

What Do You Really Think?

Acts 5: 33-39

What is it that is most meaningful to you about the Christian faith? What is it that you dearly love about the Christian tradition? Why? What is it that causes you the most distress, grief, or anger in the Christian tradition? Why? Finally, what is it that that you would change about Christianity, if you could?

Eight and a half years ago, I arrived at Crossroads Church in Kansas City. I had no plans to stir up theological controversy--no plans to be a troublemaker. It soon became clear, however, that people had questions and issues that needed articulation from pulpit. And, as I brought some of those questions into open, some folks left. One learning for me is this: one may not intend to be a trouble maker, but speaking honestly can cause trouble.

There are always troublemakers. That's as true today as it was 2000 years ago. In the book of Acts, written in the late first century by the same author as the Gospel Luke, there are lots of stories about troublemakers called apostles--Peter, John, and others. They kept insisting that their dead teacher Jesus had come back to life and had changed all the rules about Judaism.

The council of religious leaders in Jerusalem felt threatened by the Apostles' message and tried to silence them permanently. But a wise rabbi named Gamaliel counseled a more prudent approach:

keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God! (Acts 5)

Rabbi Gamaliel knew that the keepers of tradition and power were not infallible in their knowledge and judgment. He convinced the others to let beliefs be judged by their results in action.

The book of Acts reflects the movement of the Jesus faith from Jerusalem outward, eventually to Rome itself. Acts paints a picture of the first-century Church from the perspective of two generations later. One common misconception about the early Church is that they were unified in their beliefs. This leads us to today's *Ask Jack* question, "Was the Gospel of John an apologetic for one particular dimension of first-century Christianity?"

First of all, what is an apology, beside statement of regret? An apologetic is a rational defense of a point of view, such as Christian faith. It is also an attempt to expose the flaws of an opposing argument. Christian apologetics have taken many forms over the centuries, starting with Paul , including writers such as Origen and Augustine, and continuing into our modern age.

The truth is that the first and second centuries were times of widely divergent belief among those who followed Jesus. We know that Jesus left no clear statement of who he was or how his life and death had changed things. It was up to the disciples who followed his Way to decide how Jesus made difference. A lot of our belief structure came from Paul's letters and the three synoptic gospels, but there were filters on what we have received and it has affected what we believe in terms of the faith of those first followers of Jesus

The 20th-century discovery at Nag Hammadi of the so-called Gnostic Gospels revealed differences in early churches, wide differences in understanding who Jesus was and what his life, death, and resurrection meant. Was Jesus human or divine? Is everyone saved or just those who profess a divine Christ? Scholar Elaine Pagels (*Beyond Belief*) has made this material available to us.

Pagels asserted that there were probably two main competing factions in the early Church represented by the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas. They had two quite different approaches. From the perspective of the Gospel of John, Jesus a divine being who came to earth and the only possibility of salvation was in believing that Jesus was divine--God the Son. The Gospel of Thomas asserted that Jesus was a human being in whom divine light shone—that the same light shines in each person and each of us has the potential to express the divine – like Jesus. It was the Gospel of John community that became dominant in Christianity. As a result, the Gospel of Thomas as a document disappeared until the 20th century.

We live in a world of differing beliefs ranging from liberal to conservative in a big picture. There are widely different attitudes and beliefs today regarding Christian doctrine. How important are those beliefs? Beliefs are important because they provide a framework for how we perceive God. There are lots of writings today—books, magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and many, many online publications (not to mention TV & radio)—that seek to assert the rightness of particular beliefs and the wrongness of others. Some of these qualify as apologetics because of their systematic nature.

People of faith tend to be bombarded by these assertions and many people of faith also tend to be seeking understanding, seeking answers to their questions. What do we think about the nature of God or even the existence of God? What about Jesus? Was he human, divine? “What do you believe?” seems to be a question for our time. And it’s not just a religious question, either. There are assertions regarding our political beliefs and philosophical beliefs as well as religious ones.

