

The Vocabulary of Faith 2) Belief

Rev. Ron Dunn

June 28, 2015

I had just preached one of the three or four sermons I would preach that Sunday as a part of responsibility as the “park minister” at Crater Lake National Park. The attendance wasn’t great on that particular Sunday, but there were the dedicated few park visitors and youthful employees who choose to show up on the rim of Crater Lake for worship. After worship, one young man made a B-line right for me. Armed with a rather large and imposing Bible that included more tabs than I could count. He introduced himself and proceeded to ask me if I believed in the “indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”

He then followed that initial question with other, equally demanding questions and it quickly became rather clear to me that I was being grilled by this young man to determine, whether or not, my doctrine and theology as a young, aspiring pastor, was adequate. I’m not sure if my answers met his expectations or served to disappoint him, but I do know that for him, correct belief was of the utmost importance. And, of course, correct belief was something that he was fully prepared to define for the two of us and anyone else who happened to be listening in.

Perhaps you, in the course of your own journey of faith, have bumped into those who took a similar stance on the importance of belief. If you have, you have likely not forgotten them because they have ways of leaving lasting impressions. Indeed, for some, the true essence of the Christian faith is tied up solely in the matter of cultivating a system of belief that is theologically correct and doctrinally pure. The problem, of course, is that they and they alone deem themselves worthy of defining correct belief for everyone else.

As a result of this narrowly defined approach, there are large numbers of people today who have not only rejected the rigid beliefs that others tried to impose upon them, but have also decided to reject the faith that these beliefs suggest they represent. In her book, “Christianity after Religion,” Diana Butler Bass suggests that this mass exodus from organized religion and the narrow belief systems practiced by some, has resulted in what she refers to as the “**belief gap.**”

The “Belief Gap,” of course, has become quite a tangible feature in the landscape of religious belief—or non-belief. One of the primary reasons that churches are struggling to maintain their memberships lies in the fact that there are a growing number of people in our culture who have grown weary of having others define for them what they must believe if they are to be considered viable Christians. Once upon a time—a very different time—the Church had the authority to define belief systems for its members and then expect those members to adopt those beliefs...sometimes against their better judgment.

Today, however, that authority has lost its grip and people are less and less inclined to allow the church or anyone else to define their beliefs for them. It is no secret that we live in a time of religious skepticism and some would suggest, cynicism. What used to be a

given is a given no longer as we find ourselves sorting out matters of belief and the role that they play in giving shape and definition to our faith.

Yet, rather than be seen as a cause for concern, I believe that this time of change and challenge has the potential to be a true benefit and blessing to the movement of Christianity—and perhaps, for the Church itself.

When you stop to think about it, the matter of belief has often been defined primarily in terms of the intellectual content of faith. As Butler Bass points out, ***“For many centuries, Christians have equated faith with belief. Being faithful meant that one accepted certain ideas about God and Jesus, especially as articulated in creedal statements.”*** (*“Christianity after Religion”* p. 108)

Thus, in order to be a good Christian, it was necessary to believe all the correct teachings and doctrine about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But now, according to Butler Bass, this long held understanding is beginning to shift away from belief centered religion toward an experienced or experiential faith. It’s not so much about **what** you believe, but **how** you believe—that is, how you experienced God.

Harvard theologian and author, **Harvey Cox** suggests that Christian history can be divided into three ages: **The Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and the Age of Spirit.** For the first 400 years of Christendom, Cox suggests, “To be a Christian meant to live in the Spirit of Jesus, to embrace his hope and follow him in the work that he had begun.”

But then, around 400 C.E. there was an increasing focus on creeds and beliefs. Faith **in** Jesus was replaced by tenets **about** him. Those who didn’t embrace these tenets about Jesus, those who didn’t affirm the creeds, were considered heretics and were often shunned and sometimes persecuted. The low ebb of the age of belief could be seen in the horrors and the atrocities of the Inquisition and the violence that was carried out in the name of being “true to the faith.”

Cox suggests that the Age of Belief lasted for some fifteen centuries and began to ebb away at the start of the twentieth century. Replacing this long standing Age of Belief was the Age that we currently find ourselves in—the Age of the Spirit. Rather than focus on faith in Jesus, or belief about Christ, the Age of the Spirit is based upon “the experience of Jesus.” Cox writes, **“The Age of the Spirit is non-dogmatic, non-institutional, and non-hierarchical.”** It is rooted in the wonder, mystery and awe that is experienced in the presence of the Holy. **“Faith is resurgent,”** Cox claims, **“while dogma is dying.”**

I don’t know how you feel about this assessment, but I find it exciting and hopeful. Dogma is dying! The rigid mindset that once labeled people as acceptable or unacceptable, based upon their beliefs, is fading away.

