CONSENSUS THEOLOGY TAINTS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is rare to find a student of the Bible who is willing to stick to the text and allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves without allowing the murky waters of tradition or consensus to cloud the true meaning of the passage in question.

II. THE CONSENSUS MODEL SHAPES THEOLOGY AND EXEGESIS

Many today would listen to the text of Scripture through the history of exegesis and track its interpretation first back through the consensus of the magisterial Reformation tradition, then compare that to the Fathers and then finally back to text in the NT itself, letting its relevance for today speak for itself. Virgil Vaduva (adapting a statement from Michael Crichton's 2003 lecture at California Institute of Technology) sounds a strong warning concerning the consensus approach:

> I want to pause here and talk about this notion of consensus, and the rise of what has been called consensus theology. I regard consensus theology as an extremely pernicious development that ought to be stopped cold in its tracks. Historically, the claim of consensus has been the first refuge of scoundrels; it is a way

to avoid debate by claiming that the matter is already settled. Whenever you hear that the consensus of theologians agrees on something or other, reach for your wallet, because you're being had.

Let's be clear: the work of theology has nothing whatever to do with consensus. Consensus is the business of politics. Theology, on the contrary, requires only one investigator who happens to be right, which means that he or she has results that are verifiable (by reference to the real world.) In theology consensus is irrelevant. What is relevant is reproducible results. The greatest theologians in history are great precisely because they broke with the consensus.

There is no such thing as consensus theology. If it's consensus, it isn't theology. If it's theology, it isn't consensus. Period.[1]

"Consensus theology...ought to be stopped cold in its tracks." "The work of theology has nothing to do with consensus. Consensus is the business of politics." Those words run counter to Evangelical thought today. Vaduva's suggestion that "Theology...requires only one investigator who happens to be right, which means that he or she has results that are verifiable" is so far outside mainstream thought as to be immediately rejected by most theologians. Most believe that if a view is correct, then it is attested to by the majority of Evangelical scholars today, as well as the majority of Reformed scholars over the past five centuries.

Many theologians successfully track an interpretation back to the Reformation and then to the Fathers. However, when they proceed to the NT itself, their validation of their interpretation of a text remains the Fathers—they quote from them as if they were not sure of how Biblical exegesis relates to the subject at hand. If they had gone back to the text of Scripture itself to judge the Fathers' interpretation of the passages in question, their work would have been much more valuable to us who prefer Biblical exegesis based on a literal, historical, grammatical, rhetorical interpretation.

The more I study the history of the church and its doctrines, the more I suspect the process by which the church arrived at the conclusions that were then handed down as orthodoxy. Why is it enough to say Luther or Calvin is correct about any doctrine or that the church has always believed thus and so, and not require sound Biblical research to defend the same? It is because of this type of attitudes that what was vague in the early church fathers' writings on any particular subject became creed without any Biblical verification. But one must only take a look at a passage like Isaiah 55 to recoil from thinking that we—or any past generation—have arrived.

As I began reading Thomas Oden's recent book, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*, I found myself in strong agreement with his assessment of the results of secularism: "Under the tutelage of these once-confident ideologies still touted by secularizing elites, sex has been reduced to orgasm, persons to bodies, psychology to stimuli, economics to planning mechanisms, and politics to machinery."[2] As I continued reading, however, I realized that Oden's response to secularism is to forge headlong into the consensus model of doctrine.[3]

Is this approach valid? Consider the following scenarios covering the options with regards to the consensus of the Church Fathers.

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[1] http://blog.planetpreterist.com/index.php?query=Consensus&amount=0&blogid=3.

[2] Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003), 8.

[3] Ibid., 162. Oden favorably cites what is called the Vincentian rule: "In the world-wide community of believers every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always and by all."

III. THE EARLY CHURCH IMPOSED GREEK PHILOSOPHY ON THE BIBLE

In the "Introductory" to the first of his Hibbert Lectures, 1888, Edwin Hatch presented the following comparison of the Sermon on the Mount with the Nicene Creed:

The one belongs to a world of Syrian peasants, the other to a world of Greek philosophers.

> The contrast is patent. If any one thinks that it is sufficiently explained by saying that one is a sermon [sermon on the mount] and the other a creed, it must be pointed out in reply that the question why an ethical sermon stood in the forefront of the teaching of Jesus Christ, and a metaphysical creed in the forefront of the Christianity of the fourth century, is a problem which claims investigation…The presumption is that it was the result of Greek influence.[4]

Sadly, this evaluation captures well the differences between the Scripture and the creeds of the early church.

