

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Biblical Studies 108, Departures

We are going a different direction with the institute this month. I have been working on a book for quite a few years that is designed to answer the question, “Why are there so many Christian church bodies?” That, of course, is a very complex question, requiring a very complex answer. So for the foreseeable future here at the institute we will begin to work on that question. The title of the book will be “Departures”.

Why “Departures”? In my previous career in the United States Navy I spent over a decade assigned to ships. When ships prepare to get underway they schedule a departure time. Departure times apply to planes, trains and busses as well. As I started visiting with people and explaining to them what Lutherans believe, teach, and confess, I found that I spent a lot of time explaining to people the differences between Lutherans and other Trinitarian Christian church bodies. Having to regularly answer these questions led to much research while I looked for concise ways to describe these differences.

In the process of answering these questions, I found myself using the words “depart” and “departure” quite regularly. In trying to show the difference I would explain how our confessions were a clear exposition of Biblical truth while the positions others held were in some way a “departure” from what scripture clearly teaches. It is my hope that a series of articles could eventually be used as a quick reference tool for both pastors and laity to see how some doctrinal positions depart from scripture.

In order to do this, I will address many Trinitarian Christian church bodies in America coming from 15 different traditions. This will be by no means an exhaustive treatment of the over 230 church bodies in America, however, every Trinitarian Christian church in America falls into one of these 15 different traditions and those not addressed will be listed at the end of that section.

It would be impossible to address the different beliefs of all Christians because many people do not even understand or agree with the complete doctrinal position of the church bodies they claim to be members of. I will, however, address the public confessions of official church bodies and how their doctrinal positions depart from scripture. I will in each case cite the biblical position against the departure. I will address each of these church bodies in 20 doctrinal categories. Hermeneutics (biblical interpretation), each of the 10 Commandments, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, Prayer, Baptism, Forgiveness, Communion, Ordination, and Family. I propose that the ways Trinitarian Christians depart from scripture in these 20 areas fall into three categories (3 ladders) and have something in common with the five historic heresies. This will be explained in the articles that deal with each church body.

I will not address American church bodies that are not Trinitarian in accord with the historic creeds; for example, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, or Muslims. A common nautical term for a good ship is a “tight ship”, because when a wooden ship is new, all the seams and joints are properly fitted and caulked; the water then causes the wood to swell, and the ship does not creak or leak because she is a “tight ship”. When we are out there in the world, taking in our lines from the pier of the church to get underway and live our lives in a way that reflects well our Lord and redeemer, it is helpful to have a doctrinal “ship” of sorts that is tight. If I understand what God’s word teaches, it is helpful in strengthening me to boldly live my faith in the presence of others. When a tight ship is underway she must also have defensive measures to protect herself against being *“tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”* (Ephesians 4:14) The best way to build a solid foundation is to read and be well versed in scripture and its clearest reduced explanation Luther’s Small Catechism. I am not claiming that those who hold to these departures are in any way lesser Christians, but departures from biblical truth are harmful, not helpful, to those who hold them. It is my hope that this humble project will be of some assistance to the church in defense against biblical positions that are in error and will be edifying to God’s people on both sides of the discussion.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier