

On the Connection Between Theory and Practice

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(45) Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?"

(46) "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards answered. (John 7:45-46)

Introduction

When a person says one thing and does another, there is a gap between theory and practice. We often lament the fact that our own lives do not correspond more closely to the truths we profess. This is one part of a complex topic. Below I would like to discuss another part and to make just the opposite point. While freely acknowledging that theory and practice are not the same, I submit that they cannot ever be entirely separated from each other. Either our theory will shape our practice--in some way--or our practice will shape our theory.

Practice to Theory

If a person has a problem with the practice of tithing, he will develop a corresponding problem with the theory of tithing. There will be doctrinal objections. Similarly if a person has a problem in the area of entertainment practice, he will develop a corresponding problem in the area of entertainment theory. Putting practice into theory has spawned more bad theology than perhaps any other single factor. Putting theory into practice has widely different results but the underlying principles in both cases are the same. Let me illustrate what I mean by putting practice into theory.

The world to which the God-is-dead theologian turns is precisely the middle-class world of technology, sex, and the city which so much sophisticated literature and theology have deplored. Today a great many people long to enjoy some of the fruits of middle-class life so that they too can afford to disparage its values.¹

This example may not be so extreme as it appears. People who wish to live as though there were no God will develop theories that there is no God. People who wish to live in the above manner and yet be thought of as Christians will develop theologically sophisticated theories to support their lifestyles, whatever those theories and lifestyles might be.² All of this is precisely backwards.

Theory to Practice

On the other hand, when someone feeds on the Word and allows its teachings to shape the life practice in tangible ways, the result will be a powerful witness.

There is an eloquence far more powerful than the eloquence of words in the quiet, consistent life of a pure, true Christian. What a man is has more influence than what he says.

The officers who were sent to Jesus came back with the report that never man spoke as He spoke. But the reason for this was that never man lived as He lived. Had His life been other than it was, He could not have spoken as He did. His words bore with them a convincing power, because they came from a heart pure and holy, full of love and sympathy, benevolence and truth.

It is our own character and experience that determine our influence upon others. In order to convince others of the power of Christ's grace, we must know its power in our own hearts and lives. The gospel we present for the saving of souls must be the gospel by which our own souls are saved. Only through a living faith in Christ as a personal Saviour is it possible to make our influence felt in a skeptical world. If we would draw sinners out of the swift-running current, our own feet must be firmly set upon the Rock, Christ Jesus.

The badge of Christianity is not an outward sign, not the wearing of a cross or a crown, but it is that which reveals the union of man with God. By the power of His grace manifested in the transformation of character the world is to be convinced that God has sent His Son as its Redeemer. No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian.³

A corollary of the above principle is that a person may be genuinely unable to understand a given truth, however simply or clearly it is presented, if he feels the need to protect some area of practice that it challenges. We should realize this as we witness to people who hold either no systematic views on religion at all or views other than our own.

Conclusion

The distinction between what I have called theory and practice in this brief paper is similar to that between faith and works. There is no reason to worry whether we will ever be able to put our faith fully into practice. We do, right now, put our faith fully into practice. If I am right, it is impossible to do otherwise. And this in turn might help us understand more clearly the difference between faith and belief (see Jas 2:19). Whatever might be the case in regard to our beliefs, the faith that the world sees is the faith the church actually has. Stating the same thing another way, the world will never be able to see a faith that the church does not actually have. The connection between what we are in our hearts and what we do is inseparable.

(17) Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. (18) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. (Matt 7:17-20)

Christ does not say that every good tree ought to bear good fruit, or must, or will. He says it does. And He says "every good tree" (emphasis supplied). Being a good tree and bearing good fruit are inseparable. Bad fruit, on the other hand, is an imitation of good fruit. It looks like good fruit in certain ways but is not in every way identical to it. The work might appear to be the same but it springs from different principles and has a correspondingly different quality. The issue in fruit bearing is therefore not how to bear fruit but how to sink our roots deeply in the nourishing soil of God's Word and keep them there. The critical events in fruit bearing take place beneath the surface--deep in the ground. This kind of theory is not very

theoretical. It is a practical reality. But in any event, it is the only way to ensure that the fruit we bear will be on the right order.

Epilogue

The above principle can be extended to address the vexed question of Christian perfection. In one very illuminating passage Ellen White states that,

The warfare against God's law, which was begun in heaven, will be continued until the end of time. Every man will be tested. Obedience or disobedience is the question to be decided by the whole world. All will be called to choose between the law of God and the laws of men. Here the dividing line will be drawn. There will be but two classes. Every character will be fully developed; and all will show whether they have chosen the side of loyalty or that of rebellion.⁴

So to those who worry whether they will ever be able to put their faith fully into practice and achieve perfection of character I say, You surely will. It is impossible to avoid doing so. Whatever the nature of your faith, for better or worse, "Every character will be fully developed; . . ." The question is what direction your character development takes, not whether it will be perfected. It will be. One day soon Jesus will arise, lay off His priestly robes, and say:

"Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy." (Rev 22:11)

There is no third category either in Rev 22:11 (quoted above) or in Matt 25:31-46. At this time in history there will be only the righteous and the wicked, the sheep and the goats. Every person on earth will fall within one of the above groups--and not as if at the last moment only or by some narrow margin. He or she will belong there and have every reason to feel perfectly at home in the company he has chosen (see Rev 2:7).

Christ's words do not make anyone a sheep who is not already a sheep, or a goat who is not already a goat. He does not assign people to categories in Matt 25 but assigns people who are already in those categories to places on His right hand or on His left. They are mingled and He separates them. There is nothing arbitrary in this. Nor is there any question that we will be in one group or the other. The only question is which group it will be. Every time the Good Shepherd calls upon us to follow Him--on this point or that--we tell Him by our actions whether we are a sheep or a goat. It is "'his sheep [that] follow him because they know his voice'" (John 10:4).

 Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹William E. Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 242-43. The person whose thoughts are being summarized is William Hamilton.

²"[Paul] Van Buren attempts to describe Christianity in harmony with the biblical message and secularism. the term God is without meaning to secular man so it is necessary to express Christianity without references to God. . . . Van Buren's thought is a fascinating attempt to be purely secular while remaining true to the gospel" (ibid., p. 246-47).

³Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Pacific Press, 1942), pp. 469-70.

⁴Idem, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940), p. 763.