Everywhere we turn today, "faith" has become an attitude in search of an object: you've got to believe in something. We hear a lot about "faith communities" as a genus of which particular religions are regarded as species; "faith perspectives," even "faith-based" political initiatives. Prince Charles has intimated that upon his succession to Britain's throne he plans to delete the definite article in his historic title, changing it from "Defender of the Faith" to "Defender of Faith." French deconstruction philosopher, Jacques Derrida, argued that a general "messianic consciousness" was important for keeping alive hope in the future, but that the announcement of the arrival of any particular messiah provokes violence and dangerous finality. In surveys of American adults, we routinely encounter a positive view of "spirituality" and a somewhat negative view of "religion."

Actually, there is nothing especially postmodern about this situation. Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant sharply contrasted a universal religion of morality and particular "ecclesiastical faiths," and even argued that the latter is the cause of disunity and violence. To the extent that the Christian faith has been quarantined to the personal, subjective, and private life of individuals, it is simply another form of therapy and moral self-improvement rather than a public announcement of the epochal acts of God in Jesus Christ in history.

In this setting, where "faith" is merely a matter of personal opinion and experience, "orthodoxy" loses its object. Or rather, the object shifts from God to the self. We're no longer talking about truth and falsehood, the triune God and idols, but about the degree to which and the rigor with which we hold certain opinions. You have your "orthodoxy" and I have mine. Max Weber, a founder of sociology, predicted that the privatization of faith would lead to the relativization of religious claims until religion just finally died out. Although this "secularization thesis" has proved true in Europe, it has not been so in the United States.

One reason why evangelicalism actually flourishes in this process of secularization is that it celebrates the inward, subjective, personal and private dimensions of religious experience over against the outward, formal, objective, public and corporate dimensions. When secularization leads the population in herd-like fashion to confess that religion is "a very personal matter," they reflect the influence of popular pietism and revivalism in our culture as much as the legacy of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. After all, doesn't the call for "deeds" over "creeds" reflect Kant's contrast between a religion of pure morality and ecclesiastical faiths? When Emergent church leader Brian McLaren says his hope is not necessarily that adherents of other religions may become adherents of the Christian faith, but that they will become better Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist followers of Jesus, he is simply repeating a familiar modern refrain. Many of us were reared on evangelistic appeals that distinguished sharply between a personal relationship with Jesus and joining a church. We live in the land of "no creed but Christ," as if specifying what we mean by "Christ" were itself a violation of the intimacy of the personal relationship.

In Scripture, however, there is no such contrast. The New Testament uses faith (pistis) to refer both to the faith that is believed (fides quae creditur) and the personal act of faith (fides qua creditur). The former, often indicated by the definite article (the faith), is evident in many passages (1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 4:5, 13; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:1; 6:12; 2 Tim. 3:8, 4:7; and Jude 1:3). Most often, however, the faith spoken of is the personal act of believing the gospel. The content of the faith is the gospel and the object of our faith is Jesus Christ as he comes to us in the gospel (Mark 1:15; John 3:15-17, We were baptized into Christ, not into Calvin. There is no such thing as a Reformed faith, but only a Christian faith to which our Reformed confessions bear witness.
In this understanding, orthodoxy is not only a subjective conviction (though it involves this element); it is an extra-spective (i.e., outward-looking) claim about a state of affairs that happens to be true whether we believe it or not. Orthodoxy is not defined by the intensity with which one holds certain convictions or by the rigor with which one conserves traditional views. Christian orthodoxy has been articulated and defended as often by people of a liberal temperament as heterodoxy and heresy have been promulgated by narrow-minded sectarians.

From the time of the apostles, Christians—especially pastors—have been called to "guard the deposit that was entrusted to [them]" (1 Tim. 6:20) and to "follow the pattern of sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13). In fact, New Testament scholars recognize various fragments in Paul’s epistles of creedal formulas that were already in use, said, and sung in the apostolic church. Against the Gnostics, the second-century church father Irenaeus spoke of the "rule of faith," an incipient creed, and in the fourth century the Nicene Creed became the touchstone of Christian orthodoxy.

It is not so much the concept of orthodoxy itself as the relentless assault on the particulars of Christian orthodoxy—the Nicene faith—that first shaped our contemporary culture's antipathy. A new "orthodoxy" of naturalism, moralism, and relativism became more rigidly enforced in modernity than in any era of "Christendom."

