PRESERVING THE TRUTH IN OUR WORSHIP

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Introduction

My argument in this paper will be that conservative worship is essential to the preservation of truth for this reason: we will have preserved truth successfully only if it is truth rightly imagined, and our imagining truth rightly depends heavily on the forms of worship that we employ.

What is Truth?

We must first clarify what it is we aim to preserve. In its most basic definition, a statement is true if it corresponds with reality. The truth we wish to preserve—the truth of which the Church is the pillar and support (1 Tim 3:15)—has been revealed to us through the written Word of God. Everything contained within God's Word corresponds rightly with reality, and it is our responsibility to pass that truth on to future generations (Acts 20:27). What we find there is truth about God, man, sin, salvation, the world, and so much more. Therefore, the truth we wish to preserve can be no less than doctrinal.

But what we have been given through Scripture, and what we are charged with preserving, is more than brute theological facts compiled in abstract statements. Truth is no less than facts in statements to be sure, but it is more. I am not arguing for another kind of truth, but a component of truth that exists beyond mere factual correspondence.

Truth in the Bible

Modernism has led us to equate truth with factuality alone. Truth is no less than factuality, but it is deeper than that. I am convinced of this primarily because I believe in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible does not come to us as a collection of propositional statements or a systematic theology. As Kevin Vanhoozer observes, "The Bible is more than divine data."[1]

Instead, God's revelation of truth comes to us in various literary forms, most of which are not merely didactic or propositional. James S. Spiegel helpfully summarizes the various literary genres that God chose to communicate his truth:

> . . . the books of the Bible are, in the main, works of literary art. From Genesis to
> Revelation we find epic narratives (tragic and comic), proverbs, poems, hymns, oratory,

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[1]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 5.

and apocalyptic literature whose artistic tools include allegory, metaphor, symbolism, satire, and irony. Comparatively little of the biblical material is strictly didactic, and where this is the case, such as in the book of Romans, the logical rigor itself is elegant (an aesthetic quality). Finally, Jesus' own preferred method of instruction, the parable, is an aesthetic device. And even when not using parables, his language tends to be heavily laden with metaphors and symbolism, a fact that exasperated the disciples.[2]

These forms provide a way of communicating God's truth that would be impossible with systematic statements of fact alone. These aesthetic forms are essential to the truth itself since God's inspired Word is exactly the best way that truth could be presented. Clyde S. Kilby observes, "The Bible comes to us in an artistic form which is often sublime, rather than as a document of practical, expository prose, strict in outline like a textbook."[3] He asserts that these aesthetic forms are not merely decorative but part of the essential presentation of the Bible's truth: "We do not have truth and beauty, or truth decorated with beauty, or truth illustrated by the beautiful phrase, or truth in a 'beautiful setting.' Truth and beauty are in the Scriptures, as indeed they must always be, an inseparable unity."[4]

To reduce God's truth, then, only to doctrinal statements does great injustice to the way God himself has chosen to reveal truth to us. Vanhoozer articulates this well:

There are other types of precision or clarity than the scientific. It has been said, for example, that poetry is "the best words put in the best order." Similarly, because we are dealing with the Bible as God's word, we have good reason to believe that the biblical words are the right words in the right order. . . .

To interpret the Bible truly, then, we must do more than string together individual propositions like beads on a string. This takes us only as far as fortune cookie theology, to a practice of breaking open Scripture in order to find the message contained within. What gets lost in propositionalist interpretation are the circumstances of the statement, its poetic and affective elements, and even, then, a dimension of its truth. We do less than justice to Scripture if we preach and teach only its propositional content. Information alone is insufficient for spiritual formation. We need to get beyond "cheap inerrancy," beyond ascribing accolades to the Bible to understanding what the Bible is actually saying, beyond professing biblical truth to practicing it.[5]

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[2]James S. Spiegel, "Aesthetics and Worship," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 4 (1998): 44.

[3]Clyde S. Kilby, *Christianity and Aesthetics* (Chicago: Inter-varsity Press, 1961), 19.

[4]Ibid., 21.

[5]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.* 48, no. 1 (2005): 96, 100. Vanhoozer's opinion here is clearly rhetorical overstatement; neither he nor I would disparage the value of systematic theology. Yet the point is clear: systematic theology alone cannot fully encapsulate Christian truth.

