civil rights movement of the 1960's. With the rise of the (political) religious right in the early 1980's and the social and political division of the culture wars of the late twentieth century that divided not only political parties but also religious denominations, internal divisions over issues such as the inerrancy of scripture and women's ordination, clear-cut divisions between what were now called conservative Evangelicals and fundamentalists once again tended to blur.

To describe fundamentalism by its history in this way could lead to the impression that fundamentalism is restricted to a particular historical phenomenon within a specific religious tradition – that of conservative Protestantism. To do so would be to fail to locate the theological nature of fundamentalism, and would view it as an isolated phenomenon – which would be a mistake. Fundamentalism is not so much a particular movement within the specific religious tradition of Protestantism as a type that has appeared not only within Protestantism, but in other Christian traditions as well.

Fundamentalism has at least two characteristics: first, it is

a distinctly modern phenomenon. It appeared at a time when Christian identity was threatened by the rise of modern secularism that has its origins in the Enlightenment, and when secularism was perceived to have infiltrated even the Christian churches. And, second, fundamentalism is reactionary. Fundamentalism identifies itself in terms of that which it rejects as much as or more so than what actually defines it. Once one recognizes that fundamentalism is both modern in origin and reactionary, it becomes evident that fundamentalism is not simply identical with conservative or orthodox Christianity; one can also speak of fundamentalism outside of the narrow historical parameters of twentieth and twenty-first century American Protestantism.

How to identify fundamentalism? I have found the following three descriptions to be at least helpful. In the 1960's, E.J. Carnell, President of Fuller Seminary and one of the leaders of what was then called "Neo-Evangelicalism," described fundamentalism as "cultic orthodoxy." While theologically orthodox in the creedal sense, fundamentalism differed from historic orthodoxy in being insular, in defining Christianity in terms of its own peculiar historical manifestation. When I was growing up, the denomination of which I was a member was presumed to be the only true church. In the public school I attended, I had many friends who were members of other Christian denominations, but I understood them to be "not" Christians. When Billy Graham held one of his evangelistic rallies in our city, there were those in my congregation who argued against our participating on the grounds that Graham did not tell people that they needed to join our denomination.

In the 1970's, liberal Protestant biblical scholar James Barr wrote a book entitled *Fundamentalism*, in which he said that one of the characteristics of fundamentalism was "maximal conservatism." If there were two options available on any question, the fundamentalist could be counted on to take the more conservative of the two positions. In the undergraduate

college I attended, the Old Testament professor had as an essay question on the final exam: "How do we know that Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch, including the description of his own death at the end of Deuteronomy?" Barr was speaking about issues of biblical criticism, but the issue applies elsewhere as well. A friend of Roman Catholic Cardinal Manning once remarked that he would have loved nothing more than to have a papal encyclical delivered with his *London Times* at breakfast every morning.

In his recent book on *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, George Hunsinger contrasted three kinds of theology: academic, ecumenical, and enclave. By "academic," Hunsinger means basically the theology of "liberal Protestantism." By "ecumenical," he means a theology that is willing to reach across denominational boundaries to learn from the entire catholic tradition of the church. By "enclave," he means a kind of denominational theology that defines itself in terms of its own denominational or confessional distinctives.

"Enclave" theology is then another characteristic of what I am calling fundamentalism. Enclave theology tends to place the center of its theology in its own confessional distinctives. In the church in which I grew up, the single most important doctrine was "believer's baptism." There are certain kinds of Lutheran theology where the proper understanding of the relationship between law and gospel is the most important concern, and where one stands on the "third use of the law" can lead to theological fisticuffs. There are Reformed theologians for whom the proper understanding of divine sovereignty and of the covenant or "federalism" simply is the most important issue. There are Anglicans for whom the loss of the 1928 Prayer Book is an overwhelming obsession; there are Evangelical Anglicans for whom Anglicanism is "Reformed" (in the Calvinist sense), is defined strictly by the views of the Anglican Reformers (especially a specific interpretation of the theology of Thomas Cranmer) and an adherence to a literal

reading of the 39 Articles in every detail, and for whom the Caroline Divines mark the beginning of a period of decline; in contrast, there are Anglo-Catholic Anglicans for whom the proper understanding of apostolic succession is definitive, who view the Reformation as an almost unmitigated disaster, and have nothing good to say about the 39 Articles. There are Roman Catholics who embrace what has been called “creeping infallibility”; while not every statement of the pope is technically infallible, they should be treated (at least presumptively) as if they all are. I once engaged in an online discussion with some members of the Orthodox Church who argued with complete seriousness that the “Frankish takeover of the papacy” under Charlemagne was the point at which the Western church ceased to be a Christian church.

Fundamentalism tends to have certain other characteristics as well:

(1) A distrust of modern science expressed in suspicion of both evolutionary theory and global warming: both so-called “creationism” and “Intelligent Design” express this distrust; this does not mean that there are no unbelieving scientists such as Richard Dawkins, but, in principle, it is quite possible to embrace both a positive respect for the methodological principles and findings of modern science and orthodox Christian theology as well. I think, for example, of scientists and theologians such as Owen Gingerich, Francis Collins, John Polkinghorne, E.L. Mascall, Thomas F. Torrance, and Alister McGrath.

(2) A distrust of historical-critical methodology in the study of the Bible as evidenced in concerns about such things as the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch or single authorship of the Book of Isaiah. Again, it is not that there are no liberal Protestant theologians, but it is quite possible to be critical of secularist biases among liberal Protestant biblical scholars while recognizing the positive results of biblical criticism; the list of critically orthodox biblical

scholars is too lengthy to mention, but I think particularly of people who have influenced me, such as Brevard Childs, Richard Hays, and N.T. Wright.

(3) An alliance between “conservative” theology and what American culture calls “conservative” political views. In particular, American Evangelicals and conservative Roman Catholics have made common cause in supporting the politics of the Republican party because of its endorsement of “conservative social ethics” in regard to such issues as homosexuality and abortion. Here I am afraid, they have been taken advantage of by a party that really does not care about their concerns. I think of an example mentioned in Thomas Franks’ book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* Social conservatives vote a certain way because they see Madonna and Britney Spears kiss in public, and those they elect then vote to give Madonna and Britney Spears a tax break. Again, this does not mean that the Democratic party reflects Christian morality any more than does the Republican party, but orthodox Christians have been deluded to believe that either American political party cares about their concerns. The recent collapse of courage among Republicans in support of religious freedom bills (as, for the example, the Indiana RFRA) shows that conservative Christians have aligned themselves with an uncertain ally.

(4) Apologetic concerns that are disassociated from the central subject matter of Christian faith. Among both Roman Catholics and Evangelicals there has been the advocacy of a rationalist epistemology whose purpose is to dispel doubt by buttressing certitude in correspondingly recognized voices of authority. For Roman Catholics, the crucial argument concerns the infallibility of the papacy as a guarantee of epistemological certitude while simultaneously casting doubt on the epistemological claims of Protestantism by both challenging the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture and pointing to the conflicting truth claims of numerous

Protestant denominations. For Protestants this has meant the mutually exclusive endorsement of either evidentialist or presuppositionalist apologetics combined with arguments to support biblical inerrancy while simultaneously challenging the certainty of Roman Catholic claims. In both cases, in order to work, the arguments must become increasingly sophisticated and complicated. I have seen Roman Catholics try to make arguments that church fathers such as Irenaeus or Medieval thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas held to understandings of church authority that did not exist until after the Reformation period. I have seen Roman Catholics argue that (apart from papal infallibility), the Bible has no internal coherence and can mean anything that the reader wants it to mean. Evangelical arguments about inerrancy have to introduce numerous qualifications to explain that only no longer existing original manuscripts are inerrant, and that any phenomena of Scripture that would seem to challenge the theory must be re-interpreted in order to make them fit. (At this point, of course, the argument becomes question-begging: any troubling phenomena are either examples of copyists' errors or simply do not mean what a plain sense reading would indicate.)