It appears that throughout church history the philosophers had a much stronger influence on the development of systematics than did the exegetes. The converse should have been true. Systematic theology should have emerged from the process in which the first step is exegesis and the second, Biblical theology. Only after the completion of these two steps should the Biblical data have been organized into a comprehensive, coherent system.

Within the first three centuries following the Apostles, theological errors arose not from evil intentions of the church leaders but from their desire to find answers to everyday pastoral questions and to help people understand the text. Instead of going back to the text (existent, although hard to find) to form their theological views, they turned to the writings of previous generations. Gradually, the vagueness of the early Christian (post NT) works gave way to error.

As the use of the Bible faded out, theology—developed by consensus at Church Councils[5]—became increasingly dogmatic and philosophical. By the time of the invention of the printing press, theology—deeply rooted in philosophy—was already "complete." Orthodoxy had been defined and little room was left for studies of the original text. Theologians focused their studies on the works of someone else who studied the works of someone else who studied the works of someone else (and so on). Their aim was to debate the opinions expressed by their predecessors.[6]

It appears Western theologians-philosophers have always had a dire need for conjecture.[7] The Western philosopher is never sated in his quest for knowledge; he is possessed of an exploratory bent that spurs him to use the known as a springboard with which he can catapult himself beyond the limits of knowledge. This is our Greek and Roman intellectual heritage.[8] This is the mentality that makes the West the most innovative society on the

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[4] Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, Edited by Andrew Martin Fairbairn (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1995), 1-2.

[5] Oden notes that Vincent of Lerins (5th Century AD), for instance, "[had] long been engaged in what we today call an empirical inquiry, a careful sampling process, something like a poll-taking exercise. He was deliberately inquiring of many believers, especially those well-grounded in sanctity, asking this simple question: How does the whole church come to distinguish the truth of Christian faith from falsehood amid conflicted opinions?" (*The Rebirth of* Orthodoxy, p. 161). Oden went on, "Again the answer rings clear from all he asks—an answer that has become known as the Vincentian rule: In the world-wide community of believers every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always and by all" (p. 162). My take is that the Church Councils represent only a partial consensus. Group A forms a consensus that Group B is wrong. If we are Eastern Orthodox (Greek), we would claim a different consensus than if we are not—for example.

[6] There were occasional innovators who worked with portions of the text (e.g., Luther worked in Romans), but their students had a strong tendency to study their teacher's work rather than follow his example in studying the Word.

[7] Timothy Nichols, an Assistant Professor at Rocky Mountain Seminary, contributed this concept.

[8] We have yet to examine fully our relationship to both Greek and Roman thinking in regard to both content and method, since Plato (through Augustine) still rules theology proper with an iron fist.

face of the globe. (No other culture in the history of the world has produced a truly global empire; the West has managed to produce at least three.[9])

Applied to theology, this mentality generates a desire to take the known (revelation) or what is thought to be known and use it as grist for extrapolations in an effort to reach out as far as possible into the unknown. The extrapolations then become the received wisdom upon which another generation of extrapolations is based, and so on, out into the void.[10]

This exploratory bent is not without dangers. Without proper caution, one may naturally pile up extrapolation upon extrapolation, constructing a theological edifice of mere guesses.

When a theologian starts with Scripture and then begins to extrapolate, his first extrapolation is only loosely tied to Scripture. But if he then extrapolates further (as theologians often do), his second extrapolation is built not on Scripture, but on a prior extrapolation. If he then makes further extrapolations, his thinking becomes far removed from Scripture.[11]

A theologian, who is prepared to extrapolate from revelation (or worse, prior theological extrapolation) faces some unique difficulties. First of all, he undertakes a task that is well beyond his ability. The Scripture is clear that God and His ways are far above our reason and

imagination.[12] Second, he possesses only partial information. We know *a priori* only what God has chosen to tell us. There are many questions He did not answer, many bits of information He did not give.[13] Some of these would have been accessible to the original readers (via apostolic preaching that has not been recorded in Scripture); some would not.

