

Work it Out

A couple of weeks ago, the session examined and approved the seven members you, the congregation, elected last spring to be elders. Next Sunday, the session will ordain and install those same members. In the course of preparing for her examination, one of the elders-elect exposed the deep-dark secret at the heart of Presbyterianism. (I had hoped to keep the new elders from discovering this, but they were too smart not to notice.)

You see, there's a line in the *Book of Order* which reads, "It is necessary to the integrity of the Church that the persons who serve in it as officers shall adhere to the **essentials of the Reformed faith** and polity as expressed in the *Book of Confessions* and the *Form of Government*" (G2.0105).

There's even a vow in the ordination rite to go along with this provision: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the **essential tenets of the Reformed faith** as expressed in the confessions of our Church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"

This earnest elder-elect had the temerity to ask the obvious question: Where's the list? Precisely what are these **essential tenets**? And here's the deep, dark secret: *There is no list.*

Fundamentalists have a list. Most folks who call themselves "evangelicals" have a list. (I know, because I once tried to join the Tallahassee Evangelical Pastors' Association, and they wouldn't let me in.) Plenty of Christian organizations have some kind of list – of things one must believe in order to belong – but not us Presbyterians.

The working principle seems to be, sessions and presbyteries will recognize an essential tenet of the Reformed faith when they see it (provided it doesn't bite them man's chief end first.)

There are sound theological reasons for this listlessness. Starting with John Calvin, and running right through the centuries to the present day, the Reformed tradition has warned against what the *Book of Order* calls "the human tendency toward tyranny and idolatry."

In other words, as soon as you make a list, you become its slave, and you are very likely to worship the list in the place of the living God.

The Apostle Paul, himself a well-trained Pharisee, knew how dangerous lists could be. He could have provided the infant church in Philippi with a list of essential tenets, but instead he urged them to think and act with a Christ-like mindset.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1-5)

At this point, if it is possible to do so in writing, Paul breaks out in song. He quotes a hymn which the Philippians knew as well as you and I know “Amazing Grace.”

***Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death
- even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (2:6-13)***

I admit, it doesn't sound a hymn in modern English, but I imagine that when Paul's letter was being read out loud to the church, everybody in that little house church was singing along.

It's only after urging them to be of the same mind as Christ, and only after leading them in a stirring hymn to their self-emptying, servant Lord, that Paul lays on those Christians in Philippi his version of the essential tenets:

Therefore . . . work out your salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

No list. No Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. No Westminster Shorter Catechism. No Fundamentals of the Christian Faith. Just a hymn to the Servant Lord and the exhortation to work on it.

Clearly, Paul is not saying that *every individual* has to work hard to earn his or her salvation. Salvation comes by grace. The “your” in this sentence is plural. If only Paul had grown up in Tallahassee, we’d have understood him immediately. What he’s saying is, “*Y’all work out what y’all’s salvation means. Work it out in fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in y’all, enabling y’all to will and work for God’s good pleasure.*”

Paul wrote his letter from prison. He knew he would probably never see those brothers and sisters again. So, instead of giving them his list of do’s and don’ts, he started them singing and told them, “Y’all work it out together.”

Salvation is a gift from God through faith. We Christians work out our salvation in fear and trembling because we know that we are accountable to God. Yet, Paul reminds us, at the same time, God is at work in us, enabling us to live out our salvation in the world. Not alone, but together.

Some Christians put a great deal of emphasis on personal salvation. They dwell on it, obsess over it, can’t seem to get passed it. For them the most important question is “Are you saved?”

Reformed Christians think salvation is important, too, but we tend to look at it in a different way. The way we hear the gospel, God does the saving, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and it’s up to the saved to put their salvation to work in the rough and tumble world to which Jesus himself descended, taking the form a slave, being born in human likeness.

It’s not that we’re not interested in salvation. It’s that we’re less worried about *getting saved* than we are about *living saved*.

The gospel changes people. It shapes them in new and life-affirming directions. Sometimes that change is sudden and dramatic – like Nicodemus turning over his ill-gotten gain or the alcoholic leaving his bottle behind to respond to the altar call. For most of us, however, that change is gradual and takes place over a lifetime. We take a few steps forward. We fall a few steps back. After a while, we look behind us and realize we’re actually making progress.

That’s because God is at work within us while we’re working out our salvation. We’ve got lots of help. We have the scriptures and the witness of the church, and we have

each other. But most important of all, we have the Holy Spirit “**enabling us to will and to work to God’s good pleasure.**”

If we aren’t open to the Holy Spirit, we can make terrible mistakes while working out our salvation. We can construe litmus tests that Jesus never hear of. We can turn away people who affirm that they are Lesbian, or gay, or transgender. We might even enter the voting booth and vote for a candidate who brags about molesting women and makes fun of people with disabilities. We might fill in the bubble by that candidate’s name, even though his words and actions fly in the face of the Christian gospel -- because he promises to put a certain kind of jurist on the Supreme Court.

What’s on the list? At what point does the list trump the faith?

Fred Craddock, the great story teller who was also a great preacher, once told this story:

There once was an old man whose only close friend was his dog. The love between them had deepened over the years. Now both had begun to feel the pain and burden of age. The dog, twelve years old, could hardly walk and was covered with an irritating rash. The old man lifted the dog into his arms and carried it to the car where he lay it on the seat behind him on the way to see the veterinarian. From the parking lot the old man carried the dog gently inside. “Can I help you?” asked the veterinarian.

The old man, still holding his dog, said, “First, I must ask you a question. Do you love animals above everything else?”

“Well, I love God first. Jesus says in Mark 12:30, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ And of course a second command is to love thy neighbor as oneself. We must put these things first, and then we can think about the animals.”

“Then I must go elsewhere,” said the old man as he moved toward the door.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“This dog is my friend,” explained the old man, “and I feel I can trust him only to the care of a veterinarian who is a Christian.”¹

There is no list. We have to work it out together.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) p. 15-16
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