### **An Alternative to Fundamentalism or the Subject Matter of Christianity is the Subject Matter of Christianity**

If the point of the above were merely to criticize fundamentalism, it would be a wasted exercise. There is no secular advantage to orthodox Christians distancing themselves from fundamentalists, and proclaiming "Hey, we're not like those guys." For certain kinds of secularists, all Christians are simply "oppressors" – as evidenced in the recent political hostility to Christian educational institutions such as Gordon College or the University of Notre Dame. (Thus the secularist evaluation of Christians as summarized in the popular internet dictum "Haters gonna hate.") If I am opposed to fundamentalism, it is not because of apologetic concerns but



for similar reasons to my opposition to liberal Protestantism. While I regard liberal Protestantism to be the greatest contemporary threat to the gospel (from within the church), I consider fundamentalism to be almost as equally problematic and for the same reason. If liberal Protestantism has abandoned the central subject matter of Christian faith, fundamentalism at least retains that subject matter, but relegates it to secondary importance in comparison to other "enclave" issues. In both cases, there is an idolatrous preference for some secondary human concern in place of the central subject matter of Christian faith.

What then is the orthodox Christian alternative to fundamentalism? It is not unique to any one denominational or confessional tradition. Various labels could be used to describe it: critical orthodoxy, evangelical catholicism or catholic evangelicalism, ecumenical theology. It affirms the following:

(1) The formal sufficiency, clarity and primacy of canonical Scripture: In the second-century battle with the gnostic heresy, the church affirmed the full canon of a two-testament Bible as containing the definitive witness to what Christians believed about God, creation, Christ, and salvation. Scripture was read in the worship of the church, it was the subject of homilies, and expositied by theologians. Theologians such as Irenaeus, Hilary of Poitiers, and Augustine assumed in their reading of Scripture that it had a formal sufficiency and clarity in its literal sense. (T.F. Torrance has used the expression "intrinsic intelligibility" as a shorthand description of this understanding. Torrance's book *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* provides one of the best studies of how the fathers read Scripture. It is, unfortunately, out of print, and used copies are ridiculously expensive.) Patristic theologians have sometimes been accused of an arbitrary allegorism, but it was actually the gnostics who embraced arbitrary methods of biblical interpretation.

Patristic theologians often interpreted the Old Testament typologically, but this meant that the Old Testament pointed to Jesus Christ as its fulfillment, not that the reader imposed his or her own meaning on the passage. Later, Thomas Aquinas would speak of the priority of the "literal sense," and anticipated the views of the Reformers. (Few people are aware that Thomas's primary theological task was that of an expositor of Scripture; his commentaries are only recently being translated.) Later, the Reformers would insist on the primacy and sufficiency of Scripture, but they were not being original here.

One of the happy ecumenical convergences of the twentieth and early twenty-first century has been the renewed appreciation for a theological reading of Scripture – as typified by what has been called the "biblical theology" movement. Biblical theology peaked in the mid-twentieth century, and there were worries about its collapse in the 1960's and 70's but, as with Mark Twain, the rumors of its demise were greatly exaggerated. As in any other discipline, there are different schools, who disagree with each other on various issues – the controversy about the "new perspective on Paul" would be an example – yet among orthodox Christians, there is a common agreement about the importance of a theological reading of Scripture in its "plain sense." This is as true of Roman Catholics as of Protestants, and the methods used are the same. (Since even before Vatican II, Roman Catholic scholars have been committed to careful, critical, theological reading of Scripture. I received my graduate training in Roman Catholic institutions and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Roman Catholics took Scripture seriously. I remember one Catholic professor saying, "Of course, Paul believed in justification by faith and regarded it as forensic.") The best theological commentaries of the Bible these days are as likely to have been written by Catholics as by Protestants. Three recent commentary series display the current ecumenical convergence: IVP's *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* is a

multivolume collection of patristic commentary on each book of the Bible distributed by an Evangelical publisher. Roman Catholic (former Episcopalian) Rusty Reno is editor of the *Brazos Theological Commentary on Scripture* with volumes written by Roman Catholics, various flavors of Protestants and Anglicans, and Orthodox authors. Evangelical publisher Baker Academic is currently the publisher of the multivolume *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture*.