Making a theological conjecture is analogous to putting together a one-thousand-piece puzzle, but having fewer than a hundred pieces. In some spots, one can probably guess with a fair degree of accuracy what the picture would look like, but as one begins extrapolate based on "good" guesses, the emerging image will resemble less and less the picture the puzzle was intended to create. Suppose the puzzle were a picture of an animal no human has ever seen.[14] How accurate could the guesses be? One must conclude that, although a credible theological argument for *some* doctrines can be constructed, using it as a building block for further theological development is unsound.[15]

By way of example, the early church fathers recognized God's sovereignty but strongly affirmed human free will (which they believed to be part of the image of God). They held to the human responsibility for sin and countered deterministic systems. That changed with Augustine, who in his earlier years affirmed the existence of free will, but later modified his view in reaction to Pelagianism. Pelagius taught that humanity was not corrupted by the fall. Believing that to be clearly false, Augustine argued for the opposite: that humanity is a "mass of perdition," which led him to conclude that the will is not free to choose what is good. As his own experience reinforced that view,

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[9] Global empires were maintained by Spain, Great Britain, and Portugal. However, we might also include, the Netherlands during the brief period when it had an American colony, France when it held Canada and Louisiana, the USSR in its heyday, and the USA from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s.

[10] This might be similar to the game called "Telephone" where a few sentences are whispered into the ear of one person and they are to repeat that message to the person on their right and then in turn that person repeats the message to the person on their right and so on. By the time the message has reached the end of the process, the meaning has been lost nearly completely.

[11] Think of these like building blocks which are not stacked precisely on top of each other. Each block is shifted left on the one beneath it, overlapping the previous one, until the entire stack topples over because of the lack of support at the base.

[12] See, for example, Isa 55:8-9; Rom 11:33-35; 1 Cor 2:9.

[13] John 21:25 and Acts 1:7, for example, clearly show this to be true.

[14] For example, no one alive today has ever seen what Job calls the behemoth or the leviathan.

[15] This does not imply that God has given insufficient information for life and godliness, but only that He has not given enough information to satisfy all theological curiosities.

Augustine began to teach a doctrine of predestination (i.e., that God chooses some individuals to save and leaves the rest in their deserved damnation).[16] Therefore, it matters which consensus one looks at with Augustine: Early (Pre-millennial) or Later (Amillennial).

The Church settled in the middle, accepting the definition (of Vincent of Lerins) of orthodoxy as "that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all." This definition was confirmed at the Synod of Orange (529), where the delegates condemned Pelagianism, averring that humanity is corrupted by the fall and that salvation is, therefore, by God's initiative. However, the Synod did not affirm Augustine's predestination doctrine. The position of many since that time has been semi-Pelagianism or semi-Augustinianism.

By the 16th century, the leaders of the Reformation rediscovered Augustine. Both Luther (an Augustinian monk) and Calvin accepted the Augustinian view of election. Later, Calvin proceeded to adopt double predestination, while Lutherans moved away from the Augustinian view. Others took more extreme stances on the issue: On the one hand, Menno Simons (16th century Anabaptist who died in 1561) called this doctrine an "abomination of abominations," and on the other, Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, went so far as to believe that God causes sin.

Today, Oden, like many others, make the theologian's labor into a descriptive one, in which he harvests the consensus of the centuries in order to gain the truth. Oden's extensive knowledge of history is evident in what he has written—from the study of pastoral care to systematic theology to his current project dealing with the church fathers' work in Scriptural exegesis and preaching.

I am therefore amazed to see Oden and others quote Luther as the voice of consensus. Luther himself violated the consensus, not only of his day, but of the preceding

millennium, prompting a frustrated legate Aleander to rail against him: "Has the Catholic church been dead for a thousand years to be revived only by Martin? Has the whole world gone wrong and Martin only has the eyes to see?"[17] Which consensus? If Luther had harvested the consensus, there would have been no Reformation.

Standing before the Emperor and many other powerful rulers of the Holy Roman Empire at the Diet of Worms, Roman Catholic Johann Eck challenged Luther:

> Your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics.[18] You do nothing but renew the errors of Wyclif and Hus. How will the Jews, how will the Turks, exult to hear Christians discussing whether they have been wrong all these years! Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all? You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ the perfect lawgiver, proclaimed throughout the world by the apostles, sealed by the red blood of the martyrs, confirmed by the sacred councils, defined by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death and gave to us as an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the pope and the emperor to discuss lest there be no end of debate.[19]

Luther replied that he would throw his books onto a fire if it were shown, on the basis of God's Word, that he was wrong. After a night of prayer, Luther, fearing for his life, made his great statement:

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[16] Augustine also believed and taught that the elect in some sense will replace the angels who fell.

[17] Cited by Roland H. Bainton in *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1950, 1977), 166.

[18] Eck is saying that anyone who disagrees with the consensus of the Roman Church is a heretic. To go against the consensus is to be wrong, pure and simple. The appeal to Scripture is automatically misguided if one disagrees with the consensus.