**Mere Christianity**

Why can't we just be "mere Christians"? One of the truly remarkable things about evangelicalism is its enormous success in drawing together Christians from a variety of traditions for common witness to Christ and fellowship. I did not become a Christian when I became Reformed; in fact, I credit my nurture in an Arminian Baptist background with introducing me to the Bible and many of the central truths I still hold today. My pastors, parents, and family friends would not have recognized any formal adherence to a creed, but they held the articles of the Apostles’ Creed with greater commitment than many professing Christians who do, including ministers in denominations who swear before God to defend and teach its truths. It was through evangelicalism’s untidy yet intuitive coalescence around Christ’s person and work that I first became aware of Reformed theology and bumped into other evangelicals who held it. Also in evangelicalism I became familiar with God’s work in other parts of the world, not only through returning missionaries but through the parachurch ministries that attracted people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. In this environment, I not only became frustrated with the movement’s captivities to American culture but encountered fellow Christians who agreed.

Ironically, then, evangelicalism is perhaps the most ecumenical form of Christianity in the world today, as it has been ever since the modern missionary movement. For this reason, Reformed leaders from Bishop J. C. Ryle to J. I. Packer (Anglican), Charles Hodge to R. C. Sproul (Presbyterian), and John Owen to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Congregationalist) could speak of an "evangelical Christianity" that is simply true Christianity—mere Christianity. They could go on to defend the particulars of Reformed theology that distinguish it from other traditions, but they knew they had more in common with a Baptist such as Charles Spurgeon and even a Wesleyan such as, well, John Wesley, than with those in their own communion who departed from essentials of the Christian faith.

At the same time, these Reformed leaders actually lived in their "own rooms" (as C. S. Lewis describes it): not only the larger common area of Reformed faith and practice but in the particular spaces of Anglican, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches. As difficult as it is to find the proper balance here, it is crucial in my view that we recover their example at a time when there is increasing polarization and evangelicalism itself seems to be losing its focus on Christ and therefore the intensity of its consensus.

Evangelicalism, especially today, has become in many ways a tradition in its own right that nevertheless refuses to acknowledge itself as such. Prior to the 1950s, evangelicalism was mostly a loose coalition of people who banded together in defense of the gospel, but who actually "lived" in their particular churches. They lived and moved and had their being in a particular confession that (ideally, at least) shaped their faith and practice over many years. Since the neo-evangelical movement, however, a constellation of parachurch institutions has arisen whose networks often replace the distinctive faith and practice of churches. Especially given the pietistic and revivalist heritage of the movement, it seems increasingly difficult to participate in the evangelical coalition unless one is willing to keep his or her Reformed or Lutheran slip from showing. To
the extent that a Presbyterian church thinks of itself as evangelical more than Reformed, it sounds, looks, and acts more like a non-Reformed church. All cats become grey, as a generic set of lowest-common-denominators rather than rich confessional commitments define the shape of our doctrine and church life.

At the other end, partly in reaction to this phenomenon, many confessional Protestants are ready to opt out of "mere Christianity." True Christianity is really found only in the Lutheran confession, some assume. In my own circles, we commonly refer to the Reformed faith. But we were baptized into Christ, not into Calvin. There is no such thing as a Reformed faith, but only a Christian faith to which our Reformed confessions bear witness. I for one believe that these confessions bear the clearest and soundest witness to our common faith, but it is the latter that takes precedence.

It was this conviction that motivated C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Lewis imagined that the Christian family is like a great house with many rooms, where inhabitants sometimes mingle in the hallway. The hallway is "mere Christianity." Lewis introduces his remarkable book by clarifying this point: <blockquote>I hope no reader will suppose that 'mere' Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds [confessions] of the existing communions-as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable. (1)</blockquote>So while the danger on more confessional sides is to ignore C. S. Lewis's invitation to "mere Christianity," the opposite danger is toward a shallowness that loiters in the hallway and never lives in any room.

There are many reasons why we should not give up the hallway. *First, it gives us a place to stand-together.* There is a time to articulate our distinctive formulations of Christian teaching and practice, and there is a time to join brothers and sisters in the hallway to meet and greet strangers to God's promises as most of us once were ourselves. Even on these points such strangers will be likely to hear different accents, but the focus is on the most evident, explicit, and central emphases of the New Testament. Even if the stranger does not adopt our room, we are glad enough that they have taken up residence in the house.