I would add here that a doctrine *of* Scripture is not the same thing as a doctrine *about* Scripture. The shared commitment to the primacy and formal sufficiency of Scripture as found in writers from Irenaeus to Thomas Aquinas to the Protestant Reformers to the more recent advocates of “biblical theology” is that of a concern with the theological “subject matter” of Scripture, what Athanasius called its “scope” (*skopos*). Modern conservative Protestant concern about issues such as the “inerrancy” of Scripture is a doctrine *about* Scripture, a shorthand label for a particular theological understanding of Scripture’s origin (verbal plenary inspiration) that presumes commitments to specific notions of the relation between divine sovereignty and human instrumentality in the writing of Scripture, and has as little relation to the theological subject matter of Scripture as does the competing Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility. Both are primarily tools of a modern rationalist apologetics, which, even if tenable, would have little value in understanding the “scope” of Scripture.

(2) In referring to the “scope” or “subject matter” of Scripture, I am assuming (as did Athanasius), that Scripture has both a center and a periphery. The center can be found in the “Rule of Faith” appealed to by second-century theologians such as Irenaeus and the ecumenical creeds of the patristic era. The “Rule of Faith” is not an addition to Scripture, but is a hermeneutical tool to identify the heart of Scripture and assist in its interpretation. From the earliest discussions of

Christian faith by the church fathers, this subject matter or "scope" of Scripture has been summarized in the following doctrines: the nature of the Triune God; creation; fall; covenant (with the nation of Israel); the incarnation, life, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; soteriology; the mission of the Holy Spirit, grace, ecclesiology; eschatology.

(3) There are numerous theologians who have focused on this central subject matter of Christian faith in their writings, and it is important that Christians of all theological traditions know them well. Among the fathers, I would mention particularly, Irenaeus, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, and Augustine. In the Medieval church, I would consider Thomas Aquinas to be the most important figure. (In the mid-twentieth century, "Thomism" was a philosophical movement, and Catholic philosophers valued Thomas primarily for his apologetic value. In the last several decades, theologians have recognized that Thomas was actually a theologian; numerous recent studies have focused on his doctrines of the Trinity, creation, Christology, soteriology, grace, and the sacraments.) There has been a resurgence of patristic theology among Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Evangelicals in recent decades. This is all to the good, but the Medieval church should not be neglected. The Reformation is a late Medieval movement, and cannot be understood without understanding its historical precedents. It is also important that those of us in Reformation churches should know well the key writers in our own tradition. For Lutherans that means Martin Luther, and for the Reformed, John Calvin. For Anglicans, Thomas Cranmer is important, but, even more important for the theological understanding of Anglicanism, I would argue, is Richard Hooker.

(4) A key issue in the divide between ecumenical Christians and enclave Christians has to do with their understanding of the nature of the Reformation: Was the Reformation a reforming

movement in the Western Catholic Church, or, was it, rather, a complete break with an apostate Rome? The self-understanding of historic Anglicanism, as well as the continental Reformers, was the former, while enclave theologians, whether Protestant or Tridentine Roman Catholics, tend to view the Reformation as a complete break with that which had gone before. I would say that this is as much an issue of methodology and theology as of the reading of texts. Historically, polemics between Catholics and Protestants has tended to emphasize discontinuity; in the mid-twentieth century, both Catholic and Protestant scholars began to emphasize continuity, and this was the school of historiography that influenced me in my doctoral studies and dissertation. In recent years, resurgence of polemics has led to a renewed focus on discontinuity among some scholars. As an apologetic concern, Anglican Reformers such as Thomas Cranmer and John Jewel insisted on the catholicity of their views, but at the same time did not hesitate to criticize the post-Reformation Roman Catholic Church insofar as they argued that Rome had departed either from the plain reading of Scripture or from the faith of the patristic church. However, they insisted that Rome was in discontinuity, not themselves. It is this tension between continuity and discontinuity that can provide ammunition for both ecumenists and enclave Christians to claim that they are being faithful readers of the Reformers or the Catholic tradition.

(5) There are a number of modern (chronologically not methodologically) theologians who have continued to focus on the central subject matter of Christian faith in their writings. The Reformed theologian Karl Barth is, I think, the most significant modern figure. Barth initiated the modern trinitarian revival in his *Church Dogmatics* 1.1. Barth has been influential for both Protestants and Catholics. For example, Reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance and Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar could both be claimed as disciples of Barth. His influence can be seen in

their respective theologies of atonement. Torrance was a Reformed theologian working in a tradition that had focused almost exclusively on the death of Christ as the center of atonement theology. Torrance insisted that the cross only made sense within the light of the incarnation and the ontology of the person of Jesus Christ as God become human – that is, the hypostatic union. And, of course, the cross could not be understood apart from the resurrection. The crucified Christ is God become human, who has conquered death. Conversely, von Balthasar was a Catholic theologian working in a tradition that had (under the influence of theologians like Karl Rahner) focused almost exclusively on the incarnation as the whole point of Christology. Von Balthasar insisted that the incarnation and resurrection needed to be read within the light of their center, the cross. The incarnation of Jesus Christ was oriented toward the cross, and the resurrection cannot be understood except in light of the cross.

Protestants and Catholics need to know each others' theologians. If Catholics need to know Barth and Torrance, Protestants need to know Balthasar and, I would add, such figures as Henri de Lubac, whose writings on grace have been significant in their challenge of Tridentine Catholic limitations – if not identical to, at least in the same ballpark as Protestant concerns about post-Reformation Roman Catholic theology.

(6) This likely reflects Anglican prejudice, but I would also point out that historically there has been a pattern to the worship of the church that can be traced to the earliest fathers. The same church that recognized and handed on the canon of Scripture worshiped in a certain way – a worship that began every Sunday with the liturgical reading of the canonical Scriptures and concluded with the eucharistic meal. The worship of this church included a liturgical year that through its organizational structure annually summarized the “scope” of Christian faith. The most crucial celebration of

the Christian year was Holy Week, with its retelling of the events of Palm Sunday, the establishment of the eucharist (Maundy Thursday), the crucifixion (Good Friday) and the resurrection of Christ (Easter Sunday). Unfortunately, many Reformation churches have neglected or abandoned this liturgical structure of worship, but, in recent decades, Protestant theologians such as Geoffrey Wainwright and James K.A. Smith have reminded us of its importance. In recent years, there has been a revival of liturgical worship even among some historically "low church" Protestant denominations; this is all to the good. At the same time, unfortunately, there can be a liturgical enclave theology that is the "funhouse mirror" image of low church rejection of liturgical worship as "vain repetition." Among Roman Catholics, this manifests itself as a nostalgia for the Latin mass and a rejection of the *Novus Ordo*; among some Anglicans, the 1662 Prayer Book (or the American 1928) is considered the "gold standard," and Prayer Books reflecting the work of the 20th century liturgical movement (such as the 1979 American BCP) are viewed with suspicion.

(7) There is a close relationship between doctrine and practices, between faith and spirituality, ethics, and politics. How could this not be the case if Christian faith is concerned with salvation? The basic Christian claim is that through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians are united to the risen Christ and participate in the life of the triune God. If, as Christians affirm, Jesus Christ is Lord, then the implication is that Christ is Lord over every area of culture.

A generation ago, Evangelical David Moberg complained in his book *The Great Reversal*, that Evangelicals had lost a concern about social justice that had characterized the Evangelicals of the nineteenth century, and that there was now a division between liberal Protestants who were concerned with social justice and Evangelicals who focused exclusively on

evangelism. If it was the case that Evangelicals of a former generation avoided politics, that would certainly not be the case of the generation of Evangelicals following in the wake of the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Beginning with the rise of the so-called Moral Majority, continuing with groups like the Christian Coalition, and overwhelming support for President George W. Bush by “values voters” in the early 2000’s, Evangelicals regularly embraced an identifiable political philosophy. Unfortunately, it is precisely the identification of Evangelicalism with this particular political philosophy that has led to the alienation of the “Millennial” generation from the church.

Dissatisfaction with the alliance between conservative Christianity and conservative politics does not mean endorsement of the political left. Both sides of the current American political divide have the following in common: (1) both are variations of the individualist liberalism that originated with John Locke. This is illustrated by the focus on “rights talk” that both sides share. For so-called political conservatives, the rhetoric is of “right to life” or freedom from excessive taxation – thus the rhetoric of the “Tea Party”; for the political left, the rhetoric is about the “right to choose” or the right to express one’s “true” sexual identity; (2) both sides view politics as a direct confrontation between the individual and the state; thus, neither side recognizes the significance of mediating social structures such as families, churches, workplaces, schools.

There are alternatives. The anabaptist ethics of those influenced by Stanley Hauerwas rightly focuses on the church as a community of discipleship distinct from the culture. Reformed sphere sovereignty and Catholic subsidiarity both recognize the significance of mediating social structures between the individual and the state: the family, the church, work places, schools, voluntary organizations such as food pantries or clubs. Eastern Orthodox writer Rod Dreher has



written much recently about the Benedict Option – in the light of the defeat of the culture wars, Christians need to focus on forming distinct communities of virtue rather than continuing to follow failed ineffective political policies. Pope Francis's politics of "mercy" corrects the church's tendency to articulate cultural war opposition in terms of a simple "no" by emphasizing the church's primary message to the culture is one of mercy and forgiveness, not condemnation

Karl Barth's insistence that in every interaction with the culture, the gospel speaks both a "Yes" and a "No" is helpful. On the one hand, every individual whom the Christian encounters has been created in the image of God, is fallen and sinful, and is redeemed by Christ – whether he or she recognizes or acknowledges it or not – and must be treated as such. On the other hand, Jesus Christ alone is Lord, and, as the Barmen Declaration made clear, any attempt by a state or culture to claim Jesus Christ's Lordship for itself is idolatrous, and must be resisted.

(8) Christians of different confessional traditions need to get to know one another and cooperate in shared ventures. Evangelical author John Armstrong has coined the term "missional ecumenism" to refer to this. To a large extent, ecumenical encounters between Christians have taken place at the highest levels of organizational ecclesial structures, e.g., in official ecumenical dialogues. In my own experience, academia has been the setting for these relationships. I received my doctorate at the Catholic University of Notre Dame, but the faculty included not only Catholics, but also Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, and even a Mennonite. There were more non-Catholic than Catholic graduate students in the doctoral program: Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Orthodox, even a Baptist. The focus of theological study was deliberately ecumenical.

At the Anglican seminary where I teach, we revised our curriculum a few years ago, and decided that we needed to

include in each syllabus a description of how the particular course emphasized Anglican distinctives. Shortly afterwards, Lutherans approached us and we found ourselves entering into a joint agreement. We are now not only an Anglican seminary, but also the official site of the North American Lutheran Seminary. Most recently, we were approached in a similar way by Presbyterians, and we are beginning a Presbyterian track. Life is full of surprises.

Armstrong's point, however, is that ecumenical interaction is too important to be left to denominational bureaucrats, or, I would add, even seminaries. The average town has several different churches of different denominations. We all read the same Bible, affirm the same ecumenical creeds, and yet do not really know or interact with one another. I am an Anglican, and there are several churches of different confessional traditions that are much closer to where I live than the Anglican church I attend. I have never set foot in the local Roman Catholic Church or the Methodist Church, which are only a few blocks from my house. Some of the students at my seminary attend the local Presbyterian Church, which I have visited only once, for a musical concert. If we take seriously our Lord's prayer that his church would be one, if we acknowledge that the source of Christian unity is not our denominational confessions but unity with the crucified and risen Christ who enables us to participate in the life of the triune God; if we worship God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each Sunday morning through the reading of Scripture, the preaching of the Word, the reciting of the Creed, and the breaking of sacramental bread; if we believe that we die with and are risen with Christ in baptism; if we believe that the church is the body of Christ, which is united to his crucified and risen body as we share in the sacramental eucharistic bread and wine of which he spoke the words "This is my body," "This is my blood," then our living our Christian lives each day as if Christians outside our own denominational structures did not exist is a contradiction of what we claim

to believe. We need to do better.

