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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

The Heresy of Self-Centeredness

Self-centeredness has no place in the church. That ought to go without saying. But from the dawn of the Apostolic era until today, self-love in all its forms has plagued the fellowship of the saints. A classic early example of out-of-control self-centeredness is seen in the case of Diotrephes. He is mentioned in 3 John 9–10, where the Apostle says: *“I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. . . . He is talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.”*

Diotrephes aspired to be the preeminent one in his assembly (perhaps even beyond that). Therefore, he perceived everyone else with any teaching authority—including the beloved Apostle—as a threat to his power. John had written a letter of instruction and encouragement to the church, but because of Diotrephes’ desire for personal glory, he rejected what John had to say. He evidently withheld John’s letter from the church. He seems to have kept its very existence a secret; perhaps he even destroyed it. Thus, John wrote his third inspired epistle in part to tell Gaius about the earlier letter’s existence.

In effect, Diotrephes’ selfishness made him guilty of the most pernicious kind of heresy: he actively suppressed and opposed Apostolic doctrine. John, therefore, condemned Diotrephes on four counts: he rejected Apostolic teaching; he made unjust accusations against an Apostle; he was inhospitable to the brethren; and he excommunicated those who did not agree with his defiance of John’s authority. In every conceivable sense, Diotrephes was guilty of the darkest heresy, and all his errors were the fruit of his self-centeredness.

In our fleshly, fallen state, we are all beset with a tendency toward selfishness. It is no minor infraction, no petty character flaw, and no small threat to the soundness of our faith. Diotrephes illustrates the truth that self-love is the mother of all heresies. Every false teaching and every rebellion against God’s authority is ultimately rooted in a fleshly desire to have preeminence—in effect, to claim for oneself the glory that properly belongs to Christ. Every heretic the church has ever seen has tried to supplant God’s truth and God’s authority with his own overblown ego.

Indeed, self-centeredness itself is heretical because it is the very antithesis of everything Jesus taught or exemplified. And it produces seeds that give rise to every other heresy imaginable.

Therefore, there is no room for selfishness in the church. Everything about the gospel, everything the church is designed to be, and everything we learn from Christ’s example strikes a blow at the root of human pride and self-centeredness.

Koinonia

As a matter of fact, the biblical descriptions of fellowship in the New Testament church employ the Greek word *koinōnia*. The gracious spirit that word describes is the polar opposite of egocentricity. Various translations as “fellowship,” “sharing,” “communion,” “partnership,” and “contribution,” the word is derived from *koinos*, the Greek word for “common.”



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It connotes the ideas of sharing, community, joint participation, sacrifice for the sake of others, and the giving of self for the common good.

Koinōnia is one of the four core activities that drew the early church together: *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship [koinōnia], to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (Acts 2:42). The heart of “fellowship” in the New Testament church was service and sacrifice for one another, not festivity or social functions per se. The word itself made that clear in Greek-speaking cultures. It is used in Romans 15:26 to speak of *“some contribution for the poor”* (see also 2 Corinthians 9:3). In 2 Corinthians 8:4, Paul commends the churches of Macedonia for their *“taking part [koinōnia] in the relief of the saints.”* Hebrews 13:16 says, *“Do not neglect to do good and to share [koinōnia].”* Clearly, self-centeredness is hostile to the biblical notion of Christian fellowship.

The One Anothers

That fact is further stressed by the many “one anothers” in the New Testament. We are commanded to *“love one another”* (John 13:34–35; 15:12, 17); *“not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother”* (Romans 14:13); *“pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding”* (v. 19); and *“live in such harmony with one another . . . [and] welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God”* (15:5, 7). We are told to *“bear one another’s burdens”* (Gal. 6:2); to *“be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another”* (Ephesians 4:32); and to be *“submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ”* (5:21). In sum, *“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves”* (Philippians 2:3). There are many similar New Testament commands governing our relationships to one another within the church. All of them call for selflessness, sacrifice, and service to others. Combined, they definitively rule out every expression of self-centeredness in the fellowship of believers.