*Second, it gives us a place to listen to one another.* If the tendency of evangelicalism is to ignore the treasures in the various rooms by supposing that the hallway is the house, my own tendency is to ignore the hallway where my brothers and sisters mingle and enrich my own understanding of the faith we share in common. At seminal points my own growth in appreciation for Christianity generally, as well as Reformed convictions, has been spurred on by lively interaction with believers from other traditions. In many cases, I have not only become more aware of where our differences lie but of where my own caricatures or half-truths about other views lie. In the process, I am often amazed by areas of agreement I never knew existed because we use different vocabularies. Each tradition has a tendency to ride hobby-horses that obscure other important truths, and by engaging with other Christians we often find ourselves recovering emphases that were latent in our tradition but that we have ignored because we were content to talk to ourselves. The "one holy, catholic and apostolic church" is a body, with ears as well as mouths. Mutual edification and correction can occur not only formally, within our own churches, but informally through interaction. Listening in the hallway not only includes other Christians but the strangers who do not yet embrace our common faith. If we stay holed up in our rooms all the time, we are faithful neither to our evangelistic calling in the world nor to our own spiritual health. Ignorant of the pressing questions our neighbors are asking and objections they articulate, we become self-satisfied and our churches spend their energies on introspection, which easily turns to family quarrels of secondary or tertiary matters. Spending some time in the hallway has a way of waking the sleep from our eyes.

*Third, it gives us a place to speak.* Not only benefiting from the insights of others, I want to spend some time in the hallway because I believe that Reformed theology offers the best interpretation of Christian faith and practice. We can't just put up a sign on the door with our denominational label and expect other Christians, much less non-Christians, to come knocking. We were called to "go into all the world," not to hide our light under a shade in our cozy quarters.

In my view, the danger of confessional Lutherans and Reformed Christians is to ignore "mere Christianity," partly in reaction against the opposite danger. The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds still provide us with the best definition of orthodoxy. These creeds do not say everything we want to say, of course, but therein lies their strength. In spite of the important differences between Christian churches, there is a place to stand together-like Athanasius-against the world for the world.

There is a lot of wisdom in Lewis's vision. In this view of orthodoxy, we have to be on guard against two mis-interpretations: to eliminate the hallway, assuming that our room is the only one in the house; and to eliminate the rooms, mistaking our
room for the hallway. Eventually, both extremes lead to the same outcome.

Orthodoxy Is Not Conservatism

Contrary to its popular caricature by friend and foe alike, orthodoxy is not the same as conservatism, traditionalism, or nostalgia. Rather, it has always required believers to swim against the tide of their own time and place, to get out of their comfort zone, and to challenge their own cherished presuppositions and narrow experience. It is hardly radical to follow the spirit of the age; the adventure lies in challenging the status quo with the always-surprising and disorienting power of the gospel. This means that genuine orthodoxy is in touch with its own time and place as well as "the faith once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Seeking to know what it believes and why it believes it, orthodoxy is sensitive to the particular questions and issues that demand special attention and understanding. Taking the faith seriously, witnesses to orthodoxy do not have to take themselves seriously. They are not just throwing their weight around, substituting intensity of personal will or conviction for the power of the truth itself, but are "ready to give to everyone a reason for the hope that [we] have" (1 Pet. 3:15).

The power of Christian orthodoxy lies not in its "orthodoxy" but in the distinctive dogma it tenaciously defends against all odds. In 1949, Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957)-the celebrated English playwright, mystery novelist, essayist, and poet-described "the greatest story ever told": Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as the plotline of Scripture. She then wondered why the churches had transformed this into bland moralism. It's not orthodoxy's dogmas that are dull, she argued, but the trite and sentimental aphorisms that pass for sermons. (2)

But how precisely is Christian dogma "the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man"? Sayers explains:<blockquote>It is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and moral uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that one might be glad to believe. (3)</blockquote>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, another famous English writer, poet, satirist, novelist, and literary critic, G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), routinely sparred with friends like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. With Nietzsche, they had assumed that Christian orthodoxy was a blight on humanity, a curse upon life and happiness. It is obviously a generalization, but Chesterton is basically correct when he says that Christianity's "outer ring" is despair, awareness of the tragic sense of life because of original sin; while its "inner ring" is "life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom...but in the modern philosophy the case is the opposite; it is its outer ring that is obviously artistic and emancipated; its despair is within." (4) Because its chief article is that life has no transcendent meaning or purpose, Chesterton added, <blockquote>It cannot hope to find any romance; its romances will have no plots....One can find no meanings in a jungle of skepticism; but the man will find more and more meanings who walks through a forest of doctrine and design. Here everything has a story tied to its tail, like the tools or pictures in my father's house; for it is my father's house. I end where I began—at the right end. I have entered at least the gate of all good philosophy. I have come into my second childhood. (5)</blockquote>Chesterton clarifies: "When the word 'orthodoxy' is used here it means the Apostles' Creed, as understood by everybody calling himself a Christian until a very short time ago." (6)

