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POISON
 CAUTION: may cause extremely combative, paranoid, and dogmatic behavior.

Toxic Religion

by Richard Beck

I know this doesn't look good but I am going to spend this article discussing a phenomena that I don't really have a name for. What I want to discuss is a type of person (or rather the stereotype of a person) in churches who has been described using various labels such as "conservative" (versus "liberal"), "legalistic", or "traditional" (versus "progressive"). Many of us use these labels, but we employ them with little precision. Some people use these words to simply draw doctrinal contrasts, others have more pejorative meanings in mind. None of these terms fit the phenomena I have in mind.

Some of you might have read books or articles describing what has been called "toxic" religion. Toxic religion is a faith that is so maladaptive that it causes mental or behavioral dysfunction. These belief systems are often associated with cults or excessively guilt-motivated religion. This idea of toxic religion comes closer to the phenomena I want to discuss. However, rather than being toxic to the individual, the type of religion I want to discuss poisons the larger community of faith.

I want to argue that there is a "toxic" religious style. I have no good label for this style. "Ultra-conservative" or "legalistic" don't seem to work. In your experience, you may be aware, as I have, of the brand of religion I am talking about. Many within various churches have been wounded from encounters with this toxic religion in churches. It is a type of religion that is extremely combative, paranoid, and dogmatic. To give a flavor of this style, I remember a time in a church when my wife was approached and unkindly reprimanded by a complete stranger for carrying (and, by implication, studying) the New International Version of the Bible. I am sure many of you can recount similar experiences. It is a I'll-write-you-up-in-my-church-bulletin-or-newsletter-for-falling-into-apostasy kind of religion that I want to discuss.

As a psychologist I have wondered about how a person can develop this type of religious disposition. Over the years I have made some generalizations about the personality and thinking style of

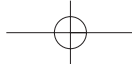
individuals displaying such a faith. By sharing this psychological analysis I hope to illuminate how faith can go awry or bloom to full spiritual maturity. This analysis will provide a contrast by which we can evaluate what is positive and good in various evangelical churches. It will help us know if we are on the right path.

Combateness and Hostility. This toxic faith found in many churches is often characterized by combateness and hostility. The justification for this attitude is that the stakes are so high that we must be bold in "contending for the faith." I feel that it is this aggression that has caused most of the wounds people have suffered in churches. This combateness creates enormous emotional rifts between people. This style lacks a sensitivity and empathy to produce peace-making, unity, and reconciliation. It treats fellow believers as "enemies." This might not be said overly, but this is the emotional tone that is created.

