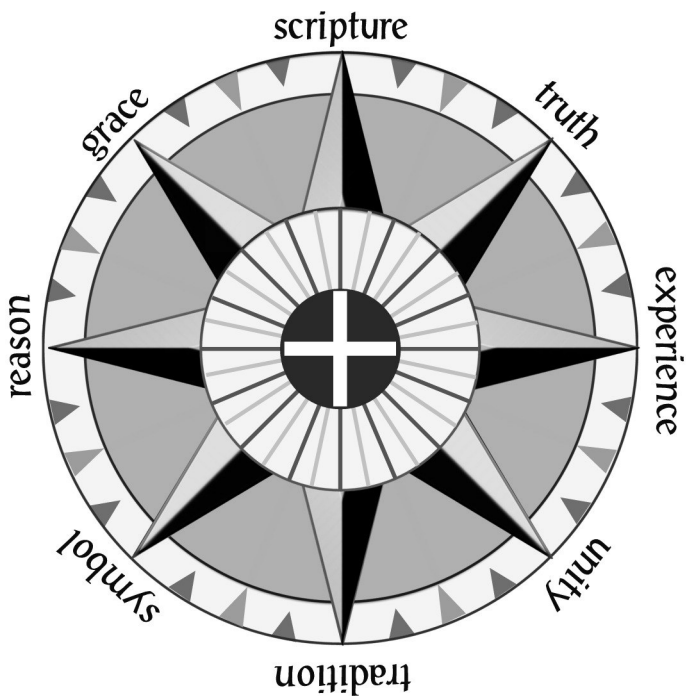


**Finding Answers
to Hard Questions About Faith**

Finding Answers to Hard Questions About Faith



Leroy Howe

Finding Answers to Hard Questions About Faith

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*To the generations of
members and leaders of
First United Methodist Church Richardson, Texas,
with gratitude for all that
this congregation has meant
to me and to my family
across three decades
and counting*

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Preface

This book is about listening encouragingly to people who are struggling with questions and doubts about the Christian faith. Two assumptions form the basis of its chapters. The first is that because Christianity has accommodated very diverse opinions across the centuries about what its followers should believe and do, we have available to us more than one answer to most of our questions and more than one way of resolving most of our doubts. The second assumption is that the best way to help people in their struggles, our own included, is to support their exploring as many of these opinions as possible in order to discover those which make the most sense in the here and now.

Although most Christians who give the first premise any thought at all will find themselves in agreement with it, not all of them will be as comfortable with the second premise as I am. Some of my closest Christian friends, for example, have expressed to me quite forcefully their conviction that for a true follower of Christ there can be no uncertainty. A questioning or doubting spirit is an unfaithful spirit, of which one must repent. A less extreme version of their point of view insists that when questions about the faith of the church do arise, they should be referred immediately to religious authorities for timely, credible, and approved answers with which they should promptly bring themselves into confident agreement.

I respect the integrity with which many clergy and lay colleagues in ministry, across our many years of worshipping and thinking together, have defended these ways of looking at things. Nevertheless, I must continue to disagree with them. As does a very good friend of mine, who puts his own objection to their outlook this way: "God gave us minds, he expects us to use them, and we aren't using

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them if we're not asking questions." To this wonderfully pithy statement I have only one thing to add: when people put their minds to the task of resolving their questions and doubts about faith, it helps to have someone available who knows how to listen, how to encourage them in their struggle, and how to refrain from trying to answer their questions for them. The chapters that follow seek to describe what we need to know as Christian friends and/or as trained caregivers in order to help people find their own answers to the questions about faith that their own experiences compel them to ask. Those to whom my approach may appear initially to be, as a student of mine once put it, an "anything goes" approach, should be comforted by its concern to balance the promptings of individual conscience in matters of personal faith with what the Christian tradition regards as saving truths cherished by all Christians at all times and everywhere.

The pages that follow contain a number of illustrations of how to make effective use, both in informal conversations and in formal caregiving relationships, of the theological and pastoral knowledge the book seeks to impart. All of the illustrations reflect actual encounters across my forty years plus as a pastor, pastoral counselor, chaplain, and seminary professor. But to protect the confidences exchanged in them and the identities of those involved, I have in presenting them given every care receiver and, with the exception of my own cases, every caregiver as well, a different name and have placed them in a different situation from the original. The downside of my exercising this necessary literary license is that I cannot express directly my deep and abiding appreciation for the many people whose real life struggles form the basis of this book. May God's peace continue to keep their minds and hearts in love with the search for Him.

Acknowledgments

Along with the many students, professional colleagues, and lay caregivers who have discussed all kinds of questions about faith with me across many years, I want to thank three very special people without whose help this book could not have come to completion. The first is Robert Macy, whose diligent reading of earlier versions of the manuscript, along with the drafts of four of my previous books, have kept my thinking more down to earth and practical than it otherwise might be. Whatever is still lacking in this regard must be attributed solely to my own stubbornness, and not to Bob's passion for clarity in every sentence.

The second very special person behind these pages is a fellow parishioner, Ms. Chris Guldi, to whom I continue to be grateful for setting up and keeping running my website, www.howeabout.com. Chris and I originally put this site together as part of the outreach ministry of First United Methodist Church, Richardson, Texas. It is still reaching out. More recently, Chris has seen ably to all of the technical details of editing this book both for the website, and for publishing it electronically in two other forms. I admire greatly Chris' technical competence, and appreciate greatly her caring Christian spirit.

And the third very special person, very, very special, I know Bob and Chris will take no offense in my adding, is my wife—of forty-seven years and counting—Nancy. Our love continues to survive her taking responsibility for getting the final versions of all my book manuscripts to a level of credibility and completeness which I could never achieve all on my own.

Chapter 1. **Talking About Faith: The First Steps**

From back pews to back alleys, shopping malls to welfare lines, communion rails to jail cells, believers and non-believers alike struggle every day with both expected and unexpected challenges to the universal quest for security, comfort, opportunity, and meaning—or, in other words, for a decent life in the here and now with good prospects for the future. A common perception among Christians is that they have an edge over those who try to face these challenges without God and without the fellowship of friends who are confident about God’s blessings in this life and in the next. However, even the most conscientious believers have questions and doubts about their faith from time to time. And deep-down, even the most ardently non-accepting of the Christian faith, or of any faith for that matter, share the same yearning that Christians do for a transforming relationship with the ultimate source and vital center of being, power, beauty, justice, and love.

This book is about establishing helping relationships with people for whom and for whatever reason their personal faith or unfaith, and/or their relationship or non-relationship with the Christian community have become sources of distress more than of comfort and uncertainty more than uplift. How to begin the process of relationship-building on both a one-to-one basis and in group contexts is the subject of the present chapter. The first focus is on a mother whose grief threatens to overwhelm her trust in God, and a caregiver who did not let her fears about being up to the job get in the way of listening well and asking the right questions. Then, the discussion moves on to a lively

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exchange about heaven and hell which broke out in a study group on basic beliefs, and what its able leader did to bring about a deeper appreciation on the part of its members of each other's personal struggles with the issues.

An Issue with Unanswered Prayer

At the close of Sunday worship one morning, Sue asked if she and I might talk for a few minutes about her present care receiver, Carolyn. Initially, Carolyn had sought support from Sue's lay caregiving group following the death of her seven-year-old son from brain cancer. "But grief and anger aren't her biggest issues now," Sue related with considerable anxiety, "even though they are still very much with her. Prayer is. Carolyn says that she doesn't know what to pray for anymore, that God hasn't listened to her for a very long time, that she's not sure that God ever will again, or that God is even there anymore, if he ever was. I don't know what to tell her. When Carolyn first confessed her anguish to a close friend," Sue added, "she received only an angry warning and a forceful directive: 'Blaming God like this can only make matters worse for your soul than they already are. You must ask God's forgiveness and then pray even harder for him to listen to you.'"

Help Thou my unbelief

Initially, Sue was deeply concerned that Carolyn's inability to deal with God's seeming absence in her son's distress, and very real absence in her own, had been made worse by her friend's misguided attempt to help. Sue was right to be concerned, and also to fear that if her care receiver could not get to a more mature understanding of how God does in fact hear and answer prayer, she might no longer be able to experience God's sustaining presence anywhere in her life. But Sue also knew that the only way Carolyn could get to that understanding would be with the help of someone committed to listen and encourage, not rebut and condemn. No matter how well intended, admonitions to be less contentious, to trust God no matter

what, and to pray even harder could only make Carolyn's turmoil worse.

In order to rescue her from the admittedly very real dangers of her painful questioning and doubting, Carolyn's well-meaning but anxious friend turned to a time-honored approach to the nurturing of devotional practice in the Christian tradition: exhortation. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach. Believers who sincerely affirm for themselves the truth of the Christian faith in the company of fellow believers do have a responsibility to hold fast to that truth to the best of their ability in whatever circumstances. And they should expect their churches to hold them accountable for living by their beliefs and for becoming credible witnesses to others, no matter how much inner turmoil they may be experiencing. If they focus more on frustrations in their personal life than on the Author of Life himself, and allow their minds to become malleable to any and every God-denying belief blowing in the wind, what they may need most is a measure of "discipline and reproof" to move them off a wrong track and back onto the right one.

In centuries past, exhortation, including stern reminders of instruction received and consent pledged, represented the church's primary way of keeping its members bound together in a unity of belief and practice. It also represented the primary way of expressing care for believers struggling with the anxiety and guilt that inevitably accompany the loosening of those bonds. The approach succeeded because the premise on which it rested, the authority and supremacy of the church over its individual members, was taken for granted—if not always enthusiastically—by almost everyone. The premise is still taken for granted in many quarters of Christendom. But it is no longer plausible to people who affirm that feelings are deserving of respect, even when they turn negative toward God, and that there is within everyone the God-given freedom and responsibility to worship God in the light of his or her own experience and best judgment. Although instruction and exhortation have their place in the nurturing of feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and

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actions in the Christian community, so do good listening, questions offered in an inquiring rather than judgmental spirit, and gentle encouragement of honest searching. It is this latter style of engagement for which Sue had been well trained. As the next section will show, her application of it in her work with Carolyn proved very effective.

Into the dark thicket

One thing that Christians struggling with confusion, uncertainty, and doubt do not need from fellow believers is criticism or rejection for asking hard questions about what they have been taught to believe or doubt, to do or not to do. Questioning is not a sin, and no one should suffer another's displeasure for engaging in it. Whatever the reason for their questions, people who ask them need and deserve both affirmation of their testing spirit—and even of their testiness—and encouragement to pursue the truth, no matter where the pursuit may seem to be leading them.

As Sue and I talked briefly, it came to both of us that from the standpoint of Christian teaching about God, Carolyn's understanding of prayer as divine-human interaction and communication, though clearly understandable in the situation she has had to face, is nevertheless too narrowly focused on why God is not answering her prayers as she expects them to be answered. "Ask and you shall receive," Carolyn has been taught, and now she seems to be putting the full weight of all that she believes about God upon this text alone. (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9) Her grief-blurred vision has activated a distorted image of a Deity whose primary tasks are to listen, deliver, and be ready for the next request, a God who must keep on doing things for his followers, especially in times of tragedy and loss, or risk their permanent disaffection. Carolyn's feelings of disappointment and anger with God are beginning to take on a life of their own, squeezing out her more positive feelings (e.g., of gratitude and joy), and pushing her toward actions (e.g., denying God's existence entirely, leaving the church) that a short time ago she would not have considered for a moment.

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More than likely, Carolyn's painful feelings are related to experiences not only with God, but with other significant people in her life too, and she seems to be displacing some of her disappointments with them onto her relationship with her Creator.

Sue resumed her work with Carolyn, fully aware that she would need to engage her care receiver soon on all of these issues. Wisely, though, she delayed inviting Carolyn to get into them immediately, out of the conviction that her care receiver needed, first, a sense of being accepted and acceptable in spite of the very strong feelings that threatened to overwhelm her faith, and second, affirmation for questioning some of her beliefs in the first place. With Carolyn's permission, Sue brought the following vignette to her caregiver support group:

Sue: What your friend said to you sounded pretty angry and judgmental. His words must have hit you pretty hard.

Carolyn: They still do, as I guess you've figured out. They're getting to me because they're so close to what I was saying to myself before I shared anything with him. I shouldn't be questioning God the way I am, and I shouldn't be feeling the way I'm feeling.

Sue: Maybe not, Carolyn, but I have a lot of respect and admiration for your doing just what's got your friend up in arms. I wish you didn't have to go through the pain you've been in, but to me it's related to doing something important and not something that you shouldn't be doing.

Carolyn: But if I hadn't started all this questioning, I wouldn't be feeling the way I'm feeling.

Sue: Could it be that the feelings came first, that you started asking the questions because you were already feeling let down by God?

Carolyn: Maybe so. But, then, isn't it wrong to feel that way about God, ever?

Sue: Well, what I've been taught is that feelings aren't right or wrong; they just are. But sometimes I wonder. You've shared with me a lot of disappointments, along with a strong faith that you can always count on God, no matter what. Now, it looks like God just isn't there for you. How could you not feel betrayed and angry and very, very sad?

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Carolyn: Sue, I know this sounds a little crazy, but I guess I feel a little better knowing that how I've been feeling isn't something I also have to feel so guilty about. But. . .

Sue: But? . . .

Carolyn: But I'd really like to begin feeling less angry and sad. And I don't know where to start.

Sue: What about with asking yourself a little more about the feelings themselves?

Carolyn: Like what?

Sue: Well, for one thing, maybe about just who it is that you've been feeling all this anger and sadness about.

Carolyn: About God!

Sue: I'm sure that's true, Carolyn, but I can't help wondering whether God's the only one. Let me ask you this: is there anyone else important in your life who's ever let you down in a big way?

Carolyn: Now I see what you're getting at. (Long pause) Sue, as horrible as it sounds, for a little while I even felt my little boy let me down.

Sue: For dying.

Carolyn: Yes! (Breaking down in wrenching sobs.)

Sue: (Waiting patiently) I wonder if he's the only one you feel may have let you down.