Faith—the faith that grows out of the experience of God—is making a comeback! This does not mean, of course, that what one believes is not important. It is important, vitally

important, but its importance is not contingent upon having solved all of the theological mysteries and resolved all of the doctrinal debates...as if that is even possible!

No, the importance of belief, in this Age of the Spirit, grows out of our experience of God, our encounter with the Holy. While the questions and uncertainties will likely linger, we can speak of that of which we do know and trust—namely that God is love and that love has given us life.

In his book, **“Believing: An Historical Perspective,”** Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggests that the word, “belief” has, in modern day usage, lost its original meaning in favor of a more negative connotation. Unfortunately, Cantwell points out, belief has, today, come to represent one’s intellectual opinion or conviction. And, as we know only too well, this approach to belief tends to separate and divide, rather than unite and connect. Religious belief remains one of the leading causes of violence and conflict in our world.

A more helpful rendering of the word, belief, however, can be found in the Latin word, **“credo,”** which meant, **“I set my heart upon,”** or, **“I give my loyalty to.”** Thus, in previous centuries, belief had little to do with one’s intellectual choice or conviction. Belief was not a doctrinal test. Instead, it was more like a marriage vow—a way of saying “I do” as a pledge of faithfulness and loving service.

Some of us grew up in churches that would recite various creeds as a regular part of worship. In my case, it was the Apostle’s Creed that we recited every Sunday. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord...” We would then to outline all the specific details of doctrine that we believed. The assumption that we often made in reciting these words was that we were affirming their literal-factual truth...that we “believed” each and every aspect of what we recited without hesitation or question.

While I did this Sunday after Sunday for much of my childhood without giving it a second thought, I would later realize that such an assumption is not without problems. For one thing, it assumes that everyone believes exactly the same thing about the various dimensions of faith as outlined by the given creed...and I highly doubt that this was or is the case. The fact is that we do believe differently and that our differences often prove to be more of an asset than a liability.

As a way of highlighting these honest differences, a colleague of mine used to invite the members of his congregation to stand and affirm only the parts of the creed that they truly believed and then to sit down in silence during those parts of the creed that they didn’t believe. I imagine that experience was one that generated a lot of after worship conversation!

Keeping Cantwell’s perspective in mind, however, we can begin to see that there is another way of approaching the matter of professing a creed. Rather than view the creed through a literal-factual lens, we can see it as an expression of our desire to profess our love and loyalty to God. It can be a tangible way of saying “I do” to God and God’s calling in our lives.

Some may not feel comfortable, for example, by stating unequivocally, that they believe in the virgin birth as outlined in the Apostle's Creed. A number of contemporary Christians do not. Does this mean that the Apostle's Creed has no place in their experience of worship? No, if you understand that belief as expressed in the creed is about more than intellectual assent, but about the fundamental desire to affirm one's loyalty to and love for God. It is another way of saying, **"I set my heart upon the God who has created the heavens and the earth."**

In an age that is weary of doctrinal tests and the judgmental attitudes of those who want to define belief in inclusive and exclusive terms, I think that we have a unique opportunity in the church in general and in this church in particular. For we have the opportunity to demonstrate to our suspicious culture that there is another way of approaching faith, another way of expressing what we believe.

I am convinced that people today do not need more information about God. There is an abundance of that information. Nor do they need us to tell them about correct doctrine and theology—as if we were the final arbiters of such matters. Instead, what they truly need, what they truly hunger for is the experience of God. And it is, I trust, obvious that their experience of God is often influenced, often shaped by the ways in which we choose to accept and include them, regardless of our differences.

As we all are aware, the mantra of many in this time and place is that they are **"spiritual, but not religious."** Or, as one t-shirt slogan phrased it so memorably, they are **"Spiritually hungry, but institutionally suspicious."** Given the Church's track record of trying to force its beliefs upon others, I'm not sure that I blame anyone who is institutionally suspicious.

But we have before us the opportunity to change that perception. By who we are and the ways in which we choose to invite and accept and encourage others in their search for the experience of God, we can play a vital and needed role in overcoming the suspicion by offering a place and an opportunity to encounter the holy and experience God. William Sloan Coffin was the Chaplain at Yale University during the turbulent and skeptical days of the sixties and the "God is dead" movement. On one memorable occasion, he addressed the faculty at Yale, many of whom embodied this skepticism about matters of faith.

Coffin said to them, **"I can see doubting the quality of the bread, but I can't see kidding yourselves that you are not hungry."** He understood, you see, that there is a hunger within all of us—a hunger for the holy—an appetite for the spiritual. And although the Church has, at times, been of more harm than help in offering the bread that will nourish and sustain, we have the opportunity to change that perception by offering the "bread of life" to those who are spiritually famished.

Now, more than ever before, people are hungering not for more rules and regulations, not for more creeds and doctrines, but for the experience of God. How will you, how will we, respond? This is, I believe, an exciting time to be the Church. Amen.