Most evangelicals, however, view the Bible—and by extension truth—as merely propositional.[6] To most, whatever aesthetic aspects are present in Scripture are incidental at best and for many a distraction. Truth is simply something to believe and perhaps get excited about.

But there is a reason the Bible calls God a "king" rather than simply asserting the doctrinal fact of his rulership. There is a reason the Bible calls God a shepherd, fortress, father, husband, and potter rather than simply stating the ideas underlying these metaphors. These images of God paint a picture that goes far beyond mere doctrinal accuracy.

The Aesthetic Component of Truth

Now to be clear, I am not arguing against the propositional nature of truth. This is the postmodern position, one of which I am as equally critical as I am of the modernist view. Truth can—and indeed often must—be summarized in propositional statements. What I am arguing is that truth is more than that. Again, Vanhoozer explains:

> Without some propositional core, the church would lose its *raison d'etre*, leaving only programs and pot-lucks. At the same time, to reduce the truth of Scripture to a set of propositions is unnecessarily reductionist. What the Bible as a whole is literally about is theodrama—the words and deeds of God on the stage of world history that climax in Jesus Christ.[7]

Nor am I arguing for two kinds of truth, one propositional and the other not; I am arguing that truth is always both propositional and aesthetic.

Thus what we are charged with preserving is not only a collection of propositions that correspond to God's reality, but also ways of expressing these ideas that likewise correspond to God's reality. We are committed to preserving not just intellectual facts, but "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Faith is more than facts; faith is right facts combined with the affection of trust; faith is right facts felt rightly.

Truth and the Moral Imagination

If truth is more than factual correspondence—if it has an aesthetic aspect to it—then both the apprehension and the presentation of truth involve more than just intellect; they involve the aesthetic part of man, in particular, his imagination.

Today we use the term "imagination" to mean something more similar to "fiction." Yet the imagination is much more than the child's fantasy or the author's plot. Our imagination is the way in which we interpret facts and is thus the way in which we make sense of truth. Scottish poet and pastor George MacDonald explains:

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[6]For a helpful comparison between the typical evangelical view of the Bible and truth and one that sees the imagination as essential to truth, see Peter W. Macky, "The Role of Metaphor in Christian Thought and Experience as Understood by Gordon Clark and C. S. Lewis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 24, no. 3 (1981).

[7]Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," 100-101.

To inquire into what God has made is the main function of the imagination. It is aroused by facts, is nourished by facts, seeks for higher and yet higher laws in those facts; but refuses to regard science as the sole interpreter of nature, or the laws of science as the only region of discovery.[8]

If God's reality is more than just facts and therefore truth is more than mere factual accuracy, imagination is what allows us to perceive the part of truth that is beyond intellectual knowledge alone. As we have seen, truth is correspondence to reality, but there are different kinds of correspondence, not all of which are propositional. Sometimes non-propositional correspondence does a better job of helping us navigate reality than does propositional correspondence. Here is an illustration. An aerial photograph of Washington D.C. is like propositional correspondence; it is an exact representation of the way things are. A map of D.C., on the other hand, is like metaphorical correspondence; it corresponds to reality, but in a way that highlights and emphasizes certain aspects of that reality over others. Now which would you rather have if you were trying to navigate D.C.?

Our perception and interpretation of truth depends upon our imagination of that truth. Leland Ryken helpfully explains how imagination affects how we view truth and what we do with truth:

It is a fallacy to think that one's worldview consists only of ideas. It is a world picture as well as a set of ideas. It includes images that may govern behavior even more than ideas do. At the level of ideas, for example, a person may know the goal of life is not to amass physical possessions. But if his mind is filled with images of fancy cars and expensive clothes and big houses, his behavior will likely follow a materialistic path. A person might say that God created the world, but if his mind is filled with images of evolutionary processes, he will start to think like an evolutionist. Someone may know that he should eat moderately, but his appetites override that knowledge when his mind is filled with images of luscious food. The imagination is a leading ingredient in the way people view reality. They live under its sway, whether they realize it or not.[9]

Imagination in the Bible

This is why the Bible uses tools of the imagination to communicate truth. It contains literary forms that utilize various aesthetic devices, not just to decorate truth or make it more interesting, but in order to rightly shape our imagination of truth. As Ryken says, "Indeed, the panoply of genres in the Bible is nothing less than the imagination in full literary display."[10] This reality reveals the essential importance of the imagination in the presentation of truth:

[8]George MacDonald, *The Imagination, and Other Essays* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1883), 2.

[9]Leland Ryken, "The Bible as Literature Part 4: "With Many Such Parables": The Imagination as a Means of Grace," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147, no. 587 (1990): 393.

[10]Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 278.

The point is not simply that the Bible allows for the imagination as a form of communication. It is rather that the biblical writers and Jesus found it impossible to communicate the truth of God without using the resources of the imagination. The Bible does more than sanction the arts. It shows how indispensable they are.[11]

Perhaps a good illustration of this is with narratives, which comprise a majority of the Bible's content. Many view narratives in Scripture as merely summaries of historical facts, but Vanhoozer explains how narratives do much more:

Narratives allow storytellers to create a unified whole from a succession of events. To be sure, there are modern despisers of narrative as there are despisers of metaphor; some see narrative as merely the rhetorical icing on historical discourse. The propositionalist temptation is to regard narrative simply as the pretty packaging of historical content to be torn off and discarded. But the point of narrative is not merely to assert "this happened, and then this happened." Narratives make another kind of claim altogether: "look at the world like this." Narratives do more than chronicle; they *configure*. Configuration is the act of grouping people and events together in a meaningful whole and is, as such, an act of the narrative imagination, a power of synoptic vision.

Narratives explain why a certain event happened by *emplotment*, not by adducing causal laws but by situating it in an intelligible story. Narrative is the form that a distinctly historical understanding takes: certain things concerning human temporality and teleology can *only* be said in the form of narrative. Like metaphors, narratives are irreducible to propositionalist paraphrase. Following a story requires a different cognitive skill than does following an argument, but it is no less cognitive for that.[12]

Imagining Truth

My point is this: if we preserve propositional statements of doctrine alone in the form of systematic theology and doctrinal confession, and yet we have not preserved a biblically informed imagination of those facts, we have not succeeded in preserving the truth. Commitment to the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture implies that God inspired the Bible's ideas, words, *and* forms, and this demands a commitment to preserving not just the ideas of truth expressed in the Bible but also the way those ideas are imagined through Scripture's various aesthetic forms.

A good illustration of the importance of preserving both the doctrinal and aesthetic aspects of truth in Scripture is with Bible translation. The best Bible translations are those that succeed in transmitting, not just the grammatical ideas expressed in the original languages, but also the various literary methods employed in the text. For example, the King James Version did a masterful job of preserving the aesthetic aspects of the original autographs while sacrificing some grammatical accuracy. The New American Standard Bible is extremely literal, but lacks beauty. In my opinion, the English Standard Version does an excellent job of preserving both.

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[11]Ryken: 392-393.

[12]Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 282.

Truth and Worship Forms

I have argued to this point that preserving the truth must include not only the preservation of right doctrine, but also the preservation of right imagination. As we have already seen, the imagination is shaped and cultivated through aesthetic forms. We have focused most specifically on literary forms since this is what we find in the Bible, but all art forms shape the imagination in some way. This leads us to the next point of my thesis, namely, that conservative worship is essential to the preservation of truth, for it is in worship that the imagination is most powerfully cultivated.

Cultivating Imagination in Worship

What art forms are chosen in worship is of utmost importance since they present to the congregation not just theological facts, but those facts imagined in certain ways. John Mason Hodges explains the power of worship forms in this regard:

> Our musical and liturgical choices in worship can display an aspect of God that is often ignored. We must ask ourselves, how can we whet the congregation's appetites now for the satisfactions that will be theirs in God for eternity? One way would be to commit ourselves to the pursuit of God's beauty made manifest through his creation and ours, and value that beauty highly when making decisions for worship.[13]

Most evangelicals today view worship forms as simply pretty packaging for truth or at best a way to "energize" the truth. Music is just a way to make truth interesting and engaging in worship. But imaginative forms are not incidental to truth—they are essential to the truth, as Spiegel explains: "At its best, liturgical art is not merely consistent with sound doctrine but serves positively to illuminate biblical teaching, making imaginative expression or application of biblical truth."[14] Therefore, worship forms help to express the imaginative aspect of truth in ways that propositional statements alone cannot; they communicate not just the *what* of biblical content, but also *how* that content is imagined. And the kinds of imaginative forms God chose to communicate his truth should inform our worship forms. Art in worship is more than incidental; it is God-ordained because of its power to express rightly imagined truth: "Surely the fact that God himself chose an artistic medium as his primary vehicle of special revelation ought by itself to persuade us to place a special premium on the arts."[15] Conservative worship is essentially a desire to preserve the kinds of aesthetic forms contained in Scripture in our worship.

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[13]John Mason Hodges, "Aesthetics and the Place of Beauty in Worship," *Reformation and Revival Volume* 9 (2000): 73.

[14]Spiegel: 51.

[15]Ibid., 44.

The Function of Form

Aesthetic form shapes propositional content; just like a liquid takes the shape of its container, doctrinal facts take the shape of the aesthetic form in which they are carried. This is accomplished in worship music through poetic devices, melody, harmony, rhythm, performance style, and many other musical elements.

Consider this example of how just the propositional content of a song text can be shaped by its form: suppose I want to communicate the idea that God is all-powerful, that he promises to protect us, and that we should trust in him. Here are four different ways to communicate that content through poetry. Notice how the form shapes the content:

1. A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.[16]

2. How strong and sweet my Father's care,
That round about me, like the air,
Is with me always, everywhere!
He cares for me![17]

3. God is bigger than the boogie man.
He's bigger than Godzilla, or the monsters on TV.
Oh, God is bigger than the boogie man.
And He's watching out for you and me.[18]

4. Draw me close to you
Never let me go
I lay it all down again
To hear you say that I'm your friend

You are my desire
No one else will do
'Cause nothing else could take your place
To feel the warmth of your embrace
Help me find the way, bring me back to you

You're all I want
You're all I've ever needed

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[16]Martin Luther, 1529.

[17]Anonymous, ca. 1929.

[18]Veggie Tales, 1992.

You're all I want
Help me know you are near.[19]

In each of these poems, the basic idea is the same: God is great, and we can trust in him. On the propositional content level, each of these poems is saying something that is true. But when we get to the level of form—what words are chosen and how they are put together—the idea in these poems is imagined very differently. Add the musical elements and performance style, and the imagination is even more significantly shaped.

The problem is that since most evangelicals understand truth to be only right knowledge of right facts, they view worship as a time to impart only right facts with some enjoyable music to make such transmission interesting or engaging. Yet while theological facts must be transmitted in worship, this misses the whole point of worship, as Bryan Chapell astutely observes:

> The negative impact of turning the sanctuary into the lecture hall is training believers to become merely reflective about the gospel in worship and tempting them to believe that right worship is simply about right thought. As a consequence, the worship focus becomes study, accumulating doctrinal knowledge, evaluating the Sermon, and critiquing the doctrinally imprecise. Congregational participation, mutual encouragement, heart engagement, expressions of grief for sin, and joyous thanksgiving may increasingly seem superfluous, or even demeaning.[20]

Thus most theologically conservative evangelical worship services are filled with good doctrinal teaching but worship forms that do not express an imagination of that truth that rightly reflects biblical imagination. They view the purpose of worship music as making truth "engaging" rather than its deeper purpose of shaping imagination in profound ways. With this view, it matters not what kind of music a church uses as long as it is "passionate" and resonates with the worshipers.

Worship choices, then, are not merely about what is pleasing, authentic, or engaging; what forms we choose for our worship must be based on the criterion of whether or not they are true—whether or not they correspond to God's reality as it is imagined in his Word.

Truth and Tradition

I have argued thus far that successful preservation of the truth necessitates that what is preserved is the doctrinal affirmations *and* the proper imagination of such affirmations, and I have suggested that the primary way in which this imaginative aspect is persevered is through conserving the Bible's aesthetic forms in our worship.

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[19]Kelly Carpenter, 1994.

[20]Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 67.

Culture and Imagination

To speak of art forms is to speak of culture, so what I am suggesting is the preservation of certain cultural forms as essential to the preservation of truth. Such an assertion that some cultural expressions are better than others may sound elitist until we remember that culture is never created in a vacuum. Culture, according to Roger Scruton, is "a shared spiritual force which is manifest in all the customs, beliefs and practices of a people"; it is "a demonstration of a belief system."[21] This follows closely T. S. Elliot's classic argument that "no culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion."[22] Cultural forms are nurtured in value systems as ways of expressing those values. In terms of our current discussion, art forms are products of human imagination intended to propagate that particular imagination. Mark Snoeberger explains the difference between a culture nurtured by Christian imagination and one formed by pagan values: "There are two worldviews among humans, the Christian worldview (which produces Christian culture) and the non-Christian (pagan) worldview (which produces pagan culture)."[23]

All cultural forms are built upon what has come before; no one creates culture *ex nihilo*. No one "invents" cultural expressions, artistic forms, rituals, liturgies, customs, languages, or styles out of nothing. Every human being builds upon what has come before him, and we call what has come before "tradition." Tradition is not a bad thing; it is inevitable.

A cultural expression is like a building. No one has even built a house without first receiving instruction from someone else. This instruction may have come in the form of an apprenticeship, a blueprint, a textbook, or at very least an observation of a house itself. But no one decides one day to build a house without having ever been told how a house works or at least discovering himself how a house works from studying a completed house. Tradition is that blueprint from which culture emerges.

After we have come to understand a given tradition, we may do one of three things with it: 1) We may simply continue to use the tradition; 2) We may nurture and further cultivate the tradition; or 3) We may reject the tradition altogether and create something completely different. But even with the latter, we have begun with a tradition in the creation of something new.

Culture and Tradition

The implication of this is that all of the various cultural institutions, forms, artistic expressions, media, languages, and systems of thought are what they are today based on hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years of nurture and development. Christian Tradition, then, is simply "the core teaching and preaching of the early church which has bequeathed to us the fundamentals of what it is to think and believe Christianly." Tradition "sits

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[21]Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 1, 286.

[22]T. S. Elliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), 100.

[23]Mark A. Snoeberger, "Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization How Culture Receives the Gospel," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9, no. (2004): 349. Snoeberger is basically summarizing the presuppositionalist definition of *worldview* as articulated by Greg Bahnsen.

in indispensable relation—historically and theologically—to the Christian use of Scripture and to the development of doctrine and spirituality. This was true in the early church; it is still true today."[24]

        This is perhaps no more clearly apparent than with how we articulate doctrine today. How we explain the Trinity or Jesus Christ comes to us in many cases, not explicitly from the pages of Scripture (although the truth is certainly there) or from our own novel ideas, but from tradition. The doctrines themselves are in the Bible, but the particular ways of explaining difficult doctrines were cultivated over time, sifted through controversy, debate, and intense discussion. Yet though these ways of expressing biblical truth have come from categories of thought outside Scripture, they nevertheless remain faithful to how the Bible itself expresses those doctrines. Stephen R. Harmon helpfully explains, from the perspective of a common Baptist aversion to tradition, how dependent we are on tradition for our doctrinal affirmations:

> Many Baptists, though perhaps not consciously dependent on Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan trinitarian or Chalcedonian christological formulations, would nevertheless oppose theological proposals that seem not to regard Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as consubstantial, coequal, and coeternal, or that appear not to affirm the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ—but only on the basis of what they believe to be self-evident in Scripture. Although the raw material for the later doctrine of the Trinity is present in Scripture, the fully developed doctrine would hardly have been self-evident to the earliest interpreters of the New Testament. Many Baptists would also regard paedobaptism, for example, as an erroneous doctrine not on the basis of a conscious appeal to a Baptist doctrinal tradition but rather because they believe it to be an unbiblical practice, even though it is the Baptist doctrinal tradition in which they are steeped that has influenced them toward this reading of Scripture.[25]

        Furthermore, the canonization of Scripture itself was the result of a healthy dependence upon tradition in the providence of God. Again, Harmon explains:

> Unless one expands the concept of biblical inspiration to include not only the production of the biblical documents but also their canonization in late fourth-century episcopal synods, it must be conceded that the canon of Scripture is the product of the same sort of consensual development of tradition in the post-New Testament period that also produced the *regula fidei* ("rule of faith") reflected in the conciliar creeds.[26]

The same can be said of worship forms and standards of conduct; how we worship and how we act is built upon customs and forms that have been, in most cases, nurtured for a long time.

        Yet we must also remember that just as some traditions have been cultivated within crucibles of transcendent, biblical values, others were nurtured in an environment of paganism.

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[24]Daniel H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 9.

[25]S. R. Harmon, "The Authority of the Community (of All the Saints): Toward a Postmodern Baptist Hermeneutic of Tradition," *Review and expositor.* 100, (2003): 591-592.

[26]Ibid., 591.

Cultural forms, customs, and mores develop because of the imaginations out of which they grew, and we must evaluate those imaginations in order to judge the traditions themselves. Scruton explains how some cultures may be better than others depending upon how closely they reflect biblical forms of expression:

> As politically incorrect as it may sound, I believe an examination of various human cultures reveals that some cultures may be closer than others in reflecting the fixed norm of Kingdom culture (how things will be when Jesus is King). That is why it is dangerous to reason from culture back to the Scriptures. Instead we should endeavor to build the best biblical model for worship and music that we can and then go to the culture in which we find ourselves and look to stimulate progress toward that model.[27]

Although there may be some differences among Christians of different ethnic backgrounds, a Christian imagination informed by biblical truth will always tend to produce similar cultural ways of expressing that truth. As Bryan Chapell explains, "where the truths of the gospel are maintained there remain commonalities of worship structure that transcend culture." Thus, when it comes to worship forms, "there are common liturgical structures that transcend individual context and traditions." [28]

This becomes no more important than when we attempt to preserve the absolute, transcendent values of God's character and nature. We have been given a truth deposit to protect (and remember, "truth" involves more than mere propositions), we are the pillar and support of that truth (1 Tim 3:15), and it is our responsibility to pass those values and ideas to future generations (Acts 20:27). The way in which we accomplish this goal is by cultivating Christian tradition. Again, this is fairly obvious with regard to doctrine. With the difficult doctrines that are not necessarily systematically explained in Scripture, we do not attempt to "reinvent the wheel" in our explanation of those doctrines to each new generation or ethnic group. Nor do we try to "repackage" those doctrines using contemporary idioms or categories developed in pop culture. We have always and will likely always explain the Trinity in terms of God being one in essence and three in persons. We have always and will likely always explain Christ as one person with two natures. We do not get these categories (essence, person, or nature) from Scripture itself; these categories have been nurtured within the Christian tradition in order to explain Christian doctrine.

And the same is true for our Christian worship. Those who want to preserve God's truth will build upon the tradition of the historic Church; they will learn the essence of that tradition and then seek to preserve and continue to cultivate that tradition. Williams explains how the tradition of the Church has cultivated biblical worship forms:

> In the final analysis . . . Tradition denotes the acceptance and the handing over of God's Word, Jesus Christ (*tradere Christum*), and how this took concrete forms in the apostles' preaching (*kerygma*), in the Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament, in the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in the doxological, doctrinal, hymnological and credal forms by which the declaration of the mystery of God Incarnate was revealed for our

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[27]Scruton, 287.

[28]Chapell, 18.

salvation. In both *act* and *substance*, the Tradition represents a living history which, throughout the earliest centuries, was constituted by the church and also constituted what was the true church.[29]

This perspective is biblical. For example, Paul appeals to the "customs" of the churches as an actual basis of argument in his discussion of head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:16. As Paul commands others to imitate him (Phil 3:17), so we are to imitate the traditions and practices of those who have come before us. Even the observance of the Lord's Supper is based not only upon direct revelation given to Paul, but also apostolic tradition (1 Cor 11:2-34).[30] The biblical command to honor parents and elders is more than simply an attitude, but a direction and disposition. This principle is even implied in Matthew 18:15-20. Jesus clearly states that two or three believers gathered in an official capacity to make a decision for the full assembly possess a certain amount of derivative authority because God is "among them." Certainly this authority applies most directly to discipline situations contextually, yet the principle applies more broadly. This authority is not infallible and equal with Scripture, as the Romanist view of Church tradition argues, but it is real authority nonetheless. These biblical principles should make us very cautious about quickly rejecting the customs, practices, and traditions of those within the Christian heritage.

I am not arguing for a view of tradition that places its authority on the same level of Scripture, but rather a perspective that sees Christian tradition as the most faithful propagation of biblical truth rightly imagined. This was exactly the position of the Reformers. They did not reject tradition outright, but rather put it in its proper place. Daniel B. Clendenin explains:

> It is clear that [the Reformers] even saw themselves as restoring the church to fidelity to the patristic consensus [i.e. tradition]. A reading of Calvin's Institutes, for example, shows his indebtedness to the church fathers. Neither were they unaware of the dangers of individualistic and private interpretation of Scripture, and of the importance of the church context for the life of faith. What they objected to was the church's elevation of tradition to the status of Scripture, and its arrogation to place itself above the Scriptures as its mediator.[31]

Nor am I arguing that these traditions, customs, and forms will never change. One of the valid responses to tradition is continued cultivation of the tradition. But the change will not be one of an entirely different form but one of further nurturing. Nor does this mean that we will never reject a particular part of the tradition that has been handed to us. Tradition is fallible because the humans who have cultivated it are fallible. Tradition, just like anything else, must be evaluated based on what values it carries. We may sometimes see the need to reject a particular part of the established tradition because we find that it does not express the transcendent absolutes that we are trying to preserve and pass on.

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[29]Williams, 36.

[30]For a helpful exploration into the traditional basis for the observance of the Lord's Supper, see Donald Farner, "The Lord's Supper until He Comes," *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (1985): 399-401.

[31]Daniel B. Clendenin, "Orthodoxy on Scripture and Tradition: A Comparison with Reformed and Catholic Perspectives," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (1995): 389.

But what we must never do if we intend to preserve the truth is completely reject the tradition we have been given in favor of other non-Christian traditions. We must not throw away the customs, expressions, and forms that have been nurtured for thousands of years in order to express transcendent values in favor of customs, expressions, and forms that were, in the words of Mark Minnick, created by pagans to express pagan values to other pagans. We must never favor novelty for novelty's sake; we must not reject our tradition merely because it is tradition.

The Judeo-Christian Worship Tradition

Instead, if we are intent upon preserving the truth handed down to us from Scripture, both its doctrinal content and the way the truth is imagined, we must continue to preserve and cultivate what we might call the Judeo-Christian tradition.[32] We have at our fingertips a rich heritage of cultural forms that have grown within the biblical value systems of Judaism and the historic Christian Church—forms that were cultivated with the goal of expressing transcendent biblical values. This tradition perpetuated and cultivated worship forms of the same character as the biblical forms. The forms up until the early 19th century were text-driven, modest, and distinct from the pagan culture; those with Bible-informed imaginations nurtured them in order to communicate that imagination to others.

This cultivation of the Judeo-Christian worship tradition continued until Revivalists in the early 19th century rejected the tradition in favor of the novelty and "excitement" of pop culture. William McLoughlin observes that "Finney's revivalism broke the dam maintained by 'The Tradition of the Elders' (the title of one of his most pungent sermons) and transformed 'the new system' from a minority to a majority religion."[33] From that point on, most of the evangelical/fundamentalist movement has failed to cultivate this tradition, but has instead favored more novel and "stimulating" cultural forms nurtured by secular culture. The Church is now ruled by what Loren Mead called the "Tyranny of the New"—a complete rejection of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Mead explains the problem with this rejection: "When the new way is considered the only way, there is no continuity, fads become the new Gospel and in Paul's words, the church is 'blown to and fro by every wind of doctrine.'"[34] Quentin Faulkner devastatingly summarizes the effect of this rejection of tradition upon the worship of the Christian Church:

> Music (for that matter, all the arts) had become a theological orphan. In fact, no important theological movement, either in the nineteenth or twentieth century, has concerned itself in

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[32]Space does not allow the full explanation of the development of the Judeo-Christian worship tradition. For a more thorough exploration, see my paper, "The Hymnody of the Christian Church: Two Roads Diverged."

[33]William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), 66.

[34]Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1991), 11.

any profound way with the significance of harmony, order, or beauty in Christian life or [worship].[35]

Tradition is neither infallible nor authoritative in itself; but I would strongly suggest that failure to preserve the truth, in both its doctrinal and aesthetic faithfulness to the revelation of God's Word, is due in large part to a failure to preserve the Judeo-Christian worship tradition. In our desire to preserve the truth, we must realize that we cannot start out of nothing; since fully-orbed truth is preserved in large part through our worship forms, we must be committed to preserving those forms that have been cultivated within the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Transmitting Imagination

In order to preserve such a tradition and thus preserve the truth in our worship, we must also commit to passing this tradition to our children. It is my fear that most Christians do not recognize that before a child can even comprehend facts, his affections and imagination are already being shaped. In fact, I would suggest that most Christians never really even consider the moral imaginations of their children. Sure, we say we are targeting their hearts, and by teaching them biblical doctrine their hearts are certainly influenced.

But do we realize that a child's imagination is shaped far before he or she has the capacity to comprehend doctrinal facts? In other words, far before a child can comprehend his need to love the one true and living God, before he or she can comprehend the concept of a god at all, the child learns *how* to love. Far before a child can comprehend his need to fear and reverence God, the child learns *how* to fear and reverence. Far before a child can comprehend his purpose to worship God, the child learns *how* to worship.

What happens with most churches, though, who see only the need to teach their children's minds, is that in order to teach such truths, they are willing to use almost whatever means necessary to do so. So they use puppets to teach Bible stories, never realizing that their children's imaginations are being shaped to view biblical truth as something light and trivial. Or they use cartoons to teach moral lessons, never realizing that their children's imaginations are being shaped to view morality as something silly or "adventurous."

This problem is seen most acutely with children's music. Christian parents, educators, and publishers have the noble goal of teaching their children about God, his Word, and how to obey him rightly, but they set such truth to irreverent, trivial, or even downright banal music, forgetting that far before their children learn these doctrines, they must learn *how* to imagine those truths rightly. I do not question the noble motives of these people for an instant. But I do question their understanding of how children are taught to worship.

Children learn to worship God primarily through participating in rightly ordered worship. Children learn to love God by first learning *how* to love. Children learn to reverence God by first learning *how* to reverence. Children learn to fear God by first learning *how* to fear.

If we fail to preserve the truth, both in its factual *and* aesthetic correspondence to God's reality, I am convinced it will be due in large part to our failure to shape our children's imaginations in our desire to teach them the truth.

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[35]Quentin Faulkner, *Wiser Than Despair: the Evolution of Ideas in the Relationship of Music and the Christian Church* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 190.

Conclusion

What I have described in this paper is nothing more than historic conservative Christianity—Christianity that aims at conserving God's truth both doctrinally and aesthetically. It is popular today to speak deridingly about "cultural conservatism" vs. "theological conservatism." Most evangelicals and increasing numbers of fundamentalists claim that cultural conservatism is at best unnecessary and at worst legalistic. For example, Mark Driscoll has proudly claimed to be "theologically conservative and culturally liberal,"[36] and more and more fundamentalists are trying to distance themselves from so-called "cultural fundamentalism."

On the contrary, my argument here is that theological conservatism is impossible in the long run without cultural conservatism. Theological conservatism alone may be able to preserve orthodox doctrinal statements, but that is not all there is to truth. It is only when we commit to preserving certain forms of expressing those doctrinal ideas that we will successfully preserve the truth.

This is why our worship forms are so important. Many of the songs hailed today as those rightly expressing biblical orthodoxy are little more than systematic theology set to a catchy tune. Such worship forms, I am arguing, do little to successfully preserve truth rightly imagined, and may actually hinder such preservation.

Therefore, if we desire to preserve the truth of Scripture by being both factually accurate and faithful to the way biblical truth is imagined, I offer the following suggestions:

1. We must commit to preserving not just factually accurate articulations of biblical doctrine but also forms that express that doctrine in the same kinds of ways that Scripture does.
2. We must choose worship forms that shape the imagination in the same kinds of ways that Scripture does.
3. We must nurture and cultivate the Judeo-Christian worship tradition rather than allowing secular or pagan tradition to inform our worship.
4. We must transfer that tradition to our children by immersing them in our worship as early as possible.

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[36]Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 138. I would suggest that this is a key distinction between historic fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. While fundamentalists have never been perfectly conservative culturally, they have always been more cautious in adopting the most novel cultural forms.