Carolyn: I don't think I've ever shared with anyone but my husband what it was like growing up after my father died of a heart attack, with no warning, leaving us in the lurch. I was eleven, Daddy's favorite, and the oldest of four kids that my mother kept saying she couldn't handle. I had to learn to handle them real quick. Mom hasn't gotten over God's taking her husband to this very day.

Sue: It sounds like you did a lot more than just handle things back then, even when it was so hard accepting that God took your Daddy, too.

Carolyn: Part of me never has. And now, I feel like I'm having to take care of my husband and kids just the way I had to take care of my Mom and brothers.

At this point in the conversation, Sue felt encouraged, and for good reason. The poignancy of Carolyn's last comment strongly suggested a readiness to deal more openly with the vulnerability of her faith to feelings of disappointment and

anger. What helped Carolyn get to this point was her conversation partner's non-judgmental, interested, and supportive stance toward the very feelings that had caused another of Carolyn's friends so much trouble. Sue acknowledged but did not immediately challenge Carolyn's interpretation of her feelings—that they were the result of her Creator's abandonment—even though she disagreed with the interpretation and wanted Carolyn to know it up front. By resisting the temptation to question Carolyn's point of view prematurely, Sue put herself in a position to validate Carolyn's feelings, and to provide her some relief from the guilt and despair that were inhibiting her ability to take a fresh look at her point of view herself.

It took the next two sessions for Carolyn fully to describe the traumatic events that ended her childhood and left her with unresolved mourning that even now spills over into her deepest convictions about God. Having listened patiently as Carolyn poured out long denied pain, Sue then took her cue for opening a new phase of their discussion from something Carolyn said toward the middle of their next conversation:

Carolyn: I guess you're thinking that I've been putting all the blame on God instead of trying to figure out where at least some of it should go instead.

Sue: I don't know whether blame is quite the word I would use, but, yes, I have been wondering whether what you've been feeling might relate more to what your Dad and Mom didn't do for you than to where God was in all of it.

Carolyn: I really have demanded a lot of God. Since my parents couldn't make things turn out like they should have, I've been expecting God to get everything exactly like I want them to be.

Sensing that Carolyn may now be ready to re-examine some of her beliefs about God and prayer, Sue offered her a specific invitation to begin doing so:

Sue: So let me see if I'm getting just how you may be doing this. If we really believe with all our heart, I think you've been saying, God will give us what we ask for in life. And what got you churning is that you do believe this with all your heart, but

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God hasn't been holding up his end of the bargain, maybe ever.

Carolyn: You sound a little like you're making fun of me.

Sue: I certainly don't mean to—either make fun or sound like I am. You're hurting too much for that and you deserve better.

Carolyn: I believe you, even if you do make what I'm saying sound kind of like a business deal gone sour. But you know what? You're right; that's what I really am thinking and feeling. The only thing I'd add is (Carolyn begins to tear up) .

. . . that I'm not sure I do believe in God anymore, that there's anybody out there to make the deal I want about my life.

Sue: Tell me a little more about that deal, would you? For instance, have you always thought that God will give us what we want if we just believe in him hard enough?

Carolyn: That friend I told you about? Well, he and I belonged to the same church growing up and that's what we heard about life from the get-go.

Sue: Now I think I understand a little better why your friend was so upset with you.

Carolyn: Yeah, but he knows that I've never been as sure as he is about the power of prayer, even though I know that believing in it has made him very successful, and that I've always wanted to be more like him in my faith. He really is worried about what I'm doing to myself with all these questions.

Sue: Maybe the harshness of what he said to you came more from worry about you than about holding up the right dogmas.

Carolyn: Yeah, deep down I know it did. He got to me, though, just because I want to believe so strongly like he does.

Sue: I think at some level he probably knew that, and so he tried to get through to you the best way he knew how. But why isn't he getting completely through to you? What's going on in you that won't let you fully buy into your friend's view of how things work?

Working hard to overcome her own impulse to do something—anything—to make Carolyn feel better immediately, Sue continued to give her care receiver the one thing most called for in the situation. She listened, asked questions, listened to the answers, asked more questions, and listened some more, creating in the process a safe place

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for Carolyn to resolve her distress by reassessing the beliefs that were compounding it. As she expressed it to her group:

Carolyn's crisis was her own crisis, nobody else's, and it was about what she did and didn't believe at the time. What I or anybody else believed wasn't the issue. My job was to be there, to listen respectfully, and to support her in her struggle, often with prayer. But at times it was all I could do just to sit there quietly and listen. I wanted so much to argue with her! What helped was reminding myself constantly that God would be her guide back to a stronger faith, not me.

Well-intentioned though he was, Carolyn's friend had only made her spiritual crisis deeper. By contrast, Sue provided just the guidance needed to help Carolyn dig herself out on her own, and in the process come to an even stronger faith. This last, and lasting, phase of Sue's work began with the question quoted above: "What's going on in you that won't let you fully buy into your friend's view of how things work?" When Carolyn complimented Sue on the question as one she had never thought about, Sue felt certain that her care receiver was now ready to think about a lot of things without her feelings overwhelming her thoughts, and to anchor her faith once again on a solid foundation of sound beliefs. Sue's certitude was well placed, as the following exchange shows:

Carolyn: To answer the question: I guess I'd have to say that early on I began reading what Jesus said about prayer differently than Shaun (her friend) did. He still thinks it's all about getting what you want from life.

Sue: And you?

Carolyn: Well, the ask and you will receive stuff is pretty prominent in the Gospels, I agree, but what really got to me was something our preacher said once in a sermon. He said that God will never leave us with more than we can handle, and that he will give us what we need.

Sue: Kind of like giving us *only* what we can handle, and *only* what we need?

Carolyn: Exactly. I remember that he was preaching on Luke 11, and when he read verse 13, I almost came out of my seat. God gives us the Holy Spirit when we ask him. That's what I

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started praying for them, and that's what I think I've been forgetting to pray for lately.

Sue: So you had been second guessing God on what you could handle, and you were falling back into praying for just the things you wanted, rather than for what God wanted you to have. And got put out when it seemed that he wasn't listening anymore.

From this interchange on the fullness of what Jesus taught about prayer, Carolyn quickly moved on to acknowledge that she had been wanting something like a "Cosmic Benefits Provider" and that she had reduced her prayer life to a vehicle for sending up only requests and demands:

Carolyn: After all, it's supposed to start with praise and thanks, isn't it? I haven't been doing much of either lately. And my son deserves better; I'm so grateful to God for even the short time we had with him.

Sue: The God that I revere and thank is so much bigger than the God I make demands on.

Carolyn: "Falling down before thee" are the words coming to my mind right now . . . before his holiness.

Sue: Carolyn, what are you feeling about God at this very moment?

Carolyn: (In tears) So much, much more than I can say.

Sue: And about prayer?

Carolyn: (Through the tears) That I just want to adore him and thank him.

Sue: Why don't we do it together?

Sue and Carolyn ended their session with a mutual acknowledgment that they had reached a point of closure in their formal caregiving relationship. They met two more times to review and celebrate their work together, and to plan for maintaining their very special friendship in the congregation they would both continue to serve.

