

The Pluralistic Dualism of Christianity

(For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying. If we discerned ourselves, we would not be under judgment; but since we are judged by [the] Lord, we are being disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

-1 Corinthians 11:23-32

"Hear then the parable of the sower. The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold."

-Matthew 13:18-23, with similar explanations in Mark 4:13-20 and Luke 8:11-15

According to the Oxford Languages Dictionary, the definition of "pluralism" is "a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principals, sources of authority, etc., coexist." This is in contrast with "dualism," which is "1. the division of something conceptually into two opposed or contrasted aspects, or the state of being so divided. 2. the quality or condition of being dual, duality." Duality has a specific meaning in Christianity. It usually means that God and creation are separate and distinct, yet still united in some way. Biblical duality deals with the fact that, although we were meant to be spirit and body, God nonetheless sustains us between death and resurrection. Both pluralism and dualism are closely related, yet neither one alone really conveys one of the most amazing and wonderful aspects of Christianity that makes it so unique.

Pluralism has a certain serenity about it, a sense of unity. A man may be both a doctor and a father, and there is no conflict between these two states. But dualism presents an apparent conflict. Marriage is a dualism of a man and woman. A man is not a woman, and a woman is not a man, yet they become one through marriage. When one thinks of a man, one normally sees the man in one aspect at a time (patients see the doctor, but not the father, whereas the son usually sees the father). But when one thinks of a marriage, hopefully both aspects are seen together. Pluralism allows for one

aspect to happen at a time; dualism forces one to think of both at once.

When we talk of Jesus, who is both God and man, which word should we use? It might appear that this is a clear case of dualism, but in practice it becomes quite difficult. We can visualize a marriage as man and woman easy enough, one needs only look at a wedding picture after the vows are made. But imaging Jesus as being man and God is hard to do except within a trite statement of faith. Even the Gospel writers had this problem. While all of them clearly indicate that Jesus is God and man, there is no clear example or explanation of this to help us understand it. Jesus is almost always portrayed by his human nature ("And Jesus wept," John 11:35), with only a few clear indications of his divine nature ("Your sins are forgiven." Luke 5:20 and 7:48). Unitarians and Muslims base their beliefs of Jesus being only man from the gospel emphasis on the humanity of Jesus.

It's not for a want of trying, however, that this is so. Examples we can understand are hard to come by. The dualism was insisted upon by Jesus Himself when He said, "take and eat; this is my body." to a culture that abhorred cannibalism (Matthew 26:26), yet nearly half of Christendom denies that God, who created the essence of the universe, could change the essence of the bread and wine into the essence of His body. Perhaps the clearest and most understandable example of both natures being shown at once is in the transfiguration He experienced on the mountain (all three synoptic gospels and 2 Peter 1:18), and during His ascension into Heaven (Luke 24:51). But these examples, beautiful as they are, do just enough to entice us to contemplate the mystery of His dualism rather than help us understand.

We have an almost endless list of titles Jesus goes by: savior, healer, teacher, brother, prophet, perfect sacrifice, king of kings, priest most high, and on and on. This suggests that perhaps pluralism is the answer. But a closer look gives us another problem. Many of the titles Jesus has can appear to contradict each other, therefore they are dualisms. Even in my short list, perfect sacrifice and priest most high would be a dualism. When Jesus is called "king of kings," we must also remember the dualism of Jesus being described, explicitly or implicitly, as a slave (such as Philippians 2:7). So I think what we really have is that Jesus is a pluralism of dualisms. And, as difficult as this concept may be to accept, the Gospels provide plenty of evidence that this is indeed the case.

In addition to a number of His titles indicating apparently contradictory aspects of Jesus, His own words and actions show this as well. I'll just give a few here. Perhaps the most obvious is when He claimed that "thus the last shall be first, and the first shall be last" (Matthew 20:16). Another good example is that He claimed that neither the law nor the prophets were to be changed (Matthew 5:17), yet the changes He promoted to the culture based on these tenants were so radical that it led to His execution. Jesus once claimed Peter had the special blessing of the Father, yet a few verses later called Peter "Satan" (Matthew 16:17-23). Jesus claimed to be "the life" (John 14:6) and a few hours later died (John 19:30). Jesus kept company with sinners and condemned the ritually righteous (Matthew 9:11 for example), and yet claimed to be doing God's will (Matthew 9:13). The most important of the apparent contradictions, however, has to go back to His being fully human and fully divine. Only a fully divine being could have withstood bearing all of mankind's sins at once, yet if He was not fully human then such a sacrifice would have been meaningless. God had to become man and die, so that in His resurrection, He could resurrect man, who had already died. I could go on, but these apparent contradictions are real. Skeptics often use them to "prove" the Bible cannot be trusted.

As "Christians" (a term that means "little Christ") we inherit this pluralistic dualism. As hard as this concept can be to grasp, if we are to truly know ourselves as Christians, we have to at least have some understanding of it. Jesus, among other great things, gave us a road map to follow, but we still

have to follow it for it to mean anything. For the rest of the paper, I am going to focus on only two dualistic expressions. I feel they are broad enough in scope that, if understood, the millions of other dualisms of Christianity can be better understood as well.

The first dualism I will address comes from C.S. Lewis. When he came out of his atheism, he looked for a means to decide which of the thousands of religions and quasi-religions in the world was the best expression of whatever god(s) might exist. He quickly noted that all pagan religions focused on the ritual. As a philosopher, C.S. Lewis was disturbed that paganism did not make any serious effort to discover philosophical truths of the universe these gods created (this was done by secular philosophers who, regardless of personal religious beliefs, were careful to not intrude on religious matters). Pagan religions were for the masses, not the intelligentsia. In a similar manner, C.S. Lewis was not impressed by godless philosophies. While philosophers were welcomed by the intelligentsia, the lack of rituals meant that the commoners had little or nothing to do with them. C.S. Lewis could not accept a religion as being true if it did not include everyone. After his search, he found that only Hinduism and Christianity had both the ritual and the philosophy (he considered Islam to be a watered-down version of Christianity, and therefore not worth considering). But while Hinduism had something for both the intelligentsia and the commoner, they could still do this while separated from each other. A whole village could perform some sacred ritual while a nearby monk could contemplate the meaning of the universe. The monk had no obligation to attend the ritual, and the villagers had no obligation to listen to the monk's insights.

It was only in Christianity, he discovered, that a highbrow like him had to kneel and sing songs with the lowbrows, but they, in turn, had to sit and listen with him as the secrets of God's plan for all mankind were revealed. He specifically used the 1 Corinthians quote I placed at the head of this paper as proof of the dualism of ritual and philosophy inherent in Christianity. I have found this dualism quite useful, as it seems most people can see both a ritual and a philosophical aspect to Christianity. But while I found it useful in many situations, there were still many situations where this explanation of Christian beliefs seemed to be stretched, and sometimes even failed. I later read *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Apology for my Life) by Saint John Henry cardinal Newman, and found another dualism that did a better job explaining the dualistic aspects of Christianity, but it seems to be harder for others to understand.

Newman, in attempting to explain the differences between Protestant and Catholic churches, and why the Anglican Church was the best blend of the two (this was before his conversion to Catholicism), described Christianity as having a pure side and a truth side (with the Anglican Church balancing both aspects the best). It should not be too hard to associate Newman's "truth" with C.S. Lewis's "philosophy," but there does seem to be great confusion in getting from C.S. Lewis's "ritual" to Newman's "purity."

But just because there is confusion, it does not mean there is no reason to not make an effort to settle it. If we look at "purity" as meaning "the way it should be" or "idealized," then perhaps getting from ritual to purity is not as hard a leap as it first seems. From the time of Cain and Able (Genesis 4) to the end of the Book of Revelation, we see rituals being presented as the way things should be, with great attention on getting things right. When things are right, there is a certain beauty to the result. Therefore profound beauty can also be considered part of purity. Protestants left the Catholic Church on grounds that the church was perverting what the Bible really said. They were arguing for the truth. The Catholic Church, in response, claimed that the office of the pope was a legacy of Saint Peter, whom Jesus explicitly named as leader of the church (Matthew 16:18). The Catholics were arguing for the idealized (or purity) of the office of the pope (if Peter was commissioned as leader of the church,

then so too should his direct successors).

As the centuries have gone by, the Catholic Church has done much to identify the truth of the faith, but such efforts are usually internal and not well appreciated outside church theologians. Protestants, however, continue to fracture at a frightening rate. Individual churches and denominations can exhibit the full range of positions considering truth or purity, yet they all seem to view themselves as embracing truth no matter how far from the truth they may have gone. Fundamentalists seem to be the most hypocritical in this regard, as they take the purist position that the Bible, being inspired by God, need not be analyzed. It says what it says and that is all there is to it.

I also find that Newman's purity and truth dualism is actually endorsed by Jesus. In His explanation for His parable of the Sower (which is only one of two parables recorded by all three synoptic writers, suggesting the importance of it), we see some seeds are spread on rocky ground, that they grow up "with joy," (Matthew 13:20 and Luke 8:13) but are quickly parched by the sun because they have no roots. Such is what one can expect from a purist position. The joy and other great feelings that can come from the purity of Catholic rituals are nonetheless feelings. Feelings are, by their nature, short-lived. Faith needs roots to survive when the feelings go away. Although the Catholic Church is opposed to the idea that marriages can end simply because the "feeling" is gone, it is failing to give its young adults a reason to stay in the Church when their feelings are gone.

And this lesson is not limited to the Catholic Church, as fundamentalists are quite excited about their faith as well. But they deny that obvious contradictions exist in the Bible, that every word is to be taken at face value. Their sense of purity is so strong that they experience cognitive dissonance when these apparent contradictions are read out loud to them. Fundamentalists, like our young adults, are likely to leave when truth does not give the faith roots.

We also see seeds scattered among thorns. They presumably grow roots, but are unable to bloom because they are "choked by the anxieties and riches and pleasures of life." (Matthew 13:22 and Luke 8:14) The constant fragmenting of the Protestant churches is evidence that they are so distracted. If their focus was truly on God and not other things, then why the need to constantly separate just to have a different way to say the same thing? Should not different ways of expressing the truth be welcomed, or is the truth of Jesus meant to be limited?

It is only when the seeds are scattered on ground that is both soft and free of weeds that a harvest of "hundred or sixty or thirtyfold" (Matthew 13:8, with similar claims in Mark 4:8 and Luke 8:8) can be had. It is only when the church embraces its plurality of dualism that the church will grow. The exodus of participating Christians from all churches is well past alarming levels, and cannot continue at this rate for long before there will be no one left to go to church. All Christian churches need to work on bringing the dualism back to the faith, just like Saint Paul did with the churches he established (per the opening quote). The alternative is a slow suicide of the faith by those refusing to accept this reality.

Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity. The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has permitted the twilight. He has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland. He has always left himself free to doubt his gods; but (unlike the agnostic of to-day) free also to believe in them. He has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and contradiction

along with them. His spiritual sight is stereoscopic, like his physical sight: he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that. Thus, he has always believed that there was such a thing as fate, but such a thing as free will also. Thus, he believes that children were indeed the kingdom of heaven, but nevertheless ought to be obedient to the kingdom of earth. He admired youth because it was young and age because it was not. It is exactly this balance of apparent contradictions that has been the whole buoyancy of the healthy man. The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid.

— G.K. Chesterton

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