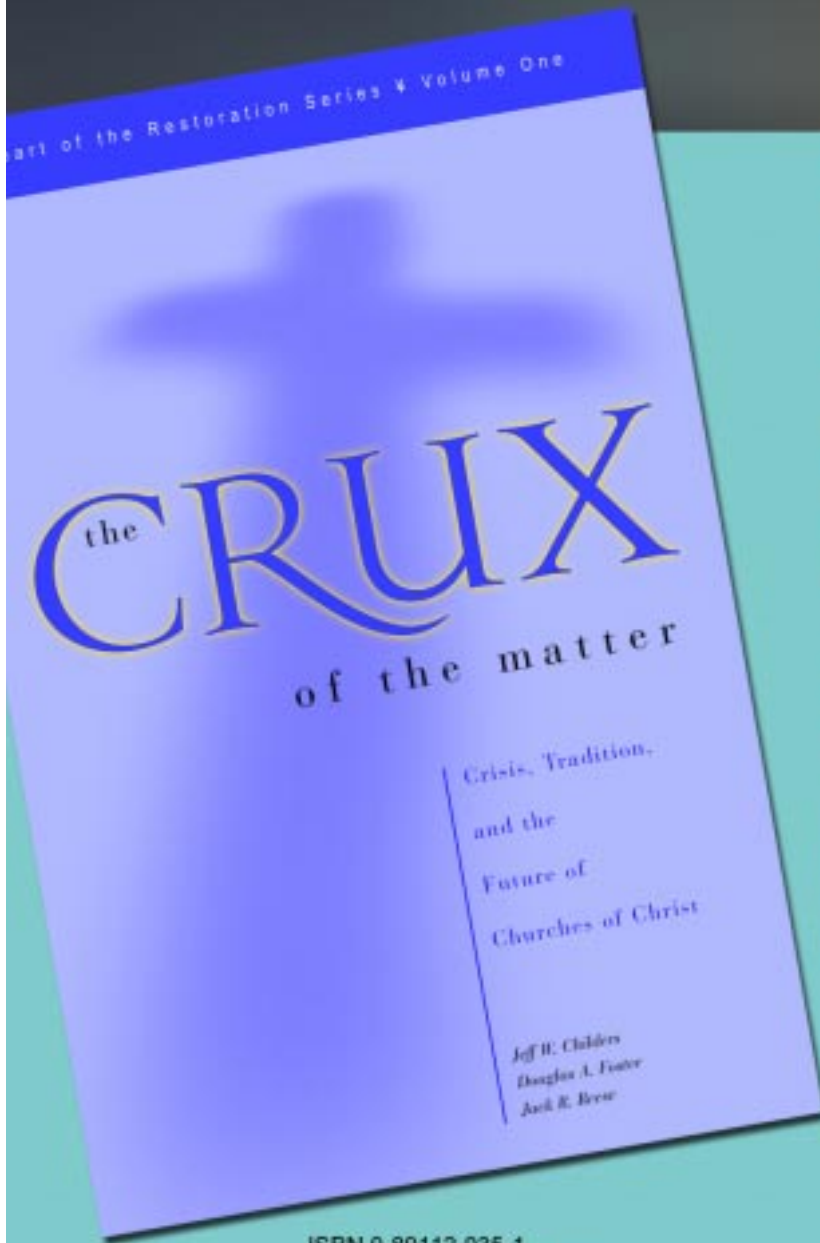
Much of this combateness is due in part, to a conviction held by the person that they are right and anyone who disagrees with them is wrong. The combateness is therefore justified as "righteous." This leads me to my second characteristic.

Dogmatism. In my scholarly research concerning the psychology of religion one of the more interesting findings I have discovered is that people who are tentative in their religious beliefs appear to have more healthy and satisfying spiritual lives. This is a counterintuitive finding. One might expect that absolute conviction and unwavering certainty are the cornerstones of spiritual well-being. This doesn't appear to be the case, and, upon further reflection, it makes a lot of sense. Although most of us are deeply convicted about the things of "first importance" as Paul outlined (the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God), we are much more tentative about many of the doctrinal issues that cause divisions among us. This really boils down to a "Hey, I believe I'm right, but I might be wrong; I am open to really to listen to what you, or the Bible, has to say." Tentativeness is openness, and it seems to be the mark

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of the spiritually mature. It is a prerequisite for spiritual growth.

What is lacking in the “toxic” orientation is a degree of tentativeness. Consequently, lacking an openness to explore and grow, a true and honest discussion with such a person is impossible. It really is like talking to a wall, in that the lack of sincere openness confers a rigid immobility to one side of the discussion.

I was once embroiled in discussion with a man who deemed himself to be a kind of “doctrinal watchdog” in a church at which I was preaching. During the discussion, which occurred after my sermon, I was asked to defend all manner of doctrinal positions I had either overtly articulated or insinuated. However, late in the discussion I stopped defending myself and simply said to the gentleman, “What is bothering me about this discussion is that you are worried about me, about if I am doctrinally correct. But did you listen to my sermon *for you*? Did you learn anything from what I said? Did anything convict you? It seems to me that you are spending so much time watching and monitoring everyone else’s faith that you are neglecting your own.” His response: “Don’t worry about me, I’m doing fine.” It is hard to discuss issues with a person who is so closed to opportunities for spiritual growth and insight.

Theological Insularity. The main reason a person can maintain this degree of dogmatism is that they keep their world insulated from novel and challenging theological perspectives. By reading material or attending meetings or conferences where the same theological views are expressed repeatedly, the person grows in the conviction that they are in possession of the Truth. Outside inputs are highly suspect and

avoided. In fact, openness to outside perspectives (a Protestant reading, perhaps, the religious work of a Catholic author or a Catholic reading the work of a Protestant) is seen as a symptom of spiritual disease. By keeping oneself so insulated, the person can maintain the belief system they were essentially given as children. Over the lifespan no real searching occurs, just repeated experiences aimed at rearticulating and reinforcing the same basic tenets of their faith.