When Talking about Heaven and Hell Turns Unheavenly

Maggie never saw it coming. "I just can't keep quiet any longer," Linda blurted out in the middle of the discussion. "What Sal's saying about who's going to heaven and who

isn't just turns me inside out. Sal, how can you call yourself a Christian when you talk like that?" As the study group's leader, Maggie was surprised by the intensity of Linda's anger. Then, she was stunned by the outpouring of passion-filled declarations by other group members on other subjects as well. All of a sudden, Maggie's group was awash not only in disagreements about the particular issue raised by Sal, but also in questions about beliefs that she mistakenly believed had already been dealt with to everyone's satisfaction.

With effort, Maggie managed to get the group back on track that evening, and brought the meeting to a peaceful close. Over the next week, though, she thought long and hard about how a course on Basic Christian Beliefs could become an object lesson on how not to talk to one another as Christians. A close friend, who frequently teaches the same course in another parish, offered Maggie some helpful observations:

The fact that people felt safe enough to share what they really believe says to me that you're doing a great job as their leader. And you know what? Their going at each other the way you describe reminds me all over again that though our beliefs are really, really important, sometimes we shouldn't make them all *that* important!

This friend has it right: beliefs do matter, but so does the respect that Christians are expected to show one another. It is good that members of Maggie's group are struggling to anchor their faith on a solid foundation. It would not be good, though, were they to trust more in their beliefs than in the God who is the ultimate source of those beliefs. Christians whose relationships have collapsed into harangues over which beliefs are acceptable and which are not cannot be effective agents of reconciliation between the warring factions of humankind. (2 Cor. 5:19,20; Eph. 1:11; Col. 1:15-17)

The background for the discussion to follow is what the Christian tradition as a whole teaches about the role of beliefs in shaping the attitude and outlook, the thoughts and

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feelings, and the decisions and actions which characterize the Christian life. In the next chapters, this background will be brought into the foreground of talking about faith. The purpose is to define further a perspective from which friends and caregivers, clergy and lay, can listen and encourage another without getting lost in specific questions of faith and without feeling that somehow they must provide answers for them. But for now, the focus will be on specific exchanges in Maggie's study group of beliefs about the afterlife. Since there are many people involved in this particular case, a reminder may be in order that, as was so in the previous discussion of the caregiving relationship between Sue and Carolyn, all of the names of Maggie's group members, including the leader's, have been changed and potentially identifying information re-worked, in order to respect privacy. However, the issues and the tenor of the discussions to be recounted are presented as accurately as the protection of confidentiality will permit. One aim is to illustrate concretely just why beliefs do and should matter, and matter deeply, to our experience of God and to our relationships with others. The other aim is to bring out the profundity of what Maggie's friend said, that beliefs are "really, really important," but not always "*that* important." It is easier to remember either the first or the second part of what she said than it is to remember both parts together. And therein lies much of what is incomplete about all of our theologies as expressions of Christianity's distinctive message and teaching.

Back to the trenches again

This section of the chapter opened in the middle of a troubled discussion among members of a Basic Christian Beliefs study. Linda was mad at Sal over what he was saying about heaven and hell, and others were randomly throwing in concerns about other beliefs. Maggie, the group's leader, was momentarily floundering in uncertainty about how to regain hold on things. The way that she and the group got back on track is the subject of what follows.

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As might have been expected, Sal did not take kindly to Linda's overly personal attack, "How can you call yourself a Christian?"

Well, Linda, here it is: the Bible says that morality makes a difference and that people who don't think and act so are going to hell. When you compare this with all the sentimental stuff you've been spouting about how God loves everybody no matter what, just who's the real Christian here?

It was at this point that other members began weighing in. "Hold on, Sal, you're not listening to Linda at all," one member blurted out. Immediately and quite forcefully, another lined up with Sal: "Linda, you don't have the right to accuse anybody in this group of not being a Christian. Who are you to say something like that?" Then a third member, Hank, shattered the last semblance of cooperativeness in Maggie's group:

Sal and Linda aren't the only ones in here who aren't listening to each other. I think a lot of us, along with myself, have been feeling pretty frustrated with our glossing over what we really think about the beliefs we've been studying. We've been a lot more eager just to get through the book than to put our real issues on the table. A lot of the beliefs we've been looking at aren't at all clear to me, and I need help!

By this time, though, Maggie had regained her composure and began taking constructive charge of the discussion again:

Maggie: Ok, gang, hold on a minute and let's start working on what's in front of us one thing at a time. You're all nodding at Hank as if you agree with what he's just said, and I want to respect that. In a minute, I'd like for us to begin taking up each question that you have about the beliefs we've looked at so far, and not push any further until we've done that. First, though, we owe it to Sal and Linda to spend a little more time in heaven and hell! (Laughter from the group.)

Linda: Yeah, I know I acted like the devil's henchman all right. Sal, I'm sorry for what I said. I guess I was getting too caught up in my own concerns to be open to yours.

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Sal: Apology accepted. And I owe you one, too. What was happening in me was a flood of memories about the church I grew up in, that came down hard on anybody who even hinted that there might be some beliefs we ought to study up on and put to use in life. You could believe or not believe anything you wanted, and nobody was supposed to care one way or another. For a minute, you reminded me of some people I went to great lengths to get away from.

Maggie: Sal, it sounds like the issue wasn't so much what Linda's own belief is, but the way she came across to you about yours, and what it reminded you of.

Sal: Well, Maggie, I do want Linda—and everybody else—to believe what I've come to believe about the afterlife. [Others are smiling with him.] But I'm not happy with myself getting into a wrangle about not being a good enough Christian. It irked me that Linda seemed to be doing that with me and lo and behold, I started doing the very same thing with her.

Linda: Sal, I think I was having the same kind of experience that you were, remembering what it was like growing up in a church that was a lot different from the one I go to now. Back then, you got judged mighty quick when you said the wrong thing about the Bible or anything else that you were supposed to believe without asking questions. I wound up with a lot of fears of being on the wrong side of the pearly gates.

Maggie: Maybe that's why it's so important for you that those gates stay open all the time?

Linda: I've never thought of it that way, but you know, you're right. It gets me real upset to think that anybody would be locked out, forever.

Sal: And for me, I guess, not having a gate that can close leaves us here on earth with an "anything goes" philosophy.

By Maggie's reckoning, this was the interchange that made possible the best discussion that members of her group had yet enjoyed together. My own assessment is that what Maggie said next to the group was just as important:

Linda and Sal seem to be at really different places when it comes to what they believe about life after death. And they've shared some very different experiences that seem to lie behind what they believe. But: they've shared. They haven't hollered. I can't help thinking that there may be a way through their

differences short of one “side” giving up in favor of the other. So, group, what do you think? How might Linda and Sal reach a meeting of the minds here?

Thinking about what happened

As members of Maggie’s group struggled with the question that she had just put to them, they followed a process that held them in good stead when they moved on to other questions about Christian beliefs. In Maggie’s words, it was a process of taking beliefs seriously, but not at the expense of respecting and caring for the people who held them, even and especially when another’s belief was seriously at odds with one’s own. With respect to belief about the afterlife in particular, Maggie now thinks that she and the group learned four important things, together. First, they learned that what individual believers make of doctrines of the “last things” (eschatology) depend a lot on what their own formative experiences in the church have been like.