Christ as the Head of His Body, the Church

That’s not all, though. The Apostle Paul commonly compared the church to a body with many parts but just one head: Christ. Immediately after emphatically affirming the deity, eternity, and absolute preeminence of Christ, Paul wrote, *“He is the head of the body, the church”* (Colossians 1:18). God *“put all things under his [Christ’s] feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body”* (Ephesians 1:22–23). Individual Christians are like body parts, existing not for their own sakes, but for the good of the whole body: *“The whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love”* (Ephesians 4:16).

Moreover, each part is dependent on all the others, and all are subject to the Head. The Head alone is preeminent, and beyond that, *“if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together”* (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Even the seemingly insignificant parts of the body are important (vv. 12–20): *“God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?”* (vv. 18–19).



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Any hint of selfishness is a betrayal of not only the rest of the body but also the Head. That imagery elevates humble selflessness to high virtue in the church—and it completely rules out self-centeredness of every kind.

Slaves of Christ

The slave language of the New Testament likewise underscores this truth. Christians are not only members of a body, subject to one another and called to the fellowship of sacrifice. We are also slaves of Christ, purchased by His blood, owned by Him, and therefore accountable to His lordship.

I wrote a whole book on this subject. There is a tendency, I fear, to try to tone down the terminology Scripture uses because — let's face it—the imagery of slavery is offensive. It was no less disturbing in New Testament times. No one wanted to be a slave, and the institution of Roman slavery was notoriously abusive.

Nevertheless, throughout the New Testament, every believer's relationship with Christ is portrayed as a master-slave arrangement. That entails absolute submission to His lordship, of course. It also rules out every hint of pride, egoism, independence, or self-centeredness. This is simply one more reason no brand of selfishness has any legitimate place in the life of the church.

Jesus Himself taught this principle clearly. His invitation to prospective disciples was a call to total self-denial: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"* (Luke 9:23).

The twelve were not swift to learn that lesson, and their interaction with one another was peppered with disputes about who was the greatest, who would have the chief seats in the kingdom, and similar expressions of self-centered bickering. So on the night of His betrayal, Jesus took a towel and basin, and He washed the disciples' feet. His admonition to them on that occasion is a powerful argument against every whisper of egocentrism in the heart of any disciple: *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you"* (John 13:14–15).

It was an argument from the greater to the lesser. If the eternal Lord of glory was willing to take up a towel and wash His disciples' filthy feet, then there is no way those who claim to be His disciples should seek preeminence for themselves. Christ is our model, not Diotrephes.

I cannot close without pointing out that this principle has a particular application for those in positions of church leadership. It is an especially vital reminder in this era of superstar religious leaders and young pastors who act like rock stars. If God has called you to be an elder or teacher in the church, it is not for your own celebrity and self-aggrandizement. It is for His glory. Our commission is to *"proclaim not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your [slaves] for Jesus' sake"* (2 Corinthians 4:5). ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



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Don't Forsake the Public Reading of Scripture

Bible reading has become a largely private practice—something we do in our own personal “quiet time.” A few verses, or perhaps as much as a chapter, are often read before the sermon on Sunday morning. But when was the last time you heard multiple chapters or, better yet, a whole book of the Bible publicly read aloud from beginning to end?

This has become a relatively rare experience in the church. However, the public reading of Scripture is one of the most ancient, time-honored practices of God's people that is recorded in Scripture. It is a practice that is repeatedly described and commended at crucial moments in redemptive history, from the very beginning to the very end of the Bible. In fact, it is something that God's people are specifically commanded to do with devotion. As Paul told Timothy, his young pastoral protégé, “*Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture*” (1 Timothy 4:13, emphasis added).

Public Scripture reading in the Old Testament

The first place that we find the public reading of Scripture in the Bible is at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 24. This is also arguably the first place that the corporate public worship of God is fully described in the Bible. Thus, it is not insignificant that it was in this key context, after the Israelites had been rescued from slavery in Egypt, that Moses “*took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people*” (Exodus 24:7).