[19] Cited by Bainton in *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, 180.

> Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.

The following five centuries have done nothing to blunt the force of Luther's statement.

Ironically, Master Eck would have approved of the methodology of Thomas Oden (and Oden is quoting Luther).

If we make the theological enterprise a descriptive one, as Master Eck and Thomas Oden would have us do, we face a difficulty in deciding which people we are going to describe. What constitutes a "Christian," or perhaps better put in Oden's terms, a "consensual exegete?" Here is a case in point: Oden states, "All consensual exegetes view this [1 Cor 8:6b] as a crucial text for unifying triune reasoning concerning the one God in three Persons." We may infer from this statement that Oden does not consider Unitarians "consensual exegetes." Yet where are his grounds for excluding them, if the theological enterprise is *de*scriptive? They also name the name of Christ.

We face one of two problems. We may admit any who claim the name of Christ, only to find that with every community thus admitted to the ranks of "consensual exegetes," the deposit of faith "once for all delivered to all the saints" shrinks more and more. The option does not appeal. We have no choice then but to exclude some who name the name of Christ. But how are we to decide whom to exclude? Ultimately, we have no choice but to use a doctrinal definition of who is, and who is not, a Christian.

However, admission of a doctrinal definition turns theology from a *de*scriptive to a *pre*scriptive discipline. And in order to stand, that prescription has to derive authority from somewhere. The Church, as we have already seen, is

a dead end. We are left, in the end, with the same basis that Luther had: the text of Scripture.

Sola Scriptura was a Reformation distinctive for a reason: the Reformers knew all too well the results of seeking authority in tradition. It is amazing, and in no small measure frightening, that we could so easily have forgotten that.

IV. ALLOWING CONSENSUS THEOLOGY TO SUPERSEDE SCRIPTURE IS IDOLATRY

Matthew Henry suggests that the most common violation of the first commandment is "giving the glory and honour to any creature which are due to God only…[W]hatever is esteemed or loved, feared or served, delighted in or depended on, more than God, that (whatever it is) we do in effect make a god of."[20] It was precisely for this reason that *Sola Scriptura* became a Reformation distinctive. The Reformers knew all too well the results of esteeming tradition and the consensus of men above the Word of God.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what Oden's methodology does. By seeking authority in a consensus of many opinions, he effectively elevates the words of men above the words of God. And this he does in the name of humility. There is no question that Oden's historical quotes as sources are noble, but by depending on consensus for authority, he inescapably leaves himself blind to the errors of the consensus and without the ability to correct them.

In response to Oden's historical interpretive approach of Exod 20:3, I would rather utilize exegesis of the Hebrew text based on context (the historical, grammatical, rhetorical interpretation). Exodus 20:3 was a call to monotheism and faithfulness to the Lord. Israel was to

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[20] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 1: Genesis to Deuteronomy (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co.), 358-59.

have no other gods besides Yahweh. He was not just to be the first among several but the *only* One (cf. 1 Cor 10:31; 1 Tim 2:5; Acts 14:15; Jas 2:19; 1 John 5:20-21). This is not a purely theoretical truth, but the foundation for the Law.

The context of this passage in Exod 20:2 is God's victory over the gods of Egypt. Comparing Exod 19:1 with 40:17 shows a nine-month time period between them, with Exod 13:4 being the starting point of the chronology. In other words, three months before Exod 20:2, the Israelites had clearly seen God's victory over the gods of Egypt.[21]

Moses is the author of Exodus. He is identified as recording the events and instructions of God contained in the account in such places as Exod 17:14; 24:4, 7, 12; and 34:27. Further evidence is contained in Num 33:1-2 and Deut 31:9-11 that he continued throughout his time to record God's instructions and the nation's history. The NT writers also accepted without question the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as attested in John 5:46-47 and 7:19 (by Jesus), Acts 3:22 (by Peter), and Rom 10:5 (by Paul).

Moses wrote to the Israelite nation, which had been redeemed from Egypt and were awaiting God's permission to enter the Promised Land.

Exodus has been accepted as canonical without question, along with the rest of the Pentateuch. Exodus contains primarily historical narrative, though some sections are also considered legal literature within the framework of the historical account of God's dealing with the nation. The book is arranged chronologically as well as logically. The historical accounts are kept in chronological order. The instructions, listing of the laws, description of construction, and erection of the tabernacle are detailed logically as well as historically, reflecting the order of God's instruction and the order of construction.