Second, Maggie and the group learned that what people believe about the life to come is inextricably tied to what they believe about the God who authors the whole story of human life, including its future. As the two confronted each other’s very different conceptions of the afterlife, Sal saw Linda’s God as permissive, weak, and unreliable. “How could a God who punishes nobody ever be a Rock of anything for anybody?” he asked. In turn, Linda saw Sal’s God as the angry, vengeful God of tribal religion. “How could an avenging God ever be a God we could worship?” she asked in reply.

Third, they learned that what people believe about the afterlife can affect the credibility that the Christian message has for them about how things work not only in the world to come, but in this world as well. For Sal, believing that grace always vanquishes punishment wholly undermines an all-important teaching of both Christianity and the Judaism that preceded it, the belief that everyone is finally accountable before God for what he or she does and does not do in this

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life. For Linda, by contrast, what Sal refers to as a respect for moral responsibility represents only a regression to a kind of you-are-what-you-earn mentality, from which Jesus came to save all humanity.

Finally, Maggie and the members of her group learned together that though beliefs about heaven and hell sometimes serve as summary statements of everything else that the Christian gospel has to say about human destiny, there clearly is more than one way to picture what lies ahead of us in the next life, for which human existence on earth is the necessary preparation. Some pictures of the next world seem deliberately conjured to arouse in people an almost immobilizing terror, e.g., of “the wrath to come.” For Sal, it is some such picture that alone motivates people to become true disciples of Jesus Christ. Other pictures seem more oriented to conveying a transfiguring hope, e.g., that “in a twinkling of an eye, we shall all be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:51,52) For Linda, it is the picture of eternal rest and rejoicing, and not of eternal torment, that inspires true worship of God. Even the single most important affirmation of apostolic faith about the afterlife, belief in “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,” can serve as both a linchpin of anticipation and a litany of despair depending, by way of examples, upon whether one’s image of life on the other side is an image of nothingness, of torment, or of peace.

What the members of Maggie’s group discovered, as they explored other basic Christian beliefs more fully, is that even those beliefs that the church considers to comprise the absolute bedrock of faith can mean different things to different people at different times. Many people find a discovery like this troubling and even unnerving. But members of Maggie’s group are not among them. As Hank put it: “It’s pretty humbling, and at the same time, freeing, to realize that there’s more to the beliefs I hold, and more to other people’s opinions about them, than I ever realized there could be.”

Reconciling differences of belief

Of all the controversies that undermine religious fellowship and outreach today, one of the most vexing is over the role of beliefs in the life of faith. On one extreme side of the debate are believers who insist that only by holding firmly to traditional teachings and practices can anyone be able to stand firmly for final truth in an age of moral relativism and religious pluralism. On the other extreme side are believers and inquirers who warn that aggressively imposed, non-negotiable definitions of belief and behavior are a principal source of divisiveness in the world today, weakening the credibility of any and all belief-systems to people seeking a deeper understanding of faith and its nurture.

Adding to the hostile tone of this unhelpful debate is the misuse of labels, for instance, conservative /traditionalist /fundamentalist and liberal / modernist / progressivist, to identify allies and denigrate enemies in wars of ideas that threaten to undermine not only Christendom, but Islam and other religious traditions as well. Condescending conservatives gloat that their own fellowships, steadfast in their scriptures, confessions, creeds, and moral code can only prosper, while those of the liberals, alleged to believe and do anything they want, can only decline. Arrogant liberals, fulminating against the oppressiveness of tradition in general, and substituting cultural relevance and social activism for sound theology, summarily dismiss conservatives as narrow-minded, mean-spirited enemies of authentic, inward faith. Shouting loudly and unremittingly at one another, doctrinaire conservatives and liberals hear only each other's rancor, not each other's meaning.

If the earnest students in Maggie's Basic Christian Beliefs group are any indication, there is a clear way through and beyond controversies like these. The essential first step is honestly acknowledging that our most carefully considered and passionately held theological convictions are still only partial views of the message of the gospel in its fullness. With this acknowledgment shared mutually and humbly, we

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can then begin to consider seriously that people, whose views of core Christian beliefs are very different from our own, are capable of sharing the Christian message as powerfully, persuasively, and truthfully as we believe ourselves to be. Christianity is healthiest when it affirms human beings' God-given right to ask probing questions about the meaning and truth of its core doctrines, *and* when it affirms that there is also a vital center of beliefs to be discovered on the far side of all genuine questioning and doubting. If our churches are to witness effectively to the whole, and not just to part of their respective faith traditions, they will need the best that all of their members together can bring to strike the best balance between holding convictions firmly and encouraging constant reflection on how we can express those convictions most credibly and persuasively. The next three chapters will address specifically how to strike this balance.

Chapter 2. **Encouraging One Another In The Faith**

When the time came for Marnie to give her accountability report to her caregiver group, she shuffled her notes conspicuously and cleared her throat repeatedly. “Next time, she wants to bring up a question about faith,” Marnie struggled to say. “I have a lot of questions about my own faith, and I’m scared they’re going to get in the way of my listening well.” Gently, the caregivers’ group leader, Anne, asked her if she thought it might help to talk a little about her own questions. After a pause, Marnie expressed concern that she might get everybody else as scared as she was. “Could be,” Anne responded, “but I’m willing to trust that God’s Spirit among us will get us through it.”

With affirming smiles all around, Marnie’s peer shepherds leaned forward invitingly, and she plunged in: “The really big question I’ve been asking myself for quite a while is whether I have any faith at all. Sometimes I’m not sure I even know what faith is.” For most of the time remaining that evening, members shared freely their own questions about what it means to have faith, how to know whether we are growing in our faith, and how to tell the difference between faith that is only professed from faith that is truly genuine. Marnie’s closest friend in the group offered an especially insightful comment as the discussion drew to a close: “If we’re going to be listening to someone’s questions about their own faith, we ought to have at least a working definition of what faith itself is. Could Leroy help us with this?” At the beginning of the group’s next session, I gave it my best shot. Together, and with Marnie playing an

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especially important role in our discussion, we put together the basic content of this chapter.

Faith as Trust and as Belief

Across the centuries and different traditions (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant), Christians have shared a remarkably consistent understanding of what faith is. First, it is trusting in God with our whole being. Second, it is assenting with our minds to the teachings of the Bible and the Church. (Which church, of course, is a question every believer must answer for himself and herself.) Both faith as trust and faith as assent are frequently referred to in scripture and tradition as acts of *believing*, as in, for instance, John 20:31, which refers to the experience of eternal life through believing with one's whole heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Believing, in this sense of the word and in the sense of "having faith," is most importantly a commitment of ultimate loyalty to the God whose message Jesus brought at the cost of his own life. It has both a passive and an active side. "Passive faith" is a capacity to believe that is constantly being re-created within us by God (1 Cor. 13:13). By contrast, "active faith" is "hearing the word of God and doing it." (Luke 8:21) It proceeds from a conscious decision on our part which shapes our lives both now and forever.

