

Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Vol 19 No 1 • Jan/Feb 2013

Falling Short of the Solas

by Carolyn Poteet

Almost five hundred years ago, Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms and declared, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” He and other Reformers identified five essentials of the faith that they could not compromise: *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture Alone, *Solus Christus*—Christ Alone, *Sola Gratia*—Grace Alone, *Sola Fide*—Faith Alone, and *Soli Deo Gloria*—To the Glory of God Alone.

While the issues that caused the Reformers to lift up the *Solas* may be different today, the importance of the *Solas* as boundaries of authentic, biblical Christian faith remains the same. In this article, we will look at the original issues at work in the church that gave rise to the *Solas*. Also, we will look at liberalism’s rejection of the *Solas* today and then finally we will look at how we can restore an understanding of the *Solas* in the church.

Sola Scriptura is Alive and Well

Sola Scriptura for the Reformers

The Reformers began their list of essentials with *Sola Scriptura* because the Bible had gotten buried beneath human ideas. Papal encyclicals, church councils, and even village priests spoke as if they had greater authority than Scripture itself. God’s Word was so far removed from the people that they could not even access it in their own language, much less study it for themselves. The Reformers returned Scripture to its proper position—the measure by which all other words would be judged. The people were given the Scriptures

to study for themselves so that they too would be able to compare the words they heard from the pulpit and the institutions of the church with the very Word of God.

Liberalism’s Rejection of *Sola Scriptura*

In 2010, Landon Whitsett, the vice-moderator of the 219th PC(USA) General Assembly, made a now-famous comment that “*Sola Scriptura* is dead in most places and rapidly dying in others.” In many parts of the church, this is an accurate assessment.

Slowly but surely, parts of the Christian church have been loosening their ties to the likes of Luther and Calvin and opting instead for a cacophony of contemporary voices informed primarily by human experience. To its detriment, the church has listened with itching ears to voices that tell us things we want to hear instead of submitting to the authority of the Word of God. Unable to elevate the voices of this generation to the level of Scripture, the tactic employed was to bring the Bible down to our level. The Confession of 1967 illustrates this point, saying, “The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the

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places and times at which they were written.” Multiple generations of pastors have now received a seminary education that reinforces the teaching that post-Enlightenment people are of a superior time and culture, and we can therefore sit in judgment above Scripture, determining for ourselves which parts are applicable.

The incremental shift from scriptural authority to human authority was punctuated recently with the decision by the highest court in the PC(USA), the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC). In the *Parnell v. San Francisco* decision issued in May 2012, the GAPJC was asked to affirm that Scripture is the only rule of faith and practice. It declined.

The commission wrote in its decision, “*The Book of Confessions* reflects that the Church listens to a multitude of voices in shaping its beliefs.” It affirmed the synod judicial commission’s earlier ruling that found a “vast diversity of interpretation of the meaning of Scripture and the confessions.” Instead of seeing the order and clarity presented in Scripture and the confessions, the GAPJC gave credence to the false teaching that listening to a multitude of human voices rightly supplants the authority of God’s Word in the common life of the PC(USA).

With its decision, the commission has placed Scripture, the confessions, and human opinion on par with each other. *Sola Scriptura* is indeed dead at this level of the PC(USA).

However, many Presbyterians continue to exalt the Scriptures above every other authority. **We will stand** with the Barmen Declaration and say, “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation” (Barmen Declaration, BOC 8.12).

Restoring *Sola Scriptura*

One member of my church recently asked, “When did all of this begin?” So many different points come to mind in the PC(USA)—the 1920s and the Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy, the Confession of 1967, the Reunion of 1983, pick a number and someone has pointed a finger. Other denominations would find other starting places. We could look back to Genesis 3 when the serpent asked Eve, “Did God really say...?” With that spark, Eve exalted her experience of the fruit (“good for food and pleasing to the eye”) above God’s word and took it and ate.

But with each of these foundational issues of the faith, each of us must stand to account before the Lord. Let us then ask, “When did I begin to demote the Scriptures in my thinking and my living?” And “when did I sit idly and silently by as human reason and human ideas usurped the authority of the Scriptures in my church?”

It began when we stopped making disciples and started making audiences. People are being fed endless courses of milk instead of graduating to solid food. Having no ability to discern between truth and error when they hear it, and having not been equipped to wield the sword of the Spirit themselves, congregations consume whatever is set before them, including philosophies and lies that directly contradict the Word of God.

The ability to be spiritually discerning has been lost. Many are not able to discern between the times when we are to “avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law because these are unprofitable and useless” (Titus 3:9), and the times when we are to “hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that [we] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). Dual pressures have led us down this path: the cultural call of tolerance and the bureaucratic call to unity at all costs coupled with a lack of courage to stand.

Fortunately, the truth and power of *Sola Scriptura* does not depend on a denomination or congregation. Hebrews 4:12 confirms: “Indeed, the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” And although we will all return to dust, the Word of God will stand forever. While there remains breath in our bodies, may we commit ourselves to the re-elevation of the Word of God in our personal discipleship and in our life together.

***Solus Christus* – Our Only Hope in Life and in Death**

***Solus Christus* for the Reformers**

By the time of the Reformation the unique work of Christ had, in practice, been overshadowed by the works of humans. Questions arose about whether or not Christ’s atoning work on the cross was fully sufficient to save people from their sins and bring them into eternal life with God the Father. According to the Roman Catholic Church at the time, the answer was generally, no. The work of Christ plus personal penance, plus indulgences, plus the accoutrements of the church produced an elaborate self-perpetuating

establishment. Specifically, the Mass itself is described in the Catholic catechism as “reparation for the sins of the living and the dead.” Parishioners were discouraged from petitioning Christ directly. Instead, they were instructed to utilize a myriad of intermediaries including their local priest, bishop, the saints, and Mary. With one sweep, the Reformers cut through these obstacles and came down to the heart of the gospel—*Solus Christus!* They declared that Christ alone is the mediator with the Father. Christ alone has paid for our sins through his death on the cross, once and for all. Christ alone is God’s solution for humanity’s ills. Christ alone, plus nothing. Christ alone is the way to salvation. There is no other way to salvation and nothing need be added to Christ to attain salvation.

Liberalism’s Rejection of *Solus Christus*

In 2001, the General Assembly of the PC(USA) was asked to approve an overture to reaffirm “the singular, saving Lordship of Jesus Christ.” The overture came in response to concerns that people were ignoring the confessions and forming a new gospel without Christ at its center. One precipitating event was Dirk Ficca’s speech at Union Seminary, when he asked, “What’s the big deal about Jesus?” Was the 2001 GA willing to reaffirm Jesus as the centerpiece of our faith? No. By majority vote, the overture was defeated. *Solus Christus* was voted down.

The primary objection to the overture, and to the statement in general, was cultural. It was argued that for the church to say that Christ alone is the only way to salvation is disrespectful of other religions. One speaker at that assembly said: “Religions are like a basket of fruit. Apples and oranges are different, but they are all fruit. Religions are different varieties of the same thing, so they’re all equal.” This is pluralism, not biblical Christianity. In all of human history, Jesus Christ is completely unique: the God-man, the Savior, God’s anointed Messiah, the Son of Man and Son of God, Emmanuel, Christus Victor!

The link between the demotion of *Sola Scriptura* and the denial of *Solus Christus* is significant. When human opinion is acknowledged as having greater worth than Scripture, statements from Christ himself or statements about Christ in Scripture carry little weight. Even statements as clear as, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6) are ignored in favor of a more inclusive cultural narrative that puts all religions on a par with one another. The result thwarts the fifth *Sola* directing all life toward the glory of God alone.

Denials of the singular saving work of Jesus Christ are evidence of a pervasive erosion of classical Christology in the church today. Advocates of the Jesus Seminar, people regarded as biblical scholars from prestigious divinity schools, teach that Jesus is not divine and much of the New Testament is a work of fiction. Feminist theologians through conferences and gatherings like “Re-Imagining” seek to replace the cross with a lactating breast celebrating the so-called sacred feminine.

At the 220th PC(USA) General Assembly (2012), commissioners were invited to attend the twentieth anniversary celebration of the Re-Imagining Conference. Linked to that was Overture 11-15 which promotes “Words Matter,” a project promoted by the Advisory Committee for Women’s Concerns. The overture was approved at the assembly without opposition. Buried in the fine print of the rationale and the connected documents, one discovers that the goal of the project is to free Christianity from “patriarchy/kyriarchy” and such racially sensitive contrasts as “light and dark.” In other words, the project aims to remove titles of Jesus like “Lord” and the “Light of the World.” The tragedy of this is that Jesus, the one who washed his disciples’ feet, is unlike any other lord in history, but by removing this language, the beauty of the first being made last is lost.

Again, many faithful Presbyterians continue to revere Jesus Christ as Lord and have not succumbed to the prevailing philosophies of the day that would strip Him of His saving power. With them and with the Church around the world and throughout the ages **we stand** and proclaim, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God” (Nicene Creed). Others may deny Him, but we will not.

Restoring *Solus Christus*

There can be no denying that the decay of *Solus Christus* is partly the responsibility of those who knowing the truth, did not contend valiantly for it. Somewhere between our “Jesus Freak” t-shirts and “Jesus is my Best Friend” bracelets, we have so focused on Jesus the human brother that we allowed the church and the world to lose sight of Jesus the eternal God. Jesus left the eternal presence of the God-head and came down to earth to do more than make us feel better about ourselves. He came to conquer the realities of sin and death that separate us from God. He came to lift us into the *koinonia*, the fellowship he enjoys with the Father. He came to inaugurate and initiate the kingdom of heaven, and he came to do what no other sacrifice could ever accomplish: offer himself as a thoroughly

sufficient atonement for sin. When we participate in the “exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world,” we are doing so as Jesus’ servants, His re-presenters, His co-laborers, people who have the privilege of being called the children of God, not by our birth nor by any right, but by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

When we are confronted with someone challenging the revelation that Jesus is the only way, are we prepared to give a reason for the hope within? Do we know the Scriptures well enough? Are we sufficiently reliant upon the Holy Spirit at work within us to speak through us? Are we equipped and have we equipped others to give a God-honoring, Christ-exalting, biblically grounded, faithful and winsome answer? People are literally dying to know the assurance of things hoped for that we possess by faith in Christ. Do we care enough to do for them what Christ has done for us: risk leaving the safety and security of our privileged positions to enter into the culture of death and begin declaring “Here is the Way! Here is the Truth! Here is the Life! Here is Jesus!”

We must humble ourselves before the Lord and pray, with Paul, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10-11). From that place of humility, we can begin to be the beggars who show other beggars where to find bread.

***Sola Gratia* – There But for the Grace of God Go I**

***Sola Gratia* for the Reformers**

As the Reformers cleared away the human encroachments on Scripture and re-exalted the person and work of Christ, they found they needed to do the same with the doctrine of grace. The connection between these three *Solas* can be clearly seen in John 1:14 which reads: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The Scriptures themselves testify to the veracity of the nature and work of Jesus Christ—realities inseparable from the grace and truth that characterize him.

Martin Luther, in the days before his own personal discovery of grace and faith in the book of Romans, wrote, “I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailor and hangman of my poor soul.” Slowly, he and the others came to

realize that it is not the works of humans that can gain mercy for our souls, much less the indulgences purchased on our behalf. It is grace alone, offered to us through Christ, by which we can be saved.

Liberalism’s Rejection of *Sola Gratia*

Splitting apart what cannot be bifurcated, liberals/progressives like to lay claim to grace and disparage evangelicals as Pharisaical defenders who lack grace and who believe themselves to have a corner on truth. Granted, evangelicals need to grow in grace and learn to speak the truth in love, but first, let us discuss the biblical notion of grace.

The grace often advocated in progressive churches is a pseudo-religious but largely psychological construction that grows out of an “I’m okay, you’re okay” philosophy. It is a perversion of grace that minimizes the depth and breadth of sin to such an extent that the cross of Christ is no longer seen as necessary, let alone sufficient. It is all too common for seminaries to teach that Jesus did not die *for* our sins, but only *because of* our sins. Even when pastors have openly denied the deity of Christ or the Trinity, their declarations have not been seen as the abandonment of an essential tenet of the Reformed faith nor a barrier to serving as a church leader.

The doctrine of grace too often seen today is reminiscent of the “cheap grace” described by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

With cheap grace, the most common sermons can be summed up as, “It is nice to be nice and good to be good.” This, in turn, becomes a form of works righteousness. We just need to be a little nicer and do a little more good. Jesus is then lifted up as an historical example of one do-gooder who was better than most and therefore worthy of emulating. The connection again between a vacuous Christology, devoid of saving power, and *Sola Gratia* is evident.

With no true doctrine of sin and therefore no need of a real Savior, there can be no true doctrine of grace. If no divine grace, then the only reservoir of forgiveness in the world is that cultivated through humanism, which is ultimately a hopeless pursuit that offers no way, no truth and no life. People know the depth of their own depravity and they know there is nothing they can do to become good enough. People need a Savior and we know His name. We know that He came full of grace

and truth and we know that He offers the same to those who put their faith in Him. How long will we deny access to the reality of God's grace to a world dying to be redeemed?

In opposition to the cheap grace proffered by many today, **we stand** on the truth that "because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace [we] have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5).

Restoring *Sola Gratia*

Scripture tells us that "all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We need to be reminded of our own need for grace. We need to be reminded that Jesus ate with sinners, came not for the healthy but those who needed a Great Physician, and said of himself, "I did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save it" (John 12:47).

No issue has highlighted this lack of grace more readily than the issue of homosexuality. Many are quick to form theological conclusions on this issue, but too few have proven themselves willing to minister. According to the board chairman of OnebyOne ministry, the number of identifiably evangelical PC(USA) churches that sponsor support groups and other ministries specifically designed to help people dealing with unwanted same-sex attraction can be counted on *one hand*. Hopefully, additional churches opt for doing ministry quietly and unseen. We tend to keep this topic under wraps because anyone who takes a stand on this issue is almost immediately labeled a "homophobe." It is extremely difficult to be compassionate without compromising God's truth—difficult but not impossible.

One of the reasons we lack credibility on this issue is that we have failed to address the morass of sexual brokenness within the heterosexual community. People sitting next to us in the pew are dealing with a myriad of hidden issues including broken relationships, child sexual abuse, infidelity, promiscuity, adultery, domestic violence, pornography, rape, abortion.... The list is tragically long and equally tragically unknown. Grace needs to be extended. Truth needs to be spoken in love. Sin needs to be outed and exposed to the light of life. The Savior can redeem—but only when we deal honestly and graciously with the reality of our depravity.

As quickly as we point to the condemnation of homosexual practice in I Corinthians 6:9, we must point out the hope of redemption and transformation that immediately follows. "That is what some of you were.

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). This is the miracle of God's redeeming grace that we have all received! This is the good news that we need to share with everyone we encounter!

May we extend grace by humbling ourselves at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, "who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace" (2 Tim. 1:9).

***Sola Fide* – The Substance of Things Hoped for**

***Sola Fide* for the Reformers**

For the Reformers, justification by faith alone was perhaps the most radical of all their statements. All of the pronouncements from the popes and church councils, priests and monks, had created an entire industry through which the common people had to be processed in order to achieve justification. It was not something a person could do on his own—justification was conferred by the church. As with the doctrine of grace, justification was not something understood as freely offered by God in Jesus Christ, but rather something that had to be earned. Even at the end of life, it could not be known for sure whether or not one had received full justification; therefore, it was best to purchase indulgences for the sake of deceased loved ones in order that their time in purgatory might be shortened.

What a radical notion, then, when the Reformers quoted, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9)! To say that faith is a gift, and grace is a gift, that Christ has freely given to all who believe in him, was a complete transformation of the message from the church of the day.

Liberalism's Rejection of *Sola Fide*

The Reformers built each *Sola* upon the last—the authority of Scripture showed them a true understanding of Christ and his work on the cross, which revealed true grace, and led them to understand and receive the gift of faith.

We can just as easily trace the opposite path in liberal/progressive theology. As the authority of Scripture has been undermined, Jesus Christ and his work on the cross have been diminished. That vacant

Christology has resulted in cheap grace, which now requires little or no faith at all—no faith in a living, sovereign, faithful God; no faith in the things hoped for but as yet unseen; no faith in anyone or anything but the self. People have rejected the biblical Christian narrative for their own stories, have exchanged the Way of the Cross for their own life-path, and have exchanged the truth of God’s revealed Word for their own syncretistic philosophies based on rationalism, existentialism and naturalism. This new version of faith is no longer a house built on the Rock but instead is built on the ever-shifting sands of cultural experience.

The evidence of this spiral is most clearly seen by our priorities as a church. We have placed the priorities of the material far above the eternal. Yes, we are absolutely called to live out our faith in word and deed. This has been a strength of the mainline denominations for many years. But when these ministries become good deeds without the Good News, we lose our heart of faith and we lose who we are. At some point the question must be posed: are we an authentic part of Christ’s Church or are we a social services agency in church clothes?

This trajectory can be demonstrated through the evolution of the definition of the word “mission” in the life of the PC(USA) and other mainline denominations. There was a day (from the 1850’s-1950’s) when mission work meant the evangelization of the world with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Then the definition began to change. In order to redirect monies given for mission work to causes that included a wider variety of humanitarian and social justice political efforts, the General Assembly changed the way the word “mission” is used. Mission has over time come to mean anything that the church does. The 220th GA finalized this reality by acting on a request by what was once the General Assembly Council and then became the General Assembly Mission Council to change its name again to the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board. No one is denying the importance of genuine ministries of relief to the least, the lost, the broken, the hurting, the wounded, the widow, or the orphan. But “missions” and “missional” now include a myriad of staff positions, advocacy efforts and programs that are a far cry from evangelism and church planting. We have lost the heart for the true building up of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, of drawing others into the saving knowledge of the grace offered to us through his death on the cross, and the making of disciples.

At the 220th PC(USA) General Assembly meeting in Pittsburgh, there were nearly 50 items of business centered on social justice and peacemaking issues. This represents about 20 percent of the business at the

assembly. In contrast, there were only three items that deal with evangelism, church planting, and church growth. Those three comprised barely 1 percent of the business.

I spent nearly a decade working for World Vision, and I believe in these ministries. While I experienced devastating physical poverty overseas, the thing that most struck me every time I came back to the States was the overwhelming spiritual poverty here. If we are an authentic expression of the Church of Jesus Christ, we cannot leave people with full stomachs but starving hearts. Jesus did not deal first with the physical condition of the paralytic, but with his desperate spiritual need that only the Savior could see. Jesus forgave the man’s sins, and only then did he send him home on restored legs, carrying his own mat.

We stand on true faith, which is “not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ’s saving work” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q.21).

Restoring *Sola Fide*

Living in the United States of America, it is often easy to put our faith in the things around us more than in God. If we need light, we turn on a switch. If we need bread, we go to the store. If we get sick, we take medicine. So if we want faith, we make a decision that we will believe something. We pick the answer we want for our prayers and try to fit God around the answer we want. We have put our faith in politics, in electricity, in institutions, in the stuff of earth, but what happens when all of that is stripped away? We tend to forget that faith is “a gift of God, not of ourselves, lest anyone should boast.” What does “faith alone” mean to us anymore?

Two Guatemalan women were visiting our church recently, and I asked them where they see God at work. They replied matter-of-factly, “Everywhere.” Through the translator they explained: “We pray, and God answers our prayers. If someone is sick, we pray, and they get better. If we need something, we pray, and God provides it.” They were truly giants in the faith—God had gifted them through very difficult circumstances, and they knew they could rely on Him for everything.

Evangelicals have labored long and hard to protect the essentials of the faith, but the difficulties we have faced in the past may pale in the face of what is to come. God may be using these trials to renew our sense of need for

him—not just intellectual assent but deep soul reliance on our Lord and Savior. As Peter writes, “These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7). And God’s glory is the most precious gift of all.

***Soli Deo Gloria* – Our Chief End**

***Soli Deo Gloria* and the Reformers**

When most people hear the phrase, “*Soli Deo Gloria*,” they think of Bach’s signature at the end of all of his compositions—to God alone be the glory. It was a deeply meaningful statement for Bach, but he didn’t originate it. It was the cry of the hearts of the Reformers nearly two hundred years earlier.

The church of the day apportioned glory, or credit, for salvation in many different ways. Some went to Christ, some went to Mary and the saints, some to the church, and some went to the sinners themselves for the work they did in following along the narrow way. In addition to being an issue about salvation, the Reformers also saw the vast amount of wealth that went into the cathedrals and institutions of the church—giant edifices that glorified humanity rather than God. They found that neither of these positions was tolerable—God and God alone deserved the glory, and our whole lives and everything about the church should reflect that.

Liberalism’s Rejection of *Soli Deo Gloria*

What is our chief end in the twenty-first century? On what is our heart really set? For what do we most often pray? Are we genuinely pressing the full force of our lives into glorifying God and seeking the advancement

of His Kingdom or are we busy in the “pursuit of happiness,” building little kingdoms of our own to our own glory?

Too often liberalism has placed human thought, human plans, human desires and vainglory over the glory of God. Abhorrent behavior and false teachers are rewarded. Human opinion and avant garde ideas are given privilege over the authority of Scripture. Jesus is allowed to be a savior but not exclusively so; servant or friend, but not Lord and certainly not God. We can have grace if we don’t talk about sin, and faith if by that we mean the demonstration through good works.

It is little wonder that most of the time at the 220th PC(USA) General Assembly was spent talking about stretching behavioral boundaries and redefining for ourselves things on which the Bible is crystal clear. Who is being glorified? Humanity, not God.

Restoring *Soli Deo Gloria*

At this point, we have a choice to make. Are we going to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and trust that all these things will be added unto us as well? Are we going to let the culture around us determine who we are and what we believe, or are we going to stand on the essentials of the faith—and have faith that the Lord will indeed triumph in the end?

Joshua said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Luther said, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” What say ye?

I say, *Soli Deo Gloria*, come what may...

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Centers and Boundaries

by Robert P. Mills

If you’ve ever driven a car around a curve you’re familiar with the physical phenomenon of centrifugal force. It’s the tug you feel as you try to keep your car on the road while your car simultaneously expresses

its desire to ignore the asphalt and continue straight along its present path.

Our English word “centrifugal” combines the Latin words for “center” and “flee.” Centrifugal force is thus

that power or persuasion that pushes a body (human, mechanical, or ecclesiastical) away from a central point. Ignoring the physical reality of centrifugal force while attempting to drive around a curve at a high rate of speed will likely acquaint you with the English word “impact” (from the Latin *impactus*, meaning “to have pushed against”).

Ignoring the equivalent theological and ecclesiastical realities will equally result in significant damage, as Frederick Buechner illustrates in his theological lexicon *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Buechner begins his definition of “sin” by writing: “The power of sin is centrifugal. When at work in a human life, it tends to push everything out toward the periphery. Bits and pieces go flying off until only the core is left.”

A vivid image to be sure, but Buechner isn’t finished. He concludes, “Eventually bits and pieces of the core itself go flying off until in the end nothing at all is left.”¹

“The power of sin is centrifugal ... in the end nothing at all is left.”

Bracketed by Buechner’s imagery of sin as a centrifugal force, this essay begins with brief excursions into the realm of etymology before making the turn to ecclesiology.

Centers and Boundaries

The first hit in a Google search (and if you see it in Google, it must be so) for the definition of the word “center” yields, “A point or place that is equally distant from the sides or outer boundaries of something.”² For the old school among us, Webster’s offers “a point equally distant from all points on the circumference [otherwise known as the boundary] of a circle or surface of a sphere.”³

By either definition, a center cannot exist without a boundary. If there is no boundary, the very notion of “center” is vacuous. And it is here that etymology becomes instructive.

Our English word “center” comes from the Latin *centrum*. *Centrum* originally meant “that point of the compass around which the other describes [literally, “writes of”] the circle.” The Latin *centrum* in turn derives from the Greek noun *kentron*, meaning “a sharp point,” or “goad.”⁴ That noun comes from the verb *kenteo*, which means “to pierce.”

In secular Greek, *kentron* “comes to denote the point at which we fix one side of the compasses while making a

circle with the other. κέντρον is thus the centre of a circle (Lat. *centrum*), then the centre of any surface or body, and even the centre of the universe.”⁵

The English word “boundary” also derives from a Latin term, *bonnarium*, which means a “piece of land within a fixed limit.”⁶ Again relying on Google, “boundary” is initially defined as “a line which marks the limits of an area; a dividing line.”⁷ Webster’s definition is similar.

The very concept of a center requires a fixed boundary. Only when the sharp point of the compass is anchored at the center can the boundary of a circle be drawn. Once inscribed, a boundary returns the favor, functioning, at least in part, to identify the center. To dismiss the viability of boundaries while insisting on the significance of “the center” is to misunderstand both ideas.

Certainly this is the case in mathematics. Circles and spheres, by definition, cannot exist without both boundaries and centers. A mathematician who denied that a circle has a boundary would not be highly regarded in his field. Any conclusions he might base on such an axiomatically mistaken premise rightly would be seen as fatally flawed.

The same is true in psychology. A person who has “boundary issues” is one who is unsure of who he is at his very core. A person who doesn’t know where he ends and another begins is in serious psychological disarray.

What is true of mathematics and psychology is also true of Christian theology. A Christian, a congregation, or a denomination that is unaware of where its boundaries lie is in danger of falling apart. If the center is uncertain, the boundary is necessarily uncertain as well.

Throughout most of Christian history, Jesus Christ has been understood to be at the center of Christian faith and life. More precisely, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed: “It is the nature of the person of Christ to be in the center, both spatially and temporally. The one who is present in Word, Sacrament, and Church is in the center of human existence, of history and of nature. It belongs to the structure of his person to be in the center.”⁸

With clarity and simplicity, Bonhoeffer saw what many in our congregations today either carelessly overlook or willfully ignore: Just as it belongs to the nature of a circle to have a center, so it belongs to the nature of Jesus to be the center not only of human existence but of the entire universe.

Going back to the Greek *kentron*, Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, is the sharp point. His very existence pierces the pretensions of all who would enthrone themselves at the center of their own existence or, in the case of the more egomaniacal, at the center of a church, a nation, or even the entire world. For many, the incarnate Jesus is a stumbling block (the Greek is *skandalon*). If he is firmly anchored at the center, they cannot occupy that space.

Confronted with Jesus as “the center of human existence,” many choose flight rather than worship as their response, which brings us to the second half of the word “centrifugal.” The Latin verb *fugere* means “to flee.” It is the root of the word “fugue,” which, in music, is a polyphonic composition in which the main melody appears to be chasing after itself in a succession of voices.

Again turning to psychology, a psychogenic fugue involves “The unexpected travel of a person, who cannot later recall the trip.” It is a dissociative disorder in which “the affected person temporarily is unable to integrate all the elements of personality into a unified whole; the result is a fragmentation or splitting. ... Often the sufferer will assume a new identity while on his or her trip and be genuinely unable to recall the former, true identity.”⁹

Do you hear any theological overtones in that description? In the language of orthodox theology the natural human tendency to flee from God has been labeled “sin.” And as Buechner notes, the power of sin is centrifugal; it is a force that causes people to flee the center, bits and pieces go flying off, a spiritual fugue results in fragmentation, true identity is lost.

That is the reality now facing many congregations and denominations, particularly those in the Protestant mainline. In a tacit recognition that this disintegration is not a good thing, some have called for a renewed focus on the center while simultaneously denying the validity, or even the existence, of boundaries.

The Center Under Siege

One who took such an approach was Jack Rogers, who in 1995 wrote *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews*. “The thesis of this book,” Rogers writes, “is that the root cause of mainline church decline is an internal conflict of worldviews. Good, intelligent, and devout people simply *see reality differently*” (emphasis added). Implicit in this statement, and illustrated, although never openly stated, in the book’s opening chapter, is that all worldviews are equally valid.

The belief that all worldviews are equally “true” for the ones holding them, leads Rogers to claim: “Conflict occurs when people—Christian people—make their theological elaboration or ideological applications or experiential colorings the ultimate rather than the ultimate religious worldview itself. In Christian terms, conflict occurs when we put anything in the center except *our commitment* to God revealed in Jesus Christ”¹⁰ (emphasis added).

Notice what Rogers puts at the center. It is not the Triune God. It is not God incarnate, Jesus Christ. It is not God’s written revelation, the Bible. Rather, for Rogers, what goes at the center of Christian faith and life is “our commitment.” Yes, he finishes the phrase “our commitment to God revealed in Jesus Christ.” But given his book’s central thesis—that good, intelligent, and devout people “see reality differently” —those with different commitments must have disjunct understandings of words like “God,” “revealed,” and “Jesus Christ.” What is important to Rogers, and those similarly captivated by his postmodern epistemology, is not the objective reality of God, but the commitment of each individual to whatever he believes to be true for him.

As a result of this kind of thinking and teaching in our seminaries, many in our congregations are now experiencing what William Butler Yeats described in his famous poem “The Second Coming,” written in 1920:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

As bad as things may have seemed when Yeats wrote, at least he could be confident that his readers shared his assurance that there was such a thing as “the center,” even if it wasn’t holding together. That assumption is no longer valid. In the postmodern worldview exemplified by Rogers and his ideological allies, there is no single sharp point at the center of human existence. Instead, there are as many centers as there are individuals with commitments.

And with an uncountable number of centers comes an uncountable number of boundaries. For if our commitment defines our center, it equally defines our boundary.

The Bible Describes the Boundaries

However, if Jesus is, as Bonhoeffer writes, “the center of human existence, of history and of nature,” that center must define boundaries. While God has revealed himself in nature and supremely in the incarnate Jesus, the sharp point at the center of our faith, he has traced the boundaries of that faith in his written revelation, the Bible.

From the Pentateuch through the prophets, from the gospels through the Revelation to Saint John, the Bible sets the boundaries for what God’s people may believe about him and for how they are to behave toward him and one another. We can never know all there is to know of God, and we must never go beyond what God has revealed about his nature and his will.

For example, if the Bible teaches that Jesus is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6), Christians do not have the option of declaring the Jesus is just one of many paths to the divine. Similarly, if the Bible teaches “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4), neither atheism nor polytheism is compatible with Christianity. If Jesus is the center, the Bible describes the boundaries of Christian faith and life.

But if the center is merely our commitment at the moment, the Bible is at best series of guidelines that we may or may not choose to follow. At worst it is a collection of misleading and even dangerous statements from an ancient period of human history that we postmoderns have long since outgrown. In either case, the Bible cannot limit what we believe or how we behave.

Salvation

The desire to be without boundaries is not new to the postmodern generation. It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Buechner concludes his definition of sin with this paragraph:

‘Original Sin’ means we all originate out of a sinful world which taints us from the word go. We all tend to make ourselves the center of the universe, pushing away centrifugally from that center everything that seems to impede its freewheeling. More even than hunger, poverty, or disease, it is what Jesus said he came to save the world from. (See SALVATION)¹¹

Focusing on boundaries is not incompatible with celebrating the center. But as Buechner notes, the power of sin is centrifugal. If the power of sin is allowed to prevail, eventually the center is pulled apart leaving

nothing at all—not a person, not a theological system, not a congregation or a denomination.

Boundaries and centers are inseparable in mathematical forms, individual psyches, and ecclesiastical institutions. Therefore, those who wish to celebrate the center of their congregation or denomination would do well to pay renewed attention to biblical boundaries.

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 88.
2. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/center>, accessed 5/19/2012.
3. “Center,” *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1999), p. 237.
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5. Lothar Schmid, “*kenron*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (electronic ed; Vol. 3, Page 665).
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9. J.R. Beck, “Fugue, Psychogenic,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1985), p. 433.
10. Jack Rogers, *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), pp. xv, xvii.
11. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 88.

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Why Do We Draw the Line?

by Carl Trueman

In recent years, talk of uniting around the center has been very popular in conservative evangelical quarters. One obvious reason for this is that many regard such a center as reflecting the fact that there is a solid core of key doctrines on which evangelicals agree, even though there are areas of disagreement. Thus, many consider Trinitarianism, penal substitution, and justification by grace alone through faith alone to be central points of agreement. At the same time, these same people would regard the subjects and mode of baptism or the details of church polity to be areas of disagreement. Yet, by seeing the former as more important, they regard diversity on the latter as not of truly fundamental significance.

A second reason for emphasizing talk about the center is, perhaps, more problematic. Frequently, those who talk of the center as all-important contrast themselves favorably with those they see as emphasizing boundaries. Boundaries are much more problematic in our current culture. They sound rather like borders, and the last hundred years witness eloquently to the evil effects of borders, with countless wars and ethnic cleansings. Further, boundaries also point to exclusion, and if there is one thing that the modern Western world seems to fear more than anything else, it is exclusion. After all, to exclude is to oppress. Finally, in a world shaped at the level of intellectual culture by the transgressive thinking of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, and at a popular level by the hedonism of Hugh Hefner and his cultural progeny, boundaries speak of oppression, of “them” stopping “us” from reaching our full potential or even simply enjoying ourselves.

For the above theological and cultural reasons, evangelical talk of centers rather than boundaries has a lot to commend it. To make the point concisely: it is consonant with both the desire of Christians for unity and the cultural, political, and psychological aesthetics of our time.

There are, however, good reasons for resisting such language, or at least for moderating it.

First, we need to be aware of the cultural aesthetic that make such ideas attractive. For the world at large, boundaries have become something to be transgressed, and that continuously. Hefner’s business empire was

built on precisely such a premise, and, indeed, the financial problems afflicting his magazine in recent years witness to the fact that one cannot simply cross a boundary and then stop: that merely establishes a new boundary, which others will transgress in more radical and extreme ways.

Yet if the pioneers of our culture see boundaries as oppressive, as Christians we need to realize that a commitment to the Bible’s teaching requires us rather to see that boundaries have not been put in place by God to oppress us or to stop us from being who we are. In fact, they have been put in place for precisely the opposite reason, to enable us to be truly human. When human beings break God’s law, for example, they do not become more human; rather, they become dehumanized as that which distinguishes them from all other animals, the fact that they bear God’s image, is practically abolished.

Second, we need to realize that, whatever our culture likes to tell us, even it has to accept in practice that not all exclusion is bad exclusion. Few, if any, would want to argue that the exclusion from wider society of serial killers and pedophiles is a bad or oppressive thing. Such exclusion actually liberates. Yes, there is much talk about prisons failing because of re-offending rates and so on, but a serial killer in prison is hard-pressed to kill a law-abiding member of the public, and a pedophile in prison has no access to children. Such exclusion is surely both desirable and successful when looked at in those terms.

Thus it is in the church: it is good to exclude from the teaching ministry of the church those who propagate heresy, and it is good to exclude even from the company of the church those whose lifestyles or water-cooler sermons every Sunday do harm to the people of God. Such exclusion saves souls—perhaps even the soul of the offender—it does not destroy them (1 Tim. 1:20).

We also need to understand that the talk of doctrinal confession that focuses on the center rather than on boundaries is ultimately specious, however well-intended such may be.

There are numerous problems with the center image, but I will address only two. The first is the rather obvious one implied by the image itself: centers and boundaries are ultimately dependent upon each other—one cannot meaningfully talk of one without assuming the existence of the other. In a circle, the central point is a function of the perimeter. I know where the center is only when I see the circle as a whole and judge its location on the basis of its circumference. Thus it is in theology: one’s judgment on which doctrines are central will depend upon where one judges it necessary to draw boundaries and for what purpose.

Second, much theology, and certainly much creedal formulation, is what we might call negative in character. In other words, it actually tells us what God is not or what He cannot be. As such, even individual Christian doctrines are boundary-forming, not center-focused. For example, to say that God is infinite is to say something negative about God: He has no limits. This formulation sets a boundary: there are lots of things I might be able to say about God, but if at some point I say He has limits, I cross a boundary into error.

It is similar with many of the great creeds. The Chalcedonian Definition defines the person of Christ by declaring that He is one person in two natures. It is

actually saying that any formula that posits more than one person or that mixes the natures to produce a kind of metaphysical compound of humanity and divinity has crossed a boundary.

What such boundaries do, of course, is liberate. They tell the church where it is safe to theologize just as fences along the edge of a cliff help to keep people from plunging to their deaths.

Talk of center-focused theology rather than boundary theology is attractive but ultimately specious. It often represents no more than one group using the rhetoric of the wider culture to make itself look good in comparison to others. In fact, to talk theology at all is to talk boundaries and always has been. The only questions are how many boundaries there are and whether one openly and honestly acknowledges them as such.

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Identifying Boundaries

by Susan A. Cyre

What are the boundaries to Christian faith which if crossed, place a person outside of Christian faith? What is the content of Christian faith? Can a person claim to be a Christian and believe anything at all as long as he/she holds those beliefs *sincerely*? Does Christian faith have any specific content at all?

Retired Episcopal bishop John Spong rejects every fundamental doctrine of historic Christian faith, yet he claims to be a Christian. Spong rejects theism (and therefore “monotheism”) in which a supernatural God intervenes in the natural world. He rejects Jesus “as the earthly incarnation of this supernatural deity” and therefore he rejects the Trinity. He rejects the need for the atonement, since he rejects the inborn sinful nature of human beings. Then Spong asks, “Can a person claim with integrity to be a Christian and at the same

time dismiss, as I have done, so much of what has traditionally defined the content of the Christian faith?”¹ Spong answers, “Yes,” and calls himself a Christian.

The question of what it means to be a Christian is not new. Paul rebuked some in Galatia for demanding that Gentile Christians follow Jewish tradition. Paul writes to the Galatians: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is no gospel at all.... If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”

Christian faith rests on the Good News that historical events, as interpreted by Scripture, have opened the way of salvation. Jesus was not merely a Jewish man who

died on a cross and remains in the grave. Scripture tells us that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...” (1 Cor. 15:2). Jesus’ resurrection proves that the “wages of sin which is death” (Rom. 6:23) have been paid in full.

The Role of Doctrine

The whole of Scripture, including the Old Testament, relays the historical events of Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection and interprets their meaning. Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders for not understanding that the Old Testament pointed to him: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me...” (John 5:39). On the road to Emmaus after the resurrection, Jesus taught the disciples “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, ... what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Our confessions are the church’s attempt over the centuries to present a systematized witness to Scripture’s teachings about Christ’s finished work of redemption. These are the doctrines we hold.

Some of these doctrines are essential and go to the heart of the atonement. Other doctrines are non-essential but help us apply Scripture to our lives. These non-essential doctrines have no impact on the atonement. John Calvin makes this distinction between essential and non-essential doctrines. Essential doctrines according to Calvin include: “God is one; Christ is God and the son of God, our salvation rests on God’s mercy; and the like.”² Clearly, these doctrines directly support and interpret the atonement.

Calvin also gives an example of a non-essential doctrine. He says that whether our souls “fly to heaven” immediately after death or whether it is sufficient to believe that souls after death, “live in the Lord” is a non-essential doctrine. It does not impact Christ’s finished work of redemption.

Essential doctrines that support and interpret the atonement form a boundary around the Gospel. If the boundaries are breached, like a protective wall, the center, which is the atonement, will soon fall. Therefore, these essential doctrines cannot be rejected, compromised, adapted to cultural values, or syncretized with modern politically correct beliefs and attitudes.

Protecting the Boundaries

In the following section I propose some essential doctrines and suggest places where they are being

challenged in our day. If those challenges prevail, it will necessarily lead to a denial of the atonement.

1. The Trinity

In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. (Westminster Confession, Book of Confessions (BOC), 6.013)

The Triune God—three persons, one Godhead—is an essential doctrine of Christian faith because without the Triune God, there is no Savior. It is the Father, who sent the Son to die for our sins, and the Holy Spirit who makes Christ’s death real and effectual in our lives. The Father sending the Son to die is not cosmic child abuse as some claim. Since there is one Godhead, it is God himself who came to die.

Boundaries:

We must reject the use of inclusive God-language exclusively to replace Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To accept such a substitution exclusively may lead to a loss of the doctrine of the Trinity and therefore the atonement. The exclusive use of impersonal terms like “rock,” “rainbow,” “ark,” “dove,” “beloved” or even “Holy One” may lose the three-ness of God and the personhood of God. Unlike Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which clearly denote three persons, “rock,” “dove,” and the like do not express God’s three-ness nor do they express the personhood of the members of the Trinity.

We must reject the use of female names for God like “Christa,” “Sophia,” “the womb,” or “Mother” because the terms lead to pantheism. In pantheism creation is identical with the divinity. A female god who “births” creation causes creation to be of the same divine substance as the goddess. There is no distinction between the goddess and the creation.

This heresy of pantheism was evident at the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference where the panels being painted in the front of the conference hall were of a goddess with the earth in her womb. Reflecting this pantheism, the conference attendees put red dots on each other’s foreheads and bowed to each other to affirm their divinity. Communion was not the body and blood of Christ but the milk and honey of women, the divine ones. The attendees rejected the atonement as “cosmic child abuse” saying “we don’t need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.”

In a few places Scripture uses the linguistic form of simile to compare an attribute of God to, for example, a mother hen. Scripture never, however, uses female names for God.

2. Authority of Scripture

All Scripture is God-breathed... (2 Tim 3:16).

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (Westminster Confession, BOC 6.004)

Scripture was written by various men and reflects different writing styles. John Calvin explains that Scripture is authoritative because it came from the “very mouth of God by the ministry of men.”³ The God who is distinct from his creation, revealed himself to his creation through the words of Scripture. Scripture therefore stands over us and is normative for our lives. Scripture is how we know God and know ourselves.

Boundaries:

We must reject ideologies that claim Scripture is the flawed record of its sinful human authors’ experience of God and therefore is filled with their sinful ideas and cultural biases. The people who claim Scripture is filled with sin and cultural biases then stand over Scripture and judge whether its content fits their personal experience of reality using a “hermeneutic of suspicion.”⁴ Spong argues that Scripture is fatally flawed because the biblical authors were “warped... by their lack of knowledge and by the tribal and sexist prejudices of that ancient time.”⁵

But consider what it means if human beings stand over Scripture and judge which parts are true and authoritative and which are not. In order to judge Scripture, human beings cannot be sinners whose judgment, reason, and emotions are clouded by sin. If they are not sinners, they have no need of a Savior who died for their sins.

3. God is the Creator

That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth with all that is in them, who also upholds and governs them by his eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ his Son, my God and my Father. (Heidelberg Catechism, BOC 4.026)

God created all that exists out of nothing.

Boundaries

We must reject the belief that God is not the Creator and therefore he did not create all that exists out of nothing. Consider that if God is not the Creator, then he is not almighty. If he is not the Creator, creation does not glorify him; he does not know how it is meant to function; he cannot judge his creation and call parts of it good or evil; he does not rule over it; he does not sustain it; he cannot tell us how to live; he cannot redeem human beings and creation.

It follows that if God is not the Creator, then Christ, as the eternal Son of God, did not enter his creation to redeem it, since there is no need for redemption. Creation is merely the product of natural forces and has no value of good or evil assigned by the Creator.

If God is not the Creator, then it follows that human beings are not created in God’s image and have no special place in creation but are descended randomly from the primordial soup and are of no more value than the animals. There is no Gospel in which God restores us to the image of God, the likeness of Christ, through the atonement and sanctifying work of the Spirit (Romans 8:29).

4. Jesus Christ

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. John 1:1, 14

It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the prophet, priest, and king; the head and Savior of his Church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world; unto whom he did from all eternity, give a people to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. (Westminster Confession, BOC 6.043)

The Son of God, the second Person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness for time was come, take upon him man’s nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof: yet without sin: being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. (Westminster Confession, BOC 6.044)

Jesus Christ is the pre-existent second Person of the Godhead. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb and not through natural human generation. Therefore he is fully divine and fully human but is without sin. Jesus is of the same substance as the Father: "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made..." (Nicene Creed). Human beings can be adopted into the relationship of the Godhead through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Boundaries:

We must reject the belief that Jesus was not conceived in a miraculous way through the virgin birth, but instead was conceived through natural human generation. Consider that if Jesus was born through natural human generation, then he was born with a sinful human nature rebelling against the Father. Since a sinner cannot atone for the sins of others, Jesus cannot atone for our sins.

Consider that if Jesus is not the pre-existent Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb, but was instead only human and was made divine by some special intervention of the Father after his birth, perhaps at his baptism, then all human beings can be made equal to Jesus and perhaps already are.

There is no need for the atonement. The Father can simply declare we are divine by filling us with the Holy Spirit as Jesus was filled at his baptism. It follows that we are not marred by sin but every thought and action is empowered by our divine nature from the Holy Spirit living in us. Anything we feel passionate and good about, we can say is from the Holy Spirit and of divine origin. This denies our need for redemption.

If Jesus is not the unique second Person of the Triune Godhead breaking into human history in human flesh, and was only a mortal man who felt close to God and spoke truth to power in both Rome and the Church, it follows that his death was merely the response of those in power to those who speak the truth. Thus there is no Gospel. Jesus is simply a model of one who spoke boldly to corrupt social systems.

5. The Holy Spirit

The Spirit proceedeth from the Father and the Son and together with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified. (Nicene)

The Holy Spirit, the third Person in the Trinity, proceeding from the Father and the Son, of the same

substance and equal in power and glory, is, together with the Father and the Son, to be believed in, loved, obeyed, and worshipped throughout the ages. (Westminster Confession, BOC 6.051)

He is the Lord and Giver of life, everywhere present, and is the source of all good thoughts, pure desires, and holy counsels in men. By him the prophets were moved to speak the Word of God, and all writers of the Holy Scriptures inspired to record infallibly the mind and will of God. The dispensation of the gospel is especially committed to him. He prepares the way for it, accompanies it with his persuasive power, and urges its message upon the reason and conscience of men, so that they who reject its merciful offer are not only without excuse, but are also guilty of resisting the Holy Spirit. (Westminster Confession, BOC 6.052)

The Holy Spirit whom the Father is ever willing to give to all who ask him, is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption. He regenerates men by his grace, convicts them of sin, moves them to repentance, and persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith. He unites all believers to Christ, dwells in them as their Comforter and Sanctifier, gives to them the spirit of Adoption and Prayer, and performs all those gracious offices by which they are sanctified and sealed unto the day of redemption. (Westminster Confession, BOC 6.053)

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Triune Godhead. The Holy Spirit inspired Scripture and because there is one God, the Spirit does not contradict himself. The Spirit makes the Gospel real and effectual in our lives. The Spirit assures us that we are children of God and can call God "Abba."

Boundaries:

We must reject the belief that the Spirit did not inspire Scripture revealing the nature and acts of God, including the atonement, and the nature of fallen human beings who are in need of redemption.

We must reject the belief that the Spirit speaks to us today revealing a different, more tolerant God than the God of Scripture: a God who affirms our deepest desires and wants nothing more than for us to be happy.

We must reject the belief that the content of Scripture is outdated and therefore, the Spirit is telling us a new thing today. We reject the belief that we can use our modern knowledge and advanced reasoning to observe the world around us through the lens of science and discover truth about God and ourselves. We reject the belief that the Holy Spirit enables us to see this new truth which can be in contradiction to the truth revealed in Scripture.

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This view fails to acknowledge that our sinful nature is unable to discern truth about God and ourselves through reason alone by observing the natural world. If our reason alone were sufficient to discover truth, there would be no need for the atonement.

6. Human beings were created good but as a result of the Fall are born with a sinful nature.

"By nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor." (Heidelberg Catechism, BOC 4.005).

Human beings commit specific sinful acts because they are born with a sinful nature that rebels against God and their neighbor. John Calvin calls this "total depravity," meaning that human beings are born with every faculty distorted by sin: reason, emotion, passions, body, heart. Even after human beings are born again, sin remains at work in us until Christ returns or we enter glory. The power of sin is broken by the cross, and the Holy Spirit living within us convicts us of our sin and empowers us to live an amended life. But the presence of sin is not removed until we die and enter glory.

Boundaries:

We must reject the belief that human beings are born without a sinful human nature but are corrupted after birth by human social institutions.

Consider that if human beings are born without a sinful human nature, but acquire sinful propensities after birth through tainted social structures, like patriarchy, poverty, bad parenting, capitalism, etc. then the solution is not a Savior, but changes to the social structures. There is no need for a Savior to redeem sinful social structures. Human beings can redeem social structures through their own ingenuity and reason.

Consider that if human beings are born without a sinful human nature, then individuals can rely on their

experience, passion, and reason to determine the truth and live the truth and they do not need a Savior.

Conclusion

Boundaries are important. It is as the boundaries are slowly eroded away that the center is lost. Christians need to understand and accept both the center and the boundaries of faith. Our faith must first rest on a knowledge of Scripture to understand the historical facts and Scripture's interpretation of those facts through the working of the Holy Spirit. A strong faith must be catechized so it rests on the witness of the confessions that are the voices of Christians across the ages. And finally that faith must understand the modern assaults on the boundaries of faith and be able to biblically, faithfully, and logically stand strong against those challenges. Scripture tells us, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). Let us begin with commitment and joy the renewal of our minds through the power of the Holy Spirit so that our faith in Christ may grow!

1. John Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World* (Harper: San Francisco, 2001), p. 7.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, translator Battles), 4.1.12.
3. *Ibid*, 1.7.5.
4. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1984), p. 15.
5. John Spong, *The Sins of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), p. 18.

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