



Orthodoxy and Freedom

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THE TIME HAS COME FOR SOMEONE to speak out in defense of orthodoxy and freedom. Both of them have been so derided by their enemies and so debased by their supporters that neither is recognizable any longer and the inseparable connection between them has been lost to the partisans of each. Trinity Sunday is the most appropriate of days, commencement at Valparaiso University the most fitting of occasions, and this magnificent gathering of scholars and Christians the most splendid of audiences for a reaffirmation of both orthodoxy and freedom. Speaking as a churchman who is unconditionally pledged to the orthodox faith of the church and as a research scholar who demands for himself and supports for his colleagues unrestricted freedom of scholarly inquiry, I must declare that I find these two commitments not only not incompatible, but in fact mutually dependent - provided that both orthodoxy and freedom are defined as the best tradition of the church and in the academy. On the basis of a definition of orthodoxy and of freedom in terms of themselves and of each other, I want to propose three theses which seem to me to have a bearing upon the future of the church, upon the life of the university, and upon the careers of those young men and women who, after their graduation, will live under the sign both of the church and of the university, and, I hope, under the sign both of orthodoxy and of freedom.

I. Orthodoxy is truly orthodox only when it is eager to encourage free and responsible inquiry, even into orthodoxy itself.

In the great debates of the fourth century over the doctrine of the Trinity, contrary to the usual impression, the orthodox or Athanasian party was the partisan of critical reexamination, while the heretical or Arian parties sought to defend the dogmatic status quo. This generalization, which I think I can substantiate historically even though I would also have to qualify it rather carefully, suggests one of the lesser-known characteristics of authentic

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orthodoxy: its acceptance of, indeed its dependence upon, free and responsible inquiry. Without such inquiry, neither the Nicene Creed nor the theology of St. Athanasius would have been possible. The opponents of orthodoxy wanted to avoid inquiry, for it would only ask embarrassing questions. They preferred the vagueness of old language to the honesty and precision of new language. Heresy was, then, the use of old language to deny traditional doctrine, while orthodoxy was the use of new language to affirm it.

It is an ironic quirk that an orthodoxy which would never have been born without free and responsible inquiry has so often opposed the very process that gave it birth. Loyalty to the authority of Sacred Scripture ought to have led to an eagerness for a thoroughgoing investigation of its text to find all the variant readings and to weed out those that were not authentic; in fact, many of those who professed such loyalty resisted the textual criticism of the Bible and still do. Affirmation of the orthodox doctrine of God as “Maker of all things visible and invisible” should have produced enthusiastic support for the inquiry into these visible things of nature and their historical development; in fact, this inquiry had to proceed without such a blessing. When the research has gone ahead, heedless of the timidity of the church, its results have not shaken the orthodox faith, but have only clarified or even confirmed it. The abiding authority of Scripture and the historic confession of God as Creator are firmer today than they have ever been, and in the process orthodoxy has begun to recognize its need for such free and responsible inquiry.

This university is a living witness to that definition of orthodoxy. During your years here as students, you have come to see that some of the most open and courageous members of the university faculty are also those whose acceptance of the church’s teachings is the clearest and strongest. Thus you have, I hope, been disabused of the stereotypes about the church which both certain churchmen and certain critics of the church have fostered. Your doubts and questions, no matter how radical, have been honored; your confessions of faith and hope, no matter how tenuous, have been affirmed. But as a member of a university community, you are not entitled to either the doubt or the faith unless you are willing to participate with your colleagues in a continuing inquiry. The eagerness to encourage such inquiry and to trust that its results, if pressed far enough and long enough, will lead to truth, defines both authentic orthodoxy and the place of the university within the life of the church.

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II. Freedom is truly free only when it critically examines the orthodox tradition.

The orthodox tradition, then, has no reason to fear free and responsible inquiry. It does have reason to fear sentimentality, trivialization, and indifference. Given the right to be heard as a serious answer to the question of the meaning of reality, orthodoxy has nothing to lose, except some of the forms of thought and language which it should have outgrown anyway. But when it is excluded from the marketplace of ideas either by its cynical enemies or by its timorous friends, it has a great deal to lose; and the so-called freedom which excludes it loses a great deal more.

In the uproar over “radical theology” during the past year, very little has been said about the downright ignorance of the Christian tradition which so much of it represents. The church has long had to contend with those who, like the emperor Julian in the fourth century, received its nurture, memorized its creeds, studied its dogmas — and then felt obliged to say No. At least these radical deniers had earned the credentials to express an opinion about the orthodox tradition, negative and tragically wrong as that opinion may have been. But today the Christian tradition is being rejected by those who lack such credentials. Not having come to terms seriously with the orthodox tradition, they simply don’t know what it is they ought to have such difficulty in believing. And one of the reasons they don’t know is that in too many centers of learning the freedom of research and study has been defined as the freedom to ignore the orthodox tradition. Even today it is easier to take a course on the Hindu Scriptures than on the Christian Scriptures at many colleges, and Luther is studied for his prose rather than for his theology. It must be added that the churches and their colleges have contributed to this ignorance by their fear of free and untrammelled study. Ignorance of the orthodox tradition seemed less threatening than critical examination.

But if the Christian answer to the meaning and promise of life is in principle excluded from the academic conversation, what kind of academic freedom is that? One of the principal justifications for this university, it seems to me, is the role it has begun to play in making itself heard as a free and responsible participant in that conversation. Its scholarship must be so thorough and its dedication to the critical examination also of the orthodox tradition so unequivocal that it will be heard. To be and remain such a university, Valparaiso will need the trust and the support of all those who believe that our historic faith is a continuing source of spiritual power and insight, not

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a reed shaken by the wind. Those outside the church who sincerely believe in free and responsible inquiry want that inquiry to include the data of the orthodox tradition, or they should. This implies that secular universities, including state universities, will move increasingly toward the establishment of departments of religious studies, in which the various religious traditions, including orthodox Christianity, will be studied as academic disciplines. It implies also that for the sake of freedom, there must be centers within the church which will give priority of men and resources to such study. Their research, no less free and critical than it is at secular universities, will help to guarantee the integrity of the inquiry into the orthodox tradition. Without such freedom, orthodoxy is a lost cause; but without such orthodoxy, critically examined, as part of its inquiry, freedom will not be truly free.

III. Orthodoxy is truly free and freedom is truly orthodox when they express themselves not merely in doctrine, but in worship and in service.

A university is usually defined as a community of scholars, but most discussions of universities say more about their scholarship than about their community. When a university claims to define itself in Christian terms, however, its character as a Christian community is an essential part of the definition. Moreover, both the definition of orthodoxy and the definition of freedom I have been proposing depend on the presence of such a community, without which orthodoxy is sterile and freedom is negative.

Orthodoxy is sterile when it is defined only as a matter of correct belief. The controversy over the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, for whose outcome the church gives thanks on this festival Sunday, was in its center a battle over what the church believed when it said its prayers and celebrated its liturgy. Orthodoxy was the declaration that the relation between the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity was such that the church had the right to praise and worship the Son of God as it did. A concern for correct worship, then, was and is an indispensable element of orthodoxy. Ever since the ninth century, the churches of Eastern Christendom have celebrated the Feast of Orthodoxy on the first Sunday in Lent to commemorate the reestablishment of the icons and thus of correct worship. I think I would be prepared to argue that one of the principal factors in the breakdown of Lutheran Orthodoxy at the end of the seventeenth century, when Orthodoxy was repudiated for the sake of freedom, was the loss of the connection between worship and doctrine

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both in the theories of the scholars and, more importantly, in the life of the churches.

If Christian orthodoxy is to have a new birth of freedom, it will need to express that freedom in worship. There must be communities within the total context of the church where the creative relation between orthodoxy and freedom can foster experiments with liturgical forms, symbolic actions, artistic innovations, and communal disciplines. For American Lutheranism, and through it for a widening circle of concerned Christians in other communions, this university has become just such a community. Your undergraduate years here have given you the opportunity, whether or not you have used it, to share in this community and to know an orthodoxy that is truly free because it is a celebration of the freedom of God. Of course there have been conflicts, perhaps even contradictions, between that free orthodoxy and both the orthodoxy and the freedom which you have known elsewhere. The university would be a failure if there were not. But the record of loyal membership and especially of creative participation in the church by alumni of Valparaiso University proves more decisively than any statement in the college catalogue that orthodoxy has found true freedom here and that it is all the more truly orthodox because it has. Similarly, freedom is negative when it is defined only as a matter of right rather than also of responsibility. Whatever freedom may mean elsewhere, in the church and in this university, where orthodoxy is taken seriously, it must imply responsibility. But again that responsibility is distorted when it is defined exclusively in doctrinal terms; for as free orthodoxy expresses itself in worship, so orthodox freedom expresses itself in service. As a community of scholars, the American university in the 1960s is finally seeking new forms of service to the larger communities that surround it. Surely a university that stands in the orthodox Christian tradition can do no less. Here, too, this university has proved how profoundly its understanding of freedom has shaped its commitment to service, not only in the usual agencies of Christian charity, but on the fringes of our affluent society and on the frontiers of the church's sincere if belated efforts at a ministry to the poor. We cannot justify this university nor this chapel, nor for that matter the parishes and districts and boards of our church, unless this commitment to service moves from the frontiers to the center of our thought and action. The scathing words of the prophets and the deadly attacks of the seer of the Book of Revelation were reserved for a church that claimed

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orthodoxy and demanded freedom, but failed to express that orthodoxy and freedom in sincere worship and authentic service.

Your university has sought to demonstrate in its life and teaching the unbreakable bond between orthodoxy and freedom. If to you it has sometimes seemed to slight freedom for the sake of orthodoxy, remember that to many others it has seemed to slight orthodoxy for the sake of freedom. It is easy to make mistakes in this delicate balance, easier still to criticize them. But the cause to which Valparaiso University has dedicated itself, and today will dedicate you, goes far beyond either administrative mistakes or undergraduate criticisms. This university stands or falls with the conviction that the light of historic Christian truth illumines the path of enlightened scholarship, that the orthodoxy of that light and the freedom of that illumination are inseparable, and that therefore in His light we do see light.