Without a doubt, the primary meaning of faith is a capacity to trust in God completely, and the exercise of that capacity in every kind of situation by conscious decision and acceptance of responsibility for it, whatever its outcome may be, e.g., "even unto the cross." Questions about faith, in this sense of the word, are questions primarily about the direction of our will, not the capacity of our understanding. The questions are not about what or who, if anything or anyone, may be deserving of our ultimate loyalty and sacrifice, as if we do not already know. Rather, they are about how and where we acquire the courage to place our loyalty wholly in the service of what and whom we already believe with all our heart to be alone deserving of it. (Gal. 6:14; 1Cor. 2:2) As Marnie reflected on her own questions

about the Christian faith, she came to see them as about faith in this most basic sense. “What I’m really struggling with,” she said finally, “is trust. I haven’t been able to trust anyone for a long time [her history includes abuse as a child and exploitation in a marriage], and I know Jesus deserves better from me, but I’m afraid to put everything in his hands.” She went on to say that what is helping her most with her trust issues is the experience of deepening relationships with trustworthy people in her group and in her church.

By this time, Marnie had learned enough about her care receiver’s particular faith question to know that it was of a different sort from her own. “She has doubts about a particular belief,” Marnie reported, “and I don’t know enough about the belief [that there are unforgivable sins] to be real helpful to her. Actually, I guess I kind of doubt it, too, but I don’t know why, so I’m worried. Am I in a ‘blind leading the blind’ kind of situation.” Marnie is now having to think about the secondary but still important meaning for “faith,” the assent of our minds to what we have been taught as Christians, and about the kinds of questions which can arise about specific teachings whose meaning may be unclear and whose reasons may be dubious. Out of this understanding of “faith,” the New Testament offers its message (*kerygma*) about God declared by Jesus of Nazareth, and its teaching (*didache*) about the implications of that message for the lives of his faithful followers. The perennial task of the church at all times and everywhere is to ensure that its own teachings are congruent with the basic message that the teachings are supposed to be about. From the perspective of faith as assent to the church’s message and teachings, there can be questions about the Christian faith which have to do with the fundamentals of the message itself (e.g., Jesus’ resurrection.) And there can be other questions about the Christian faith which have to do with more specific teachings about that message (e.g., the rapture, abortion, homosexuality, war and peace, etc.)

As I have come to see it, and as Anne’s caregivers group looked at it with me, the vital center of the Christian message

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was and is a narrative about humankind's destiny, a story that begins with creation and proceeds through the calling of a special people to bear a unique witness to the Creator. This calling comes to completion in Jesus Christ's decisive disclosure of God's selfhood and will, and in the call to share Jesus' "gospel," God's good news about humankind's future (Mk. 1:14) with all people everywhere (Mt. 28:19). Just as the Christian faith includes a wholehearted trusting in the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, it also includes a thoughtful believing that the church's story about God in Christ tells the real truth about human existence in the world. To this latter end the Christian message/story has embedded in it a number of *beliefs* about God, the world, and humankind's place in it. Hebrews 11:6, by way of example, expresses the point well, ". . . for whoever comes to God must believe that he exists and [that he] rewards those who seek him." (REB) It insists that holding to these and other beliefs is essential to the life of faith. The God of whom the text speaks transcends fantasies about tribal gods jealous of their prerogatives and chronically anxious over the possibility of losing the fealty of those they can momentarily frighten into submission. The God of whom it speaks is the God who *is*, to whom the scriptures refer strikingly by the very name I AM. (Exodus 3:14)

The Story and the Beliefs: Keeping the Relationship Straight

The beliefs that the Christian story contains make three especially important contributions to the life of faith. First, they identify who the story's ultimate source is, especially in the assertions that God is the creator of all things and that God's nature and will are fully revealed in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Second, they set forth the grounds for believing that the story containing them is true; for instance, in the assertions that God kept his word to his chosen people by giving them the land he promised them, or that Jesus of Nazareth cast out demons and healed the sick by the power of God that was in him, or most especially that God raised

Jesus bodily from the dead. And third, they succinctly sum up what the Christian story is most essentially about, often in a form that we can commit to memory and confess together in the context of worship.

Immediately after calling his congregation at Philippi to maintain a unity of heart and mind, St. Paul shared in a letter to its members a hymn that in only a few words portrayed the vital center of a Judaism transformed by faith in Christ:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11, KJV)

Similar hymns, containing other core statements of what Christians are to believe about Jesus and his relationship to God, also appear at Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:3-14, 1 Timothy 3:16, and 2 Timothy 2:11-13. Perhaps the most famous of all the earliest summaries of what every follower of Jesus Christ should believe is reported by Paul in his correspondence with the church at Corinth:

. . . the gospel will save you only if you keep believing exactly what I preached to you; believing anything else will not lead to anything . . . I taught you that Jesus Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; and that he was raised to life on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared first to Cephas and secondly to the Twelve. Next he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died; then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles; and last of all he appeared to me too . . . (1 Cor. 15:2-8, Jerusalem translation)

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These early hymns and confessional statements are the forerunners of the doctrines and creeds that later came to occupy Christians' attention with increasing regularity, from the Apostles' Creed of the late second century through the Nicene of the early fourth, all the way to the proliferation of Protestant Confessions of Faith in the sixteenth and seventeenth. They remind us that though faith is most essentially trust, it is also assent. We place our trust in the mercifulness of a God whose holiness is finally beyond all human understanding and description. But we also give our assent to beliefs about God whose meaning is intended to be as clear as thoughtful, finite human beings are capable of making them. Beliefs deal especially well with questions that the Christian story is better at raising than answering, e.g., of how one reconciles the Bible's terrifying depictions of God's wrath with its transporting praise for God's mercy, how a person of faith can be both freed from and obliged toward the Law, how the Kingdom of Heaven can be both here and far off, or how Jesus the message bearer is also the message himself—to name only a few. As the following paragraphs seek to illustrate, though, a major problem with beliefs is the ease with which they can get detached from the story in which they should remain embedded.

One of my theology students, Harry, once shared with me one of the deepest convictions of his personal faith:

I have to admit that it's quite a story—the creation of the world in seven days, and all that. It's powerful, dramatic—just the kind of thing I love to tell to my kids. But when I'm honest with myself, I know that I really don't need it to know all the way down to my soul that there is a God who put it all together and keeps it together. All I have to do is to look up at the stars, feel the seasons change, and study even the simplest insects' eye structures. How could anyone *not* believe that there is a Maker of the heavens and the earth?

Harry came to seminary from a previous career as an entomologist. Not surprisingly, therefore, his detachment of a particular Christian belief about creation from the biblical narrative could only betray a more general predilection to

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regard the scriptures as an appendix to, rather than a foundation for, his personal faith. Another student of mine, Art, also focused on a belief more than on the story that contains it, but was led to a quite different outcome.

Art stopped me after class one morning to hand me an index card on which he had written the words, God Became Like Us, So That We Could Become Like Him. I had just introduced this theme in an overview of the second century theologian, Irenaeus. "To me," Art stammered, "this says it all! I've just realized that it's the sum and substance of everything I believe as a Christian. I don't need anything else!" I affirmed to Art the importance he gave to this particular formulation of the church's belief in God's saving work through Jesus Christ, but encouraged him to keep in mind Irenaeus' own use of the scriptures in advancing this very claim, especially 2 Peter 1:4. There, the author writes of the promise that through Christ's righteousness people "might be partakers of the divine nature" (KJV) or "may come to share in the very being of God." (REB) But for Art, post-biblical formulations of the meaning and truth of the church's claims about Jesus Christ were beginning to assume as central a place in his personal faith as scientific inquiry and the use of reason had in Harry's.

Detaching certain beliefs from the story that nurtures them had decidedly different consequences for Harry and Art, long-term. At the end of his second year of study, Harry left seminary to be a biology teacher and to serve the church as an active, informed layperson. "I've finally realized," he wrote me,

that though the beliefs I hold so strongly are pretty much Christian ones, they don't come from where most of my Christian friends get theirs. It's because they're reasonable and not because they're scriptural that I believe them. The fact of the matter is that very few of the stories in the Bible mean a whole lot to me. What counts is what squares with the sense we have to make of things all on our own.

Almost ten years after Art graduated from seminary, he called to tell me that he had recently been ordained a priest

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in the Orthodox Church. He went on to say that it was our earlier conversation about Irenaeus that led him to the richness of Eastern Christianity, and especially to one of its greatest theologians, Origen of Alexandria:

Maybe I was reading and hearing things wrong back then, but all I remember from my studies was that Protestantism insisted too much on a very dark and despairing view of human nature. The Orthodox tradition gave me a wholly new outlook: God is working to make us perfect, like him. Being brought to perfection is a process; it's still going on; and it's wonderful.

Gradually, Harry absorbed the biblical story of divine creation and redemption into an outlook founded upon personal experience, close observation, the exercise of reason, and the validation of like-minded people who were as reflective as he was and is. Art gathered the same story into a doctrinal scheme whose conceptual ingredients were drawn from the vast learning of the ancient Greeks, and combined with a mystical, allegorical approach to scriptural texts. For him, the “old, old story” rapidly receded, and in its place appeared a soaring vision of cosmic transformation that gathered to itself the wisdom of many peoples and civilizations across a staggering expanse of historical time.

The detachability of Christian beliefs from the larger story in which they are embedded can lead to remarkably different pilgrimages of faith, as the experiences of Harry and Art illustrate. Across Christendom today—and in other religions of the world also—one of the most prominent forms of the detachment is Fundamentalism. Common to all forms of Fundamentalist faith is a rigorous insistence upon adhering to a central core of beliefs—“Fundamentals”—as a sign of saving faith and a guarantor of membership in a community of the truly saved.

Within Protestantism in particular, the Fundamentalist outlook is currently shaping whole denominations. The Southern Baptist Convention in America offers an instructive illustration. It has declared what for all practical purposes is a holy war on everyone who questions vesting control of the denomination's institutions, finances, programs, and

missional outreach only in the hands of those who hold the “right” beliefs. And the current struggle among its members mirrors the wide spectrum of opinion among dedicated church members today about just what role beliefs should play in the formation of Christian disciples.

Over against their more Fundamentalist friends and worshippers, many “Moderate” Southern Baptists insist that giving doctrines first priority runs counter to the heart of historic Baptist faith, which is reliance upon the scriptures alone. However the current issues within the Southern Baptist Convention are eventually resolved, the debate itself should remind us forcefully of something crucial for understanding Christianity’s central message: beliefs detached from the Christian story can get in the way of letting the story speak to people directly, unless their dependence upon the story which anchors them is recognized and affirmed from the outset.

Beyond question, though, beliefs have indispensable roles to play in the life of faith. They clarify Who it is in Whom we are called to place our ultimate trust and loyalty. They set out the grounds for confidence that the Christian message is true. And they offer vital summaries of what the Christian story as a whole is most importantly about. And so they matter, deeply. At the same time, beliefs are not the whole of faith. Trusting in God and loving all of God’s creatures as God loves them matter too—even more than does either clinging to or repudiating inadequately understood doctrines, dogmas, creeds, and “Fundamentals.”

Beliefs, Pledges, and Praise: Appreciating the “Logic” of Belief

On the surface, core Christian beliefs look very much like assertions of fact—to be sure, of very large “facts”—whose truth can be confirmed by data and close reasoning available to everyone. Certainly, more conservative Christians look upon beliefs this way. According to their way of seeing the matter, the beliefs that we must affirm as conditions of our

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salvation constitute, literally, the full and final truth about a transcendent order of things that directly influences the course of events, both throughout the physical universe and in human history on our own planet. From this perspective, the primary meaning of Christian beliefs is descriptive in character. Each belief points out some particular feature of the world as a divine creation, and its truth is the correspondence between what it says and what, in fact, is the case about the created order. One of Anne's caregivers shared that her son's best friend was struggling with his church's insistence that the universe was created in six days.

The primary problem with this way of looking at the meaning of core Christian beliefs is its narrowness. These beliefs serve several functions besides description alone and in many situations, within which believers strive to express their faith most fully, putting forward literal truth claims is the furthest thing from their minds. For instance, affirming that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary has always had far more to do with doxology than with gynecology. It is more a way of honoring God's greatness and Jesus' uniqueness than it is of chronicling yet another surprising occurrence that happened sometime back and someplace out there, determinable "objectively." Later on, this section will focus explicitly and more fully on this doxological function of beliefs. It begins, though, with an introduction to another function of beliefs in the life of faith besides those of description and praise, in specific, with beliefs as pledges.

Count me in

Three mornings a week my first year in seminary, routine and ritual became one: a favorite course, chapel, and coffee hour in the parlor. The latter made possible informal conversation between students and faculty members that my classmates and I have cherished throughout our respective ministries. One brief chat that had an especially powerful impact on me followed a chapel service in which I happened to be sitting next to the professor of my morning

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course. Across several weeks, he had been lecturing on the difficulties of getting behind biblical books to the history underlying them and in the process raised questions about the meaning and authoritativeness of the Christian tradition that many of us, myself included, had not thought about previously. The impact of his lectures was profound, and often disturbing. One fellow student spoke for many of us when he said, “It just seems like everything’s up for grabs now.”

What stimulated my particularly memorable coffee hour interchange was something that occurred that morning in chapel. Side by side at the appropriate moment my professor and I both stood with our fellow worshippers and said the Nicene Creed out loud. It struck me while we were doing this that in spite of all the questions this man of faith obviously had about this very Creed, when he confessed it himself, he clearly meant what he was saying. As we walked together to coffee hour following the service, I said to my professor, “Before you get surrounded, could I get just a minute or two with you to ask you a pretty personal question?” Graciously, he took my arm, whisked me to the coffee pot, poured cups for both of us, and headed us toward a quiet corner of the room before the rest of our caffeine-deprived community made it into the parlor. Our conversation went roughly as follows:

Leroy: This is probably going to sound strange, but you really threw me a few minutes ago in the worship service.

Professor: And I wasn’t even preaching!

Leroy: It was the Affirmation of Faith. I’ve been thinking so hard about so many things in it—(with a smile) thanks to you—that I’m not sure I understand what I’m saying when I confess it.

Professor: Fair enough. But you’re saying I messed it up for you just now, and I’m not getting how I managed to do that.

Leroy: By reciting the Creed so forcefully yourself. How can you do it when you raise so many questions about it?

Professor: It’s the Dean, you know. He makes me say it.

Leroy: (Laughing) So that’s it! After all, isn’t that what you’ve been telling us all along about these creeds? Believe

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'em because the church tells us to. I can handle that. It'll make everything so much simpler.

