

Sunday, February 5, 2012

delivered by Pastor Andy Walker

Throughout the history of the church, believers have had to wrestle with doctrinal questions. Our ancestors have had to ask, and answer, such questions as "Is Christ physically present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper?". Most Evangelicals have answered in the negative, but Lutherans believe Christ is present in some sense, though not physically. Baptists have answered that Christ is present only in the sense that He is omnipresent, and thus is everywhere. Luther and Zwingli debated this matter, and could not agree. Neither questioned the authenticity of the other man's faith, but each man was convinced that this was not a trivial disagreement. Thus, they were at an impasse.

This doctrine (among others) that distinguishes Lutherans from Baptists is not an essential, or core doctrine that, if denied, would rise to the level of rank heresy. If, for example, one were to deny the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the virgin birth, or the bodily resurrection of Jesus, these denials would not constitute a disagreement within Christianity, it would be a departure from Christianity.

This doctrine of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, while not an essential doctrine, is nevertheless, for Lutherans and Baptists, an important doctrine that each holds with conviction. Therefore, while lovingly affirming the genuine quality of each other's faith, each desires the freedom to preach and teach their convictions. This, obviously, cannot be done under the same roof or from behind the same pulpit. Thus, we continue to have Lutherans and Baptists and not BaptiLutherans.

Rather than seeing this disagreement as something for which we should be ashamed, we should thank God for the freedom that allows both groups to be able to express their respective convictions in their distinct communities of faith.

Likewise, genuine Christians have disagreed over the question of who is a valid and legitimate candidate for baptism. Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians have answered that infants and believers are valid candidates for baptism. Baptists, Assemblies of God, Nazarenes, Four Square, Calvary Chapel, and many other evangelical denominations disavow infant Baptism and affirm only believer's baptism. While neither position is considered a departure from the core of Christianity, each adherent considers their respective convictions to be very important. Neither group questions the authenticity of the other's faith, but each group is convinced that this is not a trivial disagreement. Thus, they remain at an impasse.

This doctrine, while not an essential doctrine, is nevertheless, for Presbyterians and Baptists, an important doctrine that each holds with conviction. Therefore, while lovingly affirming the authenticity of each other's faith, each desires the freedom to preach and teach their convictions. This, obviously, cannot be done under the same roof or from behind the same pulpit. Thus, we continue to have Paedo-Baptists and Baptists.

Rather than seeing this disagreement as something for which we should be ashamed, we should thank God for the freedom that allows both groups to be able to express their respective convictions in their distinct communities of faith.

I happen to love and admire many within the Paedo-Baptist community. There isn't a Christian leader that I respect more than the Presbyterian R.C. Sproul. Yet, I believe he is mistaken on his view of infant baptism.

If, tomorrow, I discovered that my Baptist view of baptism was mistaken, and believed that I must adopt the Presbyterian position, I would be at a crossroad with the leadership of Country Oaks Baptist. I would either have to:

1. Persuade the elders to adopt my new conviction, which would involve a paradigm shift for the elders as well as the entire congregation. This runs the risk of causing unnecessary division and strife while I attempt to turn a Baptist church into a Presbyterian church.
2. Agree to refrain from preaching, teaching, or in any way promoting my Presbyterian view, which would involve displeasing God by being silent regarding a conviction that, I believe, God wants me to promote.
3. Find a church of like faith where I can teach my view unhindered, which would allow me to follow my new conviction without hindrance, and avoid the dissension and inevitable division that would be caused by trying to transform a Baptist church into a Presbyterian church.

Almost three months ago Pastor Cowan had an experience that caused him to have to reconsider a long held belief. This experience raised several questions that needed to be answered by Pastor Cowan as well as the other elders of Country Oaks Baptist Church. The questions were:

- a) To what extent can a demon(s) affect a Christian?
 - *tempt?
 - *harass?
 - *influence?
 - *attach?
 - *inhabit?
 - *possess?
 - *all the above?
- b) What can be done to cancel or reverse the effects a demon(s) in a believer's life?
 - *resist?
 - *rebuke?
 - *repent?
 - *cast out the demon(s)?

- *exorcise the demon(s)?
- *all the above?

A related question that arose from (a) & (b) was:

- c) Can a demon's activity in a believer's life be so powerful that progress in sanctification is stalled until the demon is expelled, cast out, or exorcised?

The elders and Pastor Cowan could not reach agreement on these questions.

As is the case with many doctrines and policies, controversy forces leaders to reexamine and reflect upon matters that, heretofore, have not required careful articulation and codification. A couple of examples illustrate the point. When I arrived at COBC in 1990, the elders were forced to formally address the question of whether or not the Bible allowed women to teach men. The church had a position on the matter, but it wasn't in writing. The question caused the elders to rule on the matter by referring to Scripture as well as by reflecting on the historical position of Baptists. Eighteen years later the controversy of same sex marriage forced the elders to rule on the matter. The church already had a stance on same sex marriage but it was an unwritten policy/doctrinal position. Therefore, the elders ruled on the matter by referring to Scripture as well as by reflecting on the historical position of Baptists.

These recent questions regarding demonic influence and activity in the believer's life has, once again, caused the elders to rule on a matter by referring to Scripture, as well as by reflecting on the historical position of Baptists. The recently published position is consistent with the historical position of COBC. It is also consistent with what every past and present COBC elder believed before the events in question. To put it more clearly, every elder who has ever served at COBC, including Pastor Cowan, could have signed this policy/doctrinal statement prior to November 2011. Therefore, this statement is not a departure from the historical, yet unwritten, position of COBC or Baptists in general.

The statement reads as follows:

Elder's Position on Demons and Deliverance Ministry

"The Scriptures affirm that Satan and demons are real. The Lord has complete authority over Satan and demons. He allows them to have influence in the lives of unbelievers and believers. During the time of Jesus' ministry on earth, we see examples of many people being inhabited by demons as recorded in the Gospels. Jesus demonstrated authority over the demons by casting them out of people. Jesus also gave this authority to the Apostles and other disciples, and He commanded them to cast out demons in the name of Jesus Christ. However, these examples begin to fade near the end of the book of Acts and there are no examples of post-Pentecost true believers being inhabited by demons in the Epistles.

Furthermore, there are no instructions in the Epistles to look for demons hiding in believers or unbelievers. Though the Scriptures never say that true believers cannot be inhabited by demons, we believe that the Bible gives true believers reasonable assurance that they ought not to be suspicious of demon inhabitation. Rather, true believers can have assurance that they are able, by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, to resist the Devil and avoid his evil schemes through practicing a life of obedience to Christ as revealed in the Scriptures.

God's plan is clearly revealed in His Word to all believers, namely, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Because Satan prowls like a lion, we are commanded to resist him (1Peter 5:9). The Greek word translated "resist" is a military term that speaks of taking a firm stand against an enemy. We are to stand against our adversary by being firm in the faith (v. 9). That speaks of purity in both doctrine and conduct. Do you want to be firm in the faith? Shun evil and draw near to God. When Satan or fleshly desires tempt you, resist. If we do that, Scripture guarantees that the devil will flee (James 4:7).

Resisting the devil is not a matter of speaking to him or rebuking him. Scripture clearly describes the armor we are to use in battle, and it consists of divine provisions we are to rely on. In Ephesians 6:11 and 13. Paul puts it in this way: "Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. . . . Take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." Our spiritual weapons can be summed up in one word: OBEDIENCE. Obedience comes by having our minds controlled by the truth of God's Word. By obeying God's Word, you will stand firm "in the evil day" (Eph. 6:13).

A believer's progress in sanctification is solely dependent upon the believer's will to conform his/her thinking to God's, to believe what God says, and to do what God commands. The believer's progress in sanctification is not dependent upon exorcising or casting out demons. In none of the passages that address overcoming sin or false teaching are we ever instructed to implement the casting out of demons to find victory in the Christian life. If the casting out demons were a critical component of progress in holiness and freedom, surely the Apostles Paul, Peter, James, and John would have mentioned it at least once.

We do not recommend or affirm any ministry that attempts to identify, name, control, or cast out demons from believers or unbelievers. If an unbeliever seems to be demon inhabited, we affirm that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to regenerate the unbeliever and expel the demon. Anyone seeking any form of demon deliverance ministry at COBC or from leaders of COBC will have to seek

that particular type of counsel outside of COBC. The leaders of COBC will not be conducting or promoting any type of demon deliverance ministry."

Pastor Doug decided that he is no longer able to affirm COBC's historical position on this doctrinal issue. He submitted a letter to Floyd Jones, the Chairman of the Elder Board, expressing his desire to resign from Country Oaks and open a private counseling practice in Tehachapi. The Elder Board accepted his resignation as Associate Pastor and Elder of Country Oaks on February 1, 2012. Although Pastor Doug expressed a desire to slowly transition out of his ministry duties over a period of two months, the Elders agreed that it would be best for Doug and the church for him to begin his new ministry endeavors immediately. However, the Elder Board was able to grant Doug's request for a severance package to help his family while they embark on their new journey in ministry. We were glad to offer this gift out of gratitude for the Cowan's 15 years of ministry at Country Oaks.

Many of you have known that this doctrinal issue was being researched and debated by the Elders for the last 3 months. But for others, this news comes as a complete surprise. It has been remarkable how discreet and patient the people of Country Oaks have been while the Elders worked through the process of searching the Scriptures. The Elders commend you and thank you for your trust and patience, and we ask you to continue being patient as we reassign ministry responsibilities among the pastors, elders, and deacons. We understand that this news is sure to stir up a wide range of emotions and many questions. We encourage you to seek the Lord in prayer first and foremost. We also invite you to search the Scriptures as you have a chance to read and study the doctrinal statement. If you still have questions or feelings that you are struggling with, make an appointment with one of the elders and we would be glad to speak with you.