Following this formative moment at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God established His covenant with Israel, we find numerous other places where this practice also appears. In Deuteronomy 31, the Lord commands the Israelites through Moses to read the entire law at the end of every seven years “*before all Israel in their hearing*” (v. 11). In other words, God's people were called to remember the covenant that they had entered into with the Lord, and an essential part of preserving this memory was the public reading of Scripture. Through this practice of reading, the identity of Israel as the covenant people of God was formed and renewed, and the people of this former slave-nation recommitted themselves to the service of the God who had saved them.

This kind of covenant renewal ceremony, in which the public reading of Scripture played a central role, is exactly what we find described after the Israelites first entered into the Promised Land. Joshua 8:34–35 records that Joshua “*read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.*”

This is the same practice we find described later in Israel's history after the law, which had been lost for a time, was found in the temple. When God's Word was rediscovered, King Josiah brought about reforms that began with the public reading of Scripture: “*Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord*” (2 Kings 23:1–2).

This is the same practice we find after God's people returned from exile under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. They read for hours “*from early morning until midday*” on a special “*wooden platform*” that appears to have been the first “*pulpit*” in history (Nehemiah 8:3–4).



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Don't Forsake the Public Reading of Scripture

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Public Scripture reading in the New Testament

This story of the public reading of Scripture reaches a high point when Jesus famously launched His public ministry by standing up to read the Scriptures. *“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read”* (Luke 4:16). When Jesus stood up to read in the synagogue at Nazareth, He was practicing the same ancient practice that began with Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai and continued through Joshua, Josiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah. And yet, when Jesus stood up to read, He could also say, *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”* (Luke 4:21). Here was the Word not only read but made flesh.

As we continue to read the New Testament, it is clear that the practice of the public reading of Scripture is normative for the church. Consider Paul's words to the church at Colossae: *“And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea”* (Colossians 4:16). Or, similarly, consider Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica:

“I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers” (1 Thessalonians 5:27).

In fact, the last book in the Bible begins with this remarkable encouragement: *“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near”* (Revelation 1:3).

Conclusion

The public reading of Scripture is an essential element of Christian worship for the covenant people of God. Indeed, it is arguably the most foundational element of worship because all other elements of worship (such as prayer, praise, preaching, and the sacraments) come in response to the hearing of God's Word. It is a great tragedy that this practice has fallen on hard times and, in some cases, has been largely replaced by the private reading of Scripture.

Private meditation on God's law cannot replace the public reading of Scripture. Especially in a society like ours, which has become increasingly characterized by *“expressive individualism”* the church desperately needs to return to this ancient practice of spiritual formation in community. This was the practice of the early church, as Justin Martyr notes in his famous description of worship in the second century. *“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray”* (1 Apology 1.67; ANF 1:186).

May the covenant people of God be renewed as we return to this ancient practice and rediscover our true identity through the public reading of Scripture. Indeed, as Justin Martyr might say, may we be exhorted *“to the imitation of these good things.”* ~ **Reverend Justin Borger - Associate Pastor of Saint Paul's Presbyterian Church - Orlando, Fla.**



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Keeping the Faith in a Faithless Age

“The greatest question of our time,” historian Will Durant offered, “is not communism versus individualism, not Europe versus America, not even East versus the West; it is whether men can live without God.” That question, it now appears, will be answered in our own day.

For centuries, the Christian church has been the center of Western civilization. Western culture, government, law, and society were based on explicitly Christian principles. Concern for the individual, a commitment to human rights, and respect for the good, the beautiful, and the true—all of these grew out of Christian convictions and the influence of revealed religion.

All of these, we now hasten to add, are under serious attack. The very notion of right and wrong is now discarded by large sectors of American society. Where it is not discarded, it is often debased. Taking a page out of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, modern secularists simply declare wrong, right, and right, wrong.