Beliefs are not just a matter of what we think. They involve our passions and shape our lives. Often your beliefs determine which “camp” you’re in: conservative, progressive, fundamentalist. Belief is far more than casual thought. It is deeply held conviction. Belief understood this way is faith. We trust our lives to our beliefs. They determine our worldview and keep us going against all odds.

Faith shapes and is shaped by belief. What seems most important, then, is what beliefs are worthy of faith? Unfortunately, what we believe about Jesus often divides more than unifies people in general and Christians in particular. Many beliefs just tend to unite us against them. By the fourth century, belief in Christianity had become a matter of political power. The great creeds of Christian faith were originally designed to determine who was loyal to the state and who was not. This was likely one of the principal motivations for the adoption of the Nicene Creed pushed by Constantine and adopted around 325CE.

In modern times, many say that what you believe about issues such as evolution, abortion, or the second coming of Jesus determines whether you’re even accepted by God – saved. Churches such as Crossroads are filled with people who love church and who are also deeply troubled by some of its doctrines and much of its history. We are people with questions about faith--also with baggage related to faith and family. We are also people with some different

answers to those questions—different from each other as well as different from other congregations.

There are three big questions for our time. First, does God love and accept each of us, even with our different answers? The answer is “Yes!” Second, are we really *One* in God despite all that divides us? Again, the answer is “Yes!” Finally, how do the answers of faith differ from the answers of society? This third question does not lend itself to a one word answer, but rather to a list of responses:

- Faith leads us upstream, against the flow of common wisdom and societal norms. And it’s hard work!
- Faith tells us that each of us is intrinsically valuable – more valuable than the sum of what we produce – more valuable than what we do.
- Faith tells us that how far or fast we go, how much we achieve, is far less important than the relationships we build and the honesty with which we live.
- Faith tells us that security, success, and safety in life lie in doing what brings us life rather than what takes life away.
- There is risk in living this way, but a greater risk in ignoring it.

The New Testament book of Peter said, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” (1 Peter 3:15-16) So, are Christians to be apologists for their faith traditions, defending them against all attacks? Or are Christians to be critics of their traditions, seeking the truth that those traditions try to reflect even if it means challenging the very faith tradition they follow? The answer, as usual, is “yes.”

Last week, Crossroads’ Peace, Justice, and Missions work group met with the Executive Director of Hope-Faith Ministries. This organization provides ministry with homeless persons in Kansas City. There will be some great opportunities for our involvement as a congregation. This person was terrific, a bundle of energy who really understands needs of the homeless and ways to minister. She spoke almost without taking a breath for an hour.

I was struck by two things. First, it was her choice of language—what I sometimes call the language of Zion. Often “kingdom” language is accompanied by judgmental and exclusive attitudes, but she had none of these attitudes. She was very open, welcoming, creative, and loving. Second, her answer was always “Yes.” By her attitude, she offered her defense of her faith, of her reason for hope. And she reminded me of mine, that faith means saying “yes” to life.

It is important for each of us who are people of faith to be able to talk about our faith. Two of Crossroads Church’s charter members, Jim and Eunice Pierce, practiced this in their work with inner-city ministry. You build relationship first, then you share your faith. That doesn’t mean you have to convert others to your view or get them to believe the same as you do. What is important for people to know is this:

- What is the reason for the hope that is in you?
- What is the most important difference your faith makes in your attitude toward your life?
- What is the most important difference your faith makes in how you live?

After many years of talking about my faith, I am aware that faith is important because of the bigger picture that *God is* and that all of life is within God. God’s nature and the nature of the universe God created bends toward justice, peace, compassion, and love. You and I have a role

to play in shaping life toward that nature. We play our role by faith: by trusting what we really think and by being who we really are. We do it by living from the center of our lives outward and by touching everywhere with the nature of God that grows in us.