

PROTAGONIST CORNER

Back to Basics

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"Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and continually guided by our Confession and Catechisms?" Book of Church Order, "Ordination Vows," 29-3, 4

"a search for the core of Christian Experience and tradition"--"a process"--"an intention"--"depends upon the ability of significant confessors and professors." The Fire We Can Light, Martin Marty

Since decision and actions form the framework for expressing the Christian faith, I have become increasingly concerned about the basis upon which our church, our congregations and pastors have been making decisions and taking actions, especially as we move into the 1980s.

I am becoming more deeply aware of how the forces of professional efficiency and practical expediency have become more powerful in church and denominational activities than is a well-informed and reflective theological and biblical position. Perhaps my problem is just the frustrated bellowing of a pastor in a secular and technological society, but bear with me for a moment to draw this problem into the perspective of our church life.

1. Theological Education: One of the strengths of the Presbyterian heritage has been our historic allegiance to the biblically and theologically trained minister. Have you, however, reviewed the catalogues of seminaries recently? Have you noticed how "practical courses" have tended to move toward the center of the curriculums threatening to replace Bible and theology in the number of hours required? Or, have you noticed the popularity among ministers of those programs that emphasize the techniques of professionals? Is there any wonder that such trained professionals are little interested in and unable to engage in serious theological discussion about issues before the church and world?

2. Civil Religion and Professional Captivity: Most Presbyterian churches and pastors are performing ministry in an unholy alliance with the standards and values of middle class America and the free-enterprise system. A new popular piety--that of professionalism--has become the rule of the day tempting us to keep peace at all cost through "conflict management." The extent of this captivity can be observed in the decision-making process of the usual session or Presbytery meeting. How often is the biblical faith or reformed heritage brought to bear on a decision, besides the obligated opening and closing prayer?

3. Votes on the Lord's Table Admission: There has not been a greater opportunity in recent years for a good theological and biblical discussion than the

debate in presbyteries over the question of admitting children to the Lord's Table. Perhaps your experience was different from mine, but I would venture that most of the discussions have centered on the psychological and social analysis of adolescence rather than on the theological and biblical concept of the covenant of grace into which our children are baptized.

4. Confessional Standards: The recent denominational discussion about our confessional standards in the Southern Presbyterian Church was premised on the need to restate our faith in a new time and idiom. Those who opposed the New Declaration opted for the present Westminster Confession and Catechisms, while those who sought a change felt the inadequacy of these standards. Now that this discussion is over, rarely, if ever, is Westminster used by its adherents to make a point in a presbytery or session meeting, nor do its detractors find cause to point where they are out of accord with Westminster's theology. How can we be faithful to the biblical faith in the reformed tradition if we wander into the 1980s in such a standardless fashion?

5. Preaching and Pastoral Life Styles: The dangers of the professional pastor are often evident in the distance between what one preaches and what one practices. The issues of success, competency and peer pressure, not to mention congregational expectations, often blur the biblical and theological foundations of the office of minister of the Word and Sacraments. Large salaries, country club life styles and fine housing allowances all seem to fly in the face of our best stewardship sermon or bible study on the Beatitudes, and are an affront to the poor and oppressed to whom we should minister. Nowhere, perhaps, are the dangers of our professionalism seen so clearly as in these economic issues. As professionals, we deserve large salaries. After all, look what other professionals are making, and don't we have advanced degrees?

Perhaps it is time for us to come clean with ourselves and our biblical and theological foundations, and get back to basics. Perhaps it is time for us as pastors to practice more closely what we preach. Perhaps it is time for us as church leaders to demand and require a more biblical and theological discussion of issues before us. Perhaps it is time for us to be more obedient adherents to our faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps?