

Discussion Notes
from
October 19, 2008, Chapter 6: The Paradoxes of Christianity
G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*

Discussion questions:

- What is Chesterton's argument, at pp. 74-75, about the "hidden" "inexactitude" in nature and in people, about "hidden malformations or surprises"?
- What does he mean, at pp. 75-76, "The complication of our modern world proves the truth of the creed"?
- Explain his comment at p. 76, "There is, therefore, about all complete conviction a kind of huge helplessness."
- On pp. 77-83, Chesterton addresses contradictory critiques of Christianity, and said, at p. 83, "Such a paradox of evil rose to the stature of the supernatural." Does he persuade you? Why or why not?
- At pp. 83-84, Chesterton argues that the critics of Christianity actually disclosed more about themselves than about Christianity. Do you see parallels today?
- At pp. 84-91, Chesterton says Christianity combines "furious opposites" (p.88) and "the parallel passions" (p. 89), through which the Church aimed "to give room for good things to run wild" (p. 88). Can you give examples from our world today?
- At p. 91, Chesterton says that the Church was able to "(guess) the hidden eccentricities of life." Explain why that understanding was persuasive to Chesterton about the validity of Christianity.
- Is Chesterton persuasive in his rebuttal (p. 93) to the criticism of Christianity for the religious wars of the past?
- Does Chesterton's conclusion (p. 94) about "the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy", with "the wild truth reeling but erect", bring encouragement or comfort to you?

Discussion notes:

- Never elsewhere have I seen anything comparable to what Chesterton wrote at p. 93, "A sentence phrased wrong about the nature of symbolism would have broken all the best statues in Europe. . . .Doctrines had to be defined within strict limits, even in order that man might enjoy general human liberties."
- It reminds me of when Cromwell smashed the statutes throughout the churches in England.
- We wouldn't have the church music which we have today, if some of the rules of the time hadn't been broken.
- At one time, people were killed over using a form of chant other than the established one.
- A friend of mine from one denomination believes that any symbolism is against the Word of God. It is so sad when beauty is believed to be against God.
- Maybe some of these varying opinions occur because of ambiguities in translations of the scriptural texts.
- This chapter makes two central arguments: (1) Throughout its history the Church has held opposing ideas together, and (2) the Church has been attacked with arguments that the Church is simultaneously one thing and its opposite, or "furious opposites", as Chesterton put it. Are there examples of the same thing today?
- Charity and freedom can be in conflict.
- The Church's views on martyrdom and suicide, as Chesterton cited, are examples.
- Maybe the prime example is war vs. pacifism.
- Yes, as Chesterton pointed out at pp. 85-86, there is the Christian who, to save his life, must lose it.
- God's justice vs. his compassion leads us to the example of Mother Theresa.
- Chesterton argues from complexity, and says that the complexity of the Christian faith is a validation of the faith. A part of the Christian Church today emphasizes the simplicity of the faith, but Chesterton argues from its complexity.
- We should embrace the reality of that complexity, even when it means that not all Christians will agree on every point, and in every generation Christians should re-articulate the principles of the faith. Relying on a simplistic formula can be tragic.
- Some Christian groups try to break through the complexity by focusing entirely or almost entirely on the conversion experience and treat that as the be-all and end-all—but that is an over-simplification.
- And, it is only the beginning. To extrapolate from what Chesterton said at p. 76, one could not explain civilization by describing only how one enters it.
- I was in a book store looking at books about Jesus, when a stranger saw what I was reading and asked, "Who is Jesus?" I was inclined to respond, "Well, who are you?" To answer the "Who is Jesus?" question one must start with where the person is, but the full answer is much more than a one-line statement.

Creeds are an effort to take complex concepts and make them simple or at least less complex.

If you use only simple statements or cite only favorite Bible verses, you lose the paradoxes, which are important to the faith. Throughout Christian history there have been efforts to seek a properly balanced understanding and statement of the faith, but at times there has been an over-emphasis one way or another.

Chesterton's emphasis upon complexity, and our reiteration of the reality of mystery in the faith, may be in part be a reaction against the over-simplifications which we have experienced.

It is important to be able to say, "I don't know", and to acknowledge that we are all still seekers, no matter how long we have been Christians.

Both simplicity and complexity are important; as a child I could understand only what was simple, and that was important to me for that time in my life.

Complexity treats us as individuals, as God created us to be. Christianity is freeing, because it is complex; we don't all have to be the same.

A friend says, "If Christianity were true, wouldn't all Christians agree?" For Chesterton, however, the fact that we don't all agree is a validation. As Americans we endorse the constitutional principle of freedom of speech, but we don't all agree on its boundaries or applications. That doesn't make us less American, and it doesn't undermine the principle.

In the remainder of the book, will Chesterton deal with heresies?

Yes, but indirectly, in his validation of the great Christian creeds as being in accord with life as he experienced it.

At pp. 80-81 Chesterton deals with what he calls the one real objection to the faith, i.e., that it excludes people who do not endorse its beliefs but nevertheless share a common morality with Christians and others—but he points out that science does the same thing; it excludes as valid those who may reach the same conclusions but who do so without use of the scientific method. Yet, the critics of the Church on that ground say that science is right to do the same thing as that for which they criticize the Church.

There is not one monolithic science. Not all scientists agree with one another.

With regard to the "furious opposites" (p. 88), are there others besides the ones Chesterton mentioned?

One might be Christian teachings about worship, about worshipping in simplicity but also as is appropriate when we come before the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

What we call "tough love" might be an example.

Another might be the scriptural idea that as we sow, so shall we reap, as contrasted to the idea of forgiveness.

I don't think those are actually opposites, because even when we are forgiven we still bear the consequences of our actions.

Chesterton referred at p. 94 to the "romance of orthodoxy". Part of the idea is that there are no nuances to being mad, and there is drama in sanity, as we see how things fit together.

We live with the tension of contrasting ideas, and it would be easier to be a fundamentalist, with all black-and-white rules.

Well, it's not all that easy to live by rules, either.

To some degree that's the difference between living in the Old Testament and living in the New Testament.

We should live in the law of love rather than in love of law.