(9) Finally, the most interesting and exciting theological work being done these days is being done by theologians and biblical scholars from different confessional traditions who focus on what I have called the theological center: the doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, Christology, soteriology, etc. However, insisting that there is a center and a periphery to Christian faith – and that the center lies in the affirmations of the rule of faith and the ecumenical creeds – does not mean that confessional differences do not exist or that they are not important. (I have written about such issues as the relation between Scripture and tradition, episcopacy, justification by faith, infant baptism, eucharistic theology.) However, it does mean that even discussion of theological differences needs to re-examine those differences in light of the creedal center. Doing so makes a difference.

For example, division between Protestants and Catholics on justification has hinged on disagreements about whether justification is an “imputation” or an “infusion.” Stated baldly, the disagreement is intractable. However, referring justification to Christology can lead to progress in understanding. Both Protestants and Catholics affirm that salvation consists in being united to Christ. Luther himself did not use the language of “imputation,” but he did speak of “alien righteousness.” His point was that our standing before God does not depend on any good works that we have accomplished, but on Jesus Christ’s finished work on the cross, which he accomplished independently of, and “outside us,” entirely without our contribution: Jesus saves us; we do not save ourselves. The Catholic affirms that in justification we are forgiven, and there is nothing we can do to earn that forgiveness. But the Catholic also wants to affirm that God’s forgiveness is effective. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we really are united to the crucified and risen Jesus

Christ, and Christ really shares his life with us, resulting in a genuine change and transformation. The Catholic wants to take seriously the language of Anglican Thomas Cranmer's eucharistic rite: we really do dwell in Christ and he dwells in us: Jesus saves us; we do not save ourselves. But Jesus really does save us in such a way that we become more and more like him. There is progression in holiness.

Similarly, there has been disagreement between Protestants and Catholics on the notion of eucharistic sacrifice. The Protestant point is that Jesus Christ has died once for all, and his sacrifice on the cross cannot be repeated. Our salvation depends entirely on his finished work, and there is nothing that we as a church can offer to God to contribute to that. Jesus is not sacrificed again in the eucharist, and all we can offer to God as a sacrifice is the living sacrifice of "our selves, our souls, and our bodies." Careless use of language by Catholics can suggest exactly the kind of repetition of Christ's sacrifice to which Protestants object. Again, however, focusing on the creedal center can lead to progress in understanding. Certainly Jesus Christ's death on the cross is once for all, and cannot be repeated. At the same time, the church affirms that in the eucharist, the risen Christ gives himself fully to his church and is present to the worshiping community in his full humanity and deity. (We do not worship an absent Savior.) If in our eucharistic worship, Jesus is fully present (through the mediation of the Holy Spirit) in the body in which he died once for all for our sins, then his once for all sacrifice is present to the church in its full effectiveness, and when we receive the sanctified elements of bread and wine in faith, we receive the full benefits of Jesus' sacrifice. It is not that Jesus is sacrificed again, but when the church speaks of the eucharist as a sacrifice, it is insisting not that we have something of our own worthiness to offer to God – we don't – but that the only offering we can present to God the Father is the offering of Christ's once for all finished work upon the cross. The

whole point of language of eucharistic sacrifice then is not to say that the church has something of its own to offer to God, but precisely the opposite – to make plain that our salvation depends on Christ's finished work – his once for all sacrifice – and not our own.

Ecumenical dialogue that proceeds through the trinitarian, incarnational, and soteriological center will not resolve every theological disagreement, but it certainly makes such disagreements less intractable.