The following is the summary of the book of Exodus: God's preparation of Israel for nationhood[22] is accomplished through His deliverance of the nation to Himself, entrance into a national covenant, and their preparation of a tabernacle.[23]

V. APPLICATION

This isn't only a potential problem for Catholics, Orthodox, and Reformed people. This can be a problem for Free Grace folks as well.

Free Grace people sometimes have our own traditions and these traditions sometimes blind us to the clear meaning of Scripture. Take the response of some in the Free Grace camp to the writings of Zane Hodges as an example. Some rejected out of hand his view on assurance as being of the essence of saving faith. Others straightaway spurned his deserted island illustration and his suggestion that all who simply believe in Jesus have everlasting life that can never be lost. Still others in the Free Grace movement rapidly rejected his explanation of the Gospel of John because it contradicted their tradition. These people did not carefully read and consider his Biblical

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[21] How many of the Church Fathers picked this up?

[22] The subject of Exodus is God's preparation of Israel for nationhood. This is seen in the development of the argument more than in any specific statement within the book. In Exodus, God's dealings with the people of Israel move them from being a group of tribes in Egypt (1-11) to an organized people with a ratified constitution (19-24) and with a king in their midst (40). They lack only a land to be a nation, and that will come later. Thus, the subject is not the formation of a nation, but their preparation for nationhood.

[23] The complement is threefold and represents the development of the subject, describing how God prepares them for nationhood. First, He delivers the people from Egyptian bondage and brings them to Himself (1-18). This serves to remove them from the kingdom of Egypt and enables them to become an independent national entity. Further, they are moved from Pharaoh's domain to God's. Then, God provides the people with a constitution, which provides for their national relationship to Him as their Sovereign (19-24). This is finally followed by His instructions and their compliance in preparing a "residence" for their King, the tabernacle (25-40). Thus, all elements necessary for nationhood are in place, except for their occupation of a land. This, promised to the patriarchs, is still to be provided as they await entrance into Canaan.

arguments. If they had, their traditions might have given way to Scripture.

We must beware of our own consensus theology. We need to be careful that just because everyone in our network of churches or seminaries agrees, then they must be right, regardless of what the Scriptures say. We must beware of allowing the theology of anyone, Zane Hodges, Lewis Sperry Chafer, R. B. Thieme, S. Lewis Johnson, John Calvin, or whomever, to take precedence over the teachings of Scripture.

VI. CONCLUSION

Relating consensus to the NT, were not the Jewish leaders locked into opposition to Jesus Christ because they could not think outside their box? Their efforts at preventing the acceptance of a false Messiah prevented them from seeing the true One. Jesus kept showing evidence, but they were too firmly entrenched in their traditions. How do we know whether the consensus to which we appeal is right?

No one should discount the role of history in helping us understand how the earliest interpreters understood the Scriptures. Yet believers today must renew their commitment to the Scripture itself. The real issue must not be whether a doctrine[24] is affirmed by every Christian everywhere, nor whether it is officially orthodox according to the historical creeds, nor whether it is unofficially orthodox according to the fashions of contemporary Christian thought. This approach might be characterized thus: "Jesus loves me; this I know, for the early church fathers/church councils/creeds tell me so." The only real issue is whether a doctrine or belief is Biblical. There is no more sound approach to the formation of our beliefs. It is time we rescued Christian theology from the theologians and put it back in the hands of Biblical exegetes and Biblical theologians.

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[24] In the strictest sense "dogma" and "doctrine" are not synonymous terms, therefore a word is in order at the beginning of our course to clearly capture these fundamental concepts. The term *dogma*, strictly speaking, is derived from the Greek *dokein* (to seem, to be recognized as). In the NT it became attached to the findings of an ecclesiastical body such as in Heb 6:4 ("dogmata"). Therefore, dogma technically refers to the study of confessional statements (Eastern Orthodox Church dogmatics end with the second Council of Nicea in AD 787 [admitting no further refinement or clarification]; Roman Church dogmatics end with Vatican II [1963-65]; Lutheran Church dogmatics end with Formula of Concord [1580]; Reformed Church dogmatics end with the Synod of Dordt [1619] and the Westminster Confessions [1649]). The term, *doctrine* (*didaskalia*, 1 Tim 4:16), is almost universally translated *teaching* in the NT. Doctrine in the broader sense of the term is that which is taught, held, put forth as true, or supported by a teacher, a school or group. In this sense doctrine denotes teaching as distinguished from dogma, which denotes only such teaching, as is part of the confession of the church.