

Systems and Sub-systems

Peter J. Leithart, *February 14, 2007*

A few days ago, I suggested that the Federal Vision controversy in the Reformed churches is a "Presbyterian identity crisis." But I don't want to minimize the theological dimension of this debate. The issue is how to express the real theological differences, as opposed to the host of imaginary differences that are often discussed.

Here's the problem: Those associated with the Federal Vision and their opponents both claim to hold to the doctrinal standards of the PCA and OPC (or the other Reformed denominations). The differences between the two sides often seem miniscule, and that makes the debate seem trivial and often petty. The "identity crisis" dimension provides part of the explanation. But only part. It's not only theological. But it *is* theological.

Only it's not theological in the way that is often suggested.

It's not theological in the sense that one side teaches salvation by works and another salvation by grace through faith; both teach salvation by grace through faith. It's not theological in the sense that one side teaches election and reprobation and another denies it. Both sides are high Calvinists. We could tick off any number of doctrines where there would be very close agreement. There are, I admit, some doctrinal differences, but the key differences do not appear at the level of "doctrine." At that level, the differences are indeed small.

But that doesn't mean the differences are nothing, or that it's a debate about nothing. The debate is a debate at a sub-doctrinal or meta-doctrinal level. It's not a debate about the system, but about the sub-system. Both sides can agree with what confession says, but they do it with a different intonation. Both are running the same doctrinal and Confessional programs, but they have different operating systems that affect the way the doctrinal programs work.

Let me attempt to give some examples. Here, I'm not so much trying to defend my positions as trying to clarify where and why there is debate in the first place. And, I don't mean to distort the views of those who differ from me. If my descriptions seem like caricatures, that's because they are, but they are because a caricature helps to capture the character. There may be better examples to use, and no doubt I could express myself more clearly. But let me try:

1) A number of sub-systemic issues have to do with time. To what degree are time and change inherent in the doctrinal formulations we use. For instance, if election and reprobation are developed without thought to temporality and change, they are treated as fixed categories. A reprobate is a reprobate from beginning to end, and even if he hears the gospel and seems to believe, he remains a reprobate in his heart. That fixity is certainly true in one sense; God has decreed that the reprobate will be reprobate and he will be.

If, however, time is factored in more consciously, then "reprobation" does not describe a fixed "nature" in

the reprobate, but instead describes the narrative of his life story. In the course of that life story, he might well hear and believe the gospel for a time, he might really taste the Spirit and the powers of the age to come, he might have a real, if rocky, relationship with God in Christ. But that is only "along the way," and ultimately the reprobate's vitality will be choked by the cares of the world, he will return like a dog to his vomit, he will make shipwreck of his faith. God knows from beginning to end, and all along the way, that the reprobate is reprobate, and that's because He determined it. But God too is moving in time (as well as transcending it), and His gracious interactions with the reprobate in the course of time are truly gracious and truly interactive.

Both the first and the second descriptions can affirm the doctrine of reprobation; but that doctrine is sung in different keys, painted in different colorations.

2) Issues concerning human nature also operate under sub-systematically in these debates. Both sides agree that human beings are made in the image of God, created in righteousness and holiness, given dominion, and so on. Their "doctrine" of man is similar or identical. But the register in which that doctrine is elaborated, and the way anthropology works out soteriologically and ecclesiologically is quite different.

If one is working with a substance view (a poor term, but the best I can think of) of human nature, then things work out one way. On what I'm calling a "substance view," human beings are what they are in themselves. A theologian working with a substance view would say that human beings are what they are because of God's purposes and acts. But even there, the person's connections with other humans does not significantly affect or determine who or what he is.

If, however, human beings are radically relational, radically social, co-defined by other persons, then our connections with others are, obviously, much more determinative. A change in my network of relations is a significant change in *me*. On this view, it's impossible to imagine a merely "external" relationship in a community of any kind, not to mention the church.

This difference manifests itself in dramatic ways in sacramental theology. On the substance view, a baptized person enters the visible church but might have only an "external" connection with the others in the church, or with the church's Head. Baptism doesn't imply or effect any significant change in the person himself. On the relational view, when baptism extracts a person from his old world, his old social network, and places him in a new network (the visible church), the person himself is significantly, deeply changed.

Again, people with both views might have similar things to say about baptism and the Supper at the "doctrinal" level, but there are significant sub-systematic differences.

3) A final sub-systemic issue has to do with the distinction of natural and supernatural. If natural and supernatural are sealed off from each other (as in older Roman Catholic theology), soteriology and ecclesiology develop in a particular direction. Natural life is not always-already suffused with grace, and so it's possible to conceive of a pure state of nature or a purely natural/external/legal relation to the church. (I know of no Reformed theologians, by the way, who defends "pure nature" in the Counter-Reformational sense; I'm talking about the tendencies of a sharp natural/supernatural divide.) If, however, there is no purely natural reality, then what we call nature is a gift of God, an undeserved gift of grace. Even our "natural" existence is graced. These two tendencies have obvious import for the way one elaborates the doctrine of the Adamic covenant.

4) Different views of "ritual" are also subsystematic issues, but I've written more than enough about that in the past.

5) Views on the relation of Old and New are also important sub-systematic issues, but again I've written plenty on that too.

There is a fruitful debate to be had. But it would be more fruitful, in my view, if the sub-systematic issues were given more prominence and the doctrinal differences (some of them manufactured) were examined within their sub-systematic contexts.

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