



Reformation
& **REVIVAL**
JOURNAL

ORTHODOXY

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

VOLUME 12 · NUMBER 1 · WINTER 2003

FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

For my money the finest treatment of historic Christian orthodoxy and its development is that of Jaroslav Pelikan. His five-volume set, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (University of Chicago Press), is indispensable. One might conclude that a person is not educated in the great sweep of orthodox reflection without reading these volumes.

One of Pelikan's great contributions is that he sees clearly that Christian doctrine is the business of the Church. He writes, "The history of doctrine is not to be equated with the history of theology or the history of Christian thought. If it is, the historian runs the danger of exaggerating the significance of the idiosyncratic thought of individual theologians at the expense of the common faith of the church" (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 100-600, 3). Origen was right to see the philosopher and the theologian differed precisely at this point since the theologian was "a man of the Church."

Modern evangelical debate about theology suffers at this very point. Very little of our theology is done in relationship to the Church. Our schools often are "free-standing institutions," and our professors are not pastoral practitioners. The result is an academic sterility that is chilling to the health of the Church. The average person in the pew on Sunday would have no idea what constitutes orthodoxy or heresy as a result.



It is readily self-apparent that the New Testament has no creeds, only brief confessional phrases such as "Jesus is Messiah" (Mark 8:29; John 11:27) or "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9;

Philippians 2:11; Colossians 2:6). Because the apostles express deep concern for "sound doctrine" it is not surprising that longer and more detailed statements of faith were needed in time. How was health ("orthodoxy") to be preserved without a *clear* delineation of what constituted right faith and what constituted damaging, even damning, error?

Beyond the creeds some appealed to the Church Fathers in general, but the problem here is quite simple: "Which Fathers?" Vincent of Lerins' came up with the formulation that orthodoxy consisted of "that which has been believed everywhere (*quod ubique*) always (*quod semper*) and by all (*quod ab omnibus*)." This phrase is generally helpful but not specific enough to be compelling in the end.

The Reformation brought a whole new development of confessions. Each new church felt the need to define itself and to declare what it held as distinctive. These Protestants saw themselves as stating what was plain in Scripture, not creating new doctrines to be believed because they taught it. Rome, on the other hand, saw doctrine as developing. For this reason the Pope must sometimes speak *ex cathedra* and thus require the assent of the faithful to these extensions of orthodoxy.

It has been argued that orthodoxy is, in the end, an ambiguous term. In one sense this is true, but in a profoundly important sense it is completely false. The Athanasian Creed affirms that "we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity." The word for worship here carries the idea of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy, by this historic use, is not a purely private or intellectual opinion, it is giving glory to God in the revealed truth of the holy, apostolic (and historic) Christian Church. By this observation we must conclude that right belief (*orthodoxy*) is always to be connected to right practice (*orthopraxis*). For this reason the Church can and should see certain practices as constituting heresy. We might not get complete agreement on what practices these are, but in a culture of death we surely must begin with affirming life in all practical ways.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG
Editor-in-Chief