

9th.Application to Postconservative Evangelicalism (PCE) Preserving and Promoting True Knowledge in ourselves and others

Consider the claim of a “postconservative” evangelical theologian at Biblical Theological Seminar in Philadelphia: “the certainty of knowledge is an impossible dream” (Franke, *Character of Theology, a PCE Approach*, 28). This view holds that truth and knowledge exist experientially in communities of Christians; each community sees what is “true” in their experience and that is sufficient for their walk with God. There are only narratives and stories. There are “truths’ but no truth because knowledge is the subjective product shaped by each person’s history. Therefore, the church ought not to be confessional or dogmatic in even the soft sense of holding that certain dogmas we believe are certainly true in an objective sense. We should not think of beliefs as true for all people whether acknowledged by them or not, and we should not attempt to expose some beliefs as erroneous.

Initial comments: 1) The Lord allows thinking like this to challenge us and awaken us from sleepiness in our walk with God in truth. 2) We have doubts and may lack conviction about things (millennium, Rev 20, etc). 3) We also may doubt things we know because of disobedience.

Introduction

Consider the influence of postconservative evangelicalism (PCE), a contemporary movement shaped by our culture of postmodernism and relativism. Like other challenges (atheism, evolutionism), PCE calls for a response. There are things to see in a new light that we are called to see by the fact that the Lord allows various claims to challenge us and awaken us from sleepiness in our walk with God in truth. For example: “the certainty of knowledge is an impossible dream” (Franke, *Character of Theology, a PCE Approach*, 28).

PCE is a product of the postmodernist worldview regarding how we find significance and truth in narratives and stories about history, especially, in writing (in literature, in theology, etc). It claims that there is no narrative (no truth), no true story, no meaning to life that is certain and that excludes other claims of truth and meaning. There are only narratives and stories. There are “truths’ but no truth. Truth is knower specific. It is person specific and thus subjective, being the product of upbringing, learning, and culture; truth is what you know today; it may be here today and gone tomorrow. Truth changes with those who “know” it; it exists in a constant state of flux. Therefore, the church ought not to be confessional (holding x to be “the faith”) or dogmatic in even the soft sense of holding that certain dogmas we believe are certainly true in an objective sense, true for all people whether acknowledged by them or not, and exposing other beliefs as erroneous. Truth and knowledge exist existentially (experientially) in communities of Christians; each community sees what is “true” in their experience and sufficient for their walk with God.

How, then, do we arrive at truth for ourselves and promote it in others (as the 9th presupposes)?

How do we go beyond saying that coming to truth is simply being shaped experientially by the Christian story and this shaping makes us authentic Christians, even though we have no objective doctrines to define what authentic means (Helseth, *Right Reason and the Princeton Mind*, 210-221)? We arrive at truth in a context and in stages.

(1) Christians know the truth of Scripture by the testimony of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit set us apart by giving us faith and full conviction that the apostolic word is truly the word of God: **And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God,**

which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers (1 Th 1.13). Christians know that there is objective truth “out there” before them in the sixty-six books of God’s word.

(2) There is also the dynamic reality of our subjective grasp of that truth.

Because of the reality of the subjective side of knowledge and our recognition of our subjectivity and fallibility, can we affirm truth and doctrine, can we be sure about truths and doctrines or should we have no convictions (as a working conviction; no narrative as our narrative)?

The question is not: are there some things about which we ought to be less sure, even unsure? It is not: are there things about which we might be unsure at various points in our lives, such as having strong conviction about a future one thousand year millennium or a future seven year tribulation period)? As to the idea that we ought to be less sure at times, this is a humble recognition of the facts: a) that we are at different stages of sanctification with different levels of insight, b) that the Lord reveals things to each believer in stages for His purposes and we are to live by what we know waiting on the Lord to reveal more to us, as Philippians teaches: **Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you** (3.15), c) and that many subjective factors affect our grasp of truth: biases, perspective or lack of perspective on Scripture and its application to our individual lives, general education and biblical education regarding facts, themes, and definitions, degrees of patience and perseverance in wrestling with the Lord in prayer while wrestling with the Scriptures, sinful habits that work against growth in understanding, honest and earnest application of the graces of open-minded humility, and so forth.

(3) When is our confession generally or specifically (this truth) true?

When is pastoral preaching and teaching by fallible pastors true, given that we no longer have apostles today who unilaterally tell us what God says? Answer: when preaching, teaching, and our confession of truth conforms to God’s speech in the sixty-six books of Scripture. This elevates the principle of sola scriptura (Scripture alone is the standard of Christianity).

(4) How do I know (how does each Christian know) when this conformity exists?

Again, we remind ourselves of all the subjective factors of our “hermeneutic of finitude” in which we are to always remain open to new insights that come by fresh thinking on old solutions. Surely, a look back in our histories reveals that things we thought were certainly true turned out to be false; that is how we see them now. Moreover, the firmness of our belief does not indicate its truthfulness.

Accordingly, the answer is that we know the truth in stages, better and better, through a process of growth in grace by the work of the Holy Spirit who has revealed the truth of Scripture to us and who continues to reveal more to us for our maturing (Phil 3.15). Being assured rightly and genuinely involves fellowship with God, confession of sin, repentance, the pursuit of holiness, prayer, taking up of God’s appointed means of grace (diligent listening to preaching, singing, giving, praying, reading of Scripture, and observing of the sacraments), and studying to show ourselves approved of God in fulfillment of the priesthood of all believers.

For short, we gain assurance in what we know by engaging a process of learning in a context of mutual exhortation of believers, especially because of the deceitfulness of sin: **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin** (Heb 3.13). In this context, pastors patiently teach by exhortation and correction **preach the word...reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.**³ **For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,**⁴ **and will turn away from listening to the truth** (2 Tim

4.2-4). On one hand, pastors must expose error in a firm and decisive way: **For an overseer, as God's steward...must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it** (Titus 1.7-9). On the other hand, believer-priests (flocks) must test all things looking for the good; otherwise they quench the Spirit and despise God's word: **Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good** (1 Thess 5.19-21).

Ultimately, then, given the fact that confusing and contrary views abound, what makes us so sure that we (as individuals and as the church in the entire time between) are making progress in the truth? We are sure for one primary reason: we are sure because of our Lord's promise to sanctify us by the word by His Spirit through enlightenment of the eyes of our understanding.