A New Landscape

Quaker theologian D. Elton Trueblood once described America as a “cut flower civilization.” Our culture, he argued, is cut off from its Christian roots like a flower cut at the stem. Though the flower will hold its beauty for a time, it is destined to wither and die.

When Trueblood spoke those words more than two decades ago, the flower still had some color and signs of life. But the blossom has long since lost its vitality, and it is time for the fallen petals to be acknowledged.

“If God does not exist,” Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov argued, “everything is permitted.” The permissiveness of modern American society can scarcely be exaggerated, but it can be traced directly to the fact that modern men and women act as if God does not exist or is powerless to accomplish His will.

The Christian church now finds itself facing a new reality. The church no longer represents the central core of Western culture. Though outposts of Christian influence remain, these are exceptions rather than the rule. For the most part, the church has been displaced by the reign of secularism.

The daily newspaper brings a constant barrage that confirms the current state of American society. This age is not the first to see unspeakable horror and evil, but it is the first to deny any consistent basis for identifying evil as evil or good as good.

The faithful church is, for the most part, tolerated as one voice in the public arena, but only so long as it does not attempt to exercise any credible influence on the state of affairs. Should the church speak forcefully to an issue of public debate, it is castigated as coercive and out of date.

A New Role

How does the church think of itself as it faces this new reality? During the 1980s, it was possible to think in ambitious terms about the church as the vanguard of a moral majority. That confidence has been seriously shaken by the events of the past decade.



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Little progress toward the re-establishment of a moral center of gravity can be detected. Instead, the culture has moved swiftly toward a more complete abandonment of all moral conviction.

The confessing church must now be willing to be a moral minority, if that is what the times demand. The church has no right to follow the secular siren call toward moral revisionism and politically correct positions on the issues of the day.

Whatever the issue, the church must speak as the church—that is, as the community of fallen but redeemed, who stand under divine authority. The concern of the church is not to know its own mind, but to know and follow the mind of God. The church's convictions must not emerge from the ashes of our own fallen wisdom but from the authoritative Word of God, which reveals the wisdom of God and His commands.

The church is to be a community of character. The character produced by a people who stand under the authority of the sovereign God of the universe will inevitably be at odds with a culture of unbelief.

The Old Call

The American church faces a new situation. This new context is as current as the morning newspaper and as old as those first Christian churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Laodicea, and Rome. Eternity will record whether the American church is willing to submit only to the authority of God or whether the church will forfeit its calling in order to serve lesser gods.

The church must awaken to its status as a moral minority and hold fast to the gospel we have been entrusted to preach. In so doing, the deep springs of permanent truth will reveal the church to be a life-giving oasis amid America's moral desert. ~ **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.**



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If you have a September birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt (gwlcfl0415@gmail.com).

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner September 2020

Ben P. (3)

Zachary A. (9)

Rhydian H. (12)

Jonathan D. (15)

Ruth T. (23)

Lydia W. (30)

Jeremy and Jesse W. (27)

Our souls cannot climb out of the mire of sin because they are dead. Salvation comes not to those who cry out, "Show me the way to heaven," but to those who cry, "Take me there for I cannot."

Lest we see the sinner's prayer as mere technique, we must remember that Christ raises the dead that they might walk. We do not mumble the magic words and then wait to die. Christianity is about spiritual growth as well. It is about work, the hard work of sanctification. Regeneration is monergistic, God's work alone. Sanctification, the process by which we are made holy, is synergistic, God's work with us.

God's part is easy for Him. He needs no shortcuts because He never tires. We, though, must ever fight the temptation to seek the shortcut. No technique will make us holy. No technique of the Devil's, though, can stop the process of Christ making us into His image. Those whom He calls He sanctifies.

Our sanctification requires the Spirit of God and, because He has so ordered His world, sanctification requires the disciplined and repeated use of the means of grace. Five minutes a day of Bible study smells like technique. Arid, it is sure to fail. We must immerse ourselves in the Word of God. Then, as Jesus promised, we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. Then we will be His disciples (John 8:31-32). ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



***West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership***

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