Concrete Thinking. This last characteristic of “toxic” faith is the most psychological of the list. It is a characteristic of a certain style of thinking. To start, let me define some terms. Abstract thinking involves making higher-level connections among a set of seemingly unrelated facts or categories. By contrast, concrete thinking keeps to the details and doesn’t notice the overarching patterns.

Among people who display the “toxic” orientation I have been discussing, I have noticed a predominately concrete thinking style. Specifically, these individuals find abstract arguments from Scripture, arguments that cannot be reduced to a proof text, very unpersuasive. In fact, the whole proof-text phenomena is very concrete in nature with its one-to-one mapping of Text-to-Truth. Attempts to look at broad or overarching themes in Scripture are often rejected in that they involve the simultaneous interpretation of multiple verses, some of which may seem to contradict each other. The role of paradox or mystery in Scripture is also suspect.

To digress a bit, this issue is important in that many progressive (there go those labels!) churches are basing their changes on abstract Biblical arguments. Some people find these arguments unconvincing since “Chapter and Verse” cannot be offered as a definitive argument.

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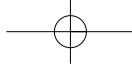
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Consequently, one's tolerance of abstract arguments will in large part affect what one accepts as a "Biblical" or "Scriptural" argument. In my opinion, the whole "Old" versus "New Hermeneutic" debate hinges on thinking styles and preferences (Does the person primarily operate out of an abstract or concrete thinking mode?).

A Positive Conclusion: A Study in Contrasts. My goal so far has not been to create a caricature or to mock individuals (Some may find my use of the term "toxic" off-putting; However, few could debate that individuals displaying the style I have described have caused great pain). I also recognize that I have been stereotyping quite a bit. My main goal has been to reach a point where I could comment on the positive trends I have been seeing in churches that have tried to break down these walls. These trends become apparent if we use the "toxic" orientation we have been discussing as a contrast.


Specifically, I think many Christian churches have been moving in the "opposite" direction as the "toxic" orientation, away from stagnation and toward greater spiritual wholeness. To start, the tone in these churches is changing. Less combative, our congregations are more focused on peace, unity, and reconciliation. We are more tolerant of doctrinal diversity as long as the things of "first importance" are clung to. As a consequence, we are being perceived differently in our communities. Rather than being seen as judgmental and harsh, we are increasingly being seen as people of empathy and compassion.

Much of this change in tone is due to our being increasingly open and willing to grow. We are much less willing to endorse the position that we have it all right and anyone who disagrees with us is all wrong. In

a sense, tentativeness is at the heart of the movement among evangelical churches toward dropping denominational titles. Being tentative in currently held beliefs and, therefore, open to new Truth, we can participate in the dynamic nature of restoring our faith in Christ.

I'm seeing more churches that are open to the fruits of those outside their particular faith community. Christians are reading and discussing ideas from authors from different Christian backgrounds. From C.S. Lewis to Richard Foster to Dietrich Bonhoeffer we expose ourselves to ideas that enrich and deepen our views of Scripture. Many of us also participate in ecumenical activities such as Promise Keepers, Bible Study Fellowship, or Walk to Emmaus. For many, these experiences have reinvigorated their spiritual walk.

Finally, views of Scripture is changing. The proof-text has given way to the more abstract view that Scripture is God's Story and the conviction that that Story continues in a powerful way in our present day. We remain a "People of the Book" but realize that God will do what God will do. The Bible is cherished for pointing us to Jesus.

In sum, although "toxic" faith among a few churches provides an interesting case study, my real intent is to provide a contrast to illustrate specific ways I believe Christian churches—such as Churches of Christ, community churches, and mainline denominations that are shedding their formal names—are growing in the right direction. Over the last few decades many congregations have grown more empathic and less combative, more tentative and less dogmatic, more willing to learn from others in Christendom and less theologically insulated, and, finally, we are increasingly seeing the Big Picture of Scripture rather than missing the forest for the trees. 



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