The new humility para-lyzes people from actually moving in any direction, despite all the talk of progress, innovation, and forward-looking excite-ment. "We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table....Scoffers of old time were too proud to be convinced; but these are too humble to be convinced." (8) Chesterton adds, "An imbecile habit has arisen in modern controversy of saying that such and such a creed can be held in

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1. G. K. Chesterton, "The Insect" (originally published in the London Post, 1893).
2. Dorothy Sayers, "Orthodoxy" (1929).
4. Chesterton, "The Inner Ring and the Outer Ring" (1922).
5. Sayers, "The Measure of a Man" (1925).
one age but cannot be held in another....You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed on Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays." (9)

Therefore, when orthodoxy is defined by its particular convictions, it is seen to be more open and free, not less. In fact, "It is commonly the loose and latitudinarian Christians who pay quite indefensible compliments to Christianity," Chesterton observes.<blockquote>They talk as if there had never been any piety until Christianity came, a point on which any medieval would have been eager to correct them. They represent that the remarkable thing about Christianity was that it was the first to preach simplicity or self-restraint, or inwardness and sincerity. They will think me very narrow (whatever that means) if I say that the remarkable thing about Christianity was that it was the first to preach Christianity. Its peculiarity was that it was peculiar, and simplicity and sincerity are not peculiar, but obvious ideals for all mankind. Christianity was the answer to a riddle, not the last truism uttered after a long talk. (10) </blockquote>It is not Christian orthodoxy but moralistic liberalism that reduces the surprising news of the gospel to the bland repetition of what people already know.

Chesterton refers to an article he had recently read arguing that "Christianity when stripped of its armour of dogma (as who should speak of a man stripped of his armour of bones), turned out to be nothing but the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light....Now, if I were to say that Christianity came into the world specially to destroy the doctrine of the Inner Light, that would be an exaggeration. But it would be very much nearer the truth." (11) The Romans of the first century (especially the Stoics) were advocates of the Inner Light, <blockquote>[Yet] of all horrible religions the most horrible is the worship of the god within....Christianity came into the world firstly in order to assert with violence that a man had not only to look inwards but to look outwards, to behold with astonishment and enthusiasm a divine company and a divine captain. The only fun of being a Christian was that a man was not left alone with the Inner Light, but definitely recognized an outer light, fair as the sun, clear as the moon, terrible as an army with banners. (12) </blockquote>

The identification of orthodoxy with mere conservatism cannot explain how Christianity (unlike liberal "pro-gressivism") has brought perpetual shock and disruption to the status quo. "Some fall back simply on the clock: they talk as if mere passage through time brought some superiority; so that even a man of the first mental caliber carelessly uses the phrase that human morality is never up to date. How can anything be up to date?-a date has no character." (13) A heresy in the second, fourth, or twelfth century is still a heresy in the twenty-first. There is nothing "postmodern" about the suggestion that the faith has to be constantly conformed to the spirit of the age; this is the unassailable modern dogma of progress. With the whole world being divided between progressives and conservatives, Chesterton quipped, "The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected." (14)

Today, orthodoxy is often confused with a cultural and even political conservatism. This has not always been so (and still is not in other parts of the world). Frequently, America's culture wars are identified by sociologists in terms of "orthodox versus "progressive," which is to define orthodoxy again in terms other than Christian doctrine.

Setting its sights on the plotline of God's mighty acts in history "for us and for our salvation," orthodoxy defines faithfulness by how well we not only conserve this faith but by how well we correct our faith and practice to conform to its rule. That's why orthodoxy has given rise as often to reformations as to conservations. It is a living faith-in fact, the only part of what calls itself Christianity that is actually alive. From this Archimedean point, William Wilberforce was able to stand almost alone in bringing down the British slave trade. Christian orthodoxy has no personal stake in progressivism or conservatism; its instincts are evangelical in the deepest sense: oriented to the gospel that creates and sustains the church in all times and places.

Heterodoxy is easy; orthodoxy is the challenge. Orthodoxy forces us to set sail for ever new and distant harbors, beyond the comfort of our cherished assumptions and practices. It is orthodoxy that is adventurous, refusing to allow us to stew in our own juices. We are not allowed to reduce our horizon to the dimensions of our own experience in our own time and place but must become "catholic" creatures: opened up to the church in all times and places.

Where the gospel itself is at stake there can be no compromise, as Paul indicated in his famous Epistle to the Galatians; for it is the gospel that not only defines the house but creates it and keeps everyone in it alive. However we may justly quarrel with other important matters, wherever that gospel is confessed and proclaimed, we owe the judgment of charity-for our own good, as well as that of others. So I conclude with an admonition from Lewis:<blockquote>When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house. (15) </blockquote>
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