Professor: There you have it. Now please collect your A for the course, go home, and make no more trouble.

Leroy: Okay, I promise. Somehow, though, I get the feeling you haven't quite shared all you might want to share on the subject.

Professor: I'll recommend an A for you in pastoral care also. Before I do that, though, consider this: Ever since I became an American citizen, one of my greatest joys has been reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. For me, affirming a creed is like that. This, too, is a declaration of loyalty—in this latter case, to the church.

Leroy: But surely not in the sense of “my church, right or wrong.”

Professor: Of course not. We're not saying “my country, right or wrong” when we say the Pledge of Allegiance either.

Leroy: For some reason, I'm thinking about college and having to learn a password and a special handshake as a part of getting into a fraternity.

Professor: Ah yes, the American “frats.” I know so little about them. Passwords? Handshakes?

Leroy: Really secret stuff. Whispering the password to another member when you offer him the handshake tells him you're one of the brotherhood.

Professor: You may be on to something here. What you're saying does suggest a connection with the ancient creeds. Knowing them and saying them is more than a little like letting members of a group know that you're one of them.

Analogies between pledging allegiance to a country's flag at a public event, sharing a password at a fraternity initiation, and saying a creed out loud in church bring out something very important about faith as the holding of beliefs. Most especially, they serve as a reminder that doctrines, dogmas, creeds, and articles of religion have other roles to play in the life of faith besides making objectively true statements about God, the world, and humankind's relations with both. As do pledges of allegiance and secret passwords and handshakes, the beliefs that we share as Christians call us to declarations of loyalty, to one another

and to the whole community of faith—past, present, and future—whose reason for being is to serve the cause of Christ in the world. Assenting to what one is called to believe as a Christian is a way of sealing one’s commitment not only to God, but to all of God’s people at work for God on behalf of God’s creation everywhere. Or, as a member of a confirmation class once put it: “So when we stand up and say the Apostles’ Creed in church next Sunday, we’re gonna be saying, ‘Count me in.’”

It is by no means a new idea that core Christian beliefs are about loyalties as well as facts. Just how deeply this idea has shaped Christian practice can be seen in how the church refers to its own definitive statements of what members are expected to believe. In specific, Christendom’s most important ecumenical creeds and confessions of faith are consistently called “symbols”, e.g., *Symbolum Romanum* (the Apostles’ Creed), *Symbolum Nicaenum* (the Nicene Creed). There are two good reasons for designating these expressions of faith as symbols. First, like all symbols, creeds and confessions of faith convey by words and images important truths about reality and human experience of it. By means of precisely chosen words, these symbols of the faith represent the church’s best efforts through the centuries to convey to the world succinctly and accurately, though always incompletely, what it understands most fundamentally about God and God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. Second—and this is the primary emphasis of the present section—like some but not all symbols, creeds and confessions contain just those words whose correct use is a condition for acceptance by the fellowship from whom the symbols derive meaning and to whom the symbols give life. Learning the symbols is a marker of readiness for initiation; using them correctly is a marker of membership. In these senses of the word, *symbolon* meant not only a signifying word (standing for or representing something or someone), but also a password.

Lost in wonder, love, and praise

Sheila, another member of Anne's lay caregiver group, shared with me her awestruck reaction to a just concluded hospital room visit with Helen, a terminally ill care receiver in her early thirties. For several months, Helen had angrily demanded answers from Sheila to the one faith question for which good answers are always difficult to come by: "*Why me?*" Repeatedly, Helen cried out to her caregiver: "I'm a good person, Sheila; I've tried to live a good life; my husband and children need me. Why, Sheila? Why is God letting this happen to me, *now?*" With her care receiver's permission, Sheila and I, along with Sheila's peer caregivers, talked regularly about how best to help Helen cope with her illness, its likely outcome, its consequences on those she loved most, and a faith challenged to the breaking point—Sheila's as well as Helen's. Sheila was a very effective caregiver during Helen's physical and spiritual decline and received as many appreciative words from Helen as she heard vitriolic ones, e.g.: "I know I'm not much of a Christian now, and that I'm really hell to be around. I'll never be able to repay you for all that you're putting up with from me." Lately, though, Sheila had begun to feel like a failure: "I can't seem to find in me the answers that Helen needs and deserves."

When Sheila called me that morning, Helen's physical condition had taken a dramatic turn for the worse even as her spiritual condition turned for the better, and it was the latter that had almost overwhelmed her in the presence of her care receiver. I asked: "Do you think you could get some of the conversation down on paper to share with your peer group tonight?" Sheila answered: "It'll do me good to try." What follows is a brief section from the more extensive dialogue that Sheila shared that evening:

Helen: (Very weakly) Hi, Sheila, I'm glad you're here. I do have things that maybe we could talk about, but before we do, do you think it would it be all right if we just prayed together for a little while?

Sheila: I'm glad I'm here, too, Helen. Prayer? I think it would be very all right. (Pauses) I know you usually like me to begin,

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but right now I've got a feeling that you just might be wanting to do that yourself.

Helen: I think I do. (Helen begins to pray, softly) God, all I want to do is praise you and thank you . . . you made everything . . . in everything . . . blessed me with . . . life . . . and . . . (Helen's voice is cracking) family to love . . . holy . . . holy . . . (Helen drifts off to sleep.)

Sheila: (After waiting patiently for Helen to awaken) Welcome back, dear one. You seemed to sleep so peacefully.

Helen: I'm been feeling so much at peace now. It seems as if, all of a sudden, I don't want to be mad at God anymore. All I want to do is praise him. Like, sing the doxology, you know?

Sheila: Feel like singing it now?

Helen: That's just what I feel like doing right now. (As Sheila and Helen begin to sing quietly together, a nurse who has just entered the room joins in) . . . flow, Praise Him all creatures here below . . .

When Sheila finished her report that night, a member of the group quietly started humming the doxology, and then the others sang it aloud together: "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow . . ." Two weeks later, the members attended Helen's funeral as a group and received tearful words of gratitude from her husband for their prayers and their love. "I know I can go on because Helen felt so loved by God at the end. All her questions and all her anger were gone, just gone. And it's because of Sheila and all of you." Sheila responded for the group, Jerry, God has been with all of us in so many ways these past months. We're so thankful to him for Helen, and for you, and for all the two of you mean to us.

As I continue to think about Helen at the pain-wracked end of her life, I keep returning to the integrity with which she kept hurling at her caregiver one of faith's most profound questions: "How could I have deserved this?" And I keep giving thanks for the patience and love Sheila showed in listening to Helen dismiss curtly and rightly the "answers" that others unwisely chose to offer her, e.g.: that there are evils that not even God can overcome; that we have no right to question how God chooses to apportion or withhold benefits; that even the worst suffering serves a greater good.

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Early in her illness, Helen's physical pain was exacerbated by her struggle to reconcile believing in an all-powerful, loving God with the harsh facts of her unjust suffering in a world supposedly under God's wise and benevolent governance. Finally, though, she achieved inner peace with respect both to her condition and her faith, not by abandoning her struggle with the belief's logic, but by entering more deeply into the logic itself.

Helen's prayer in the presence of her loving caregiver—a gift that Sheila says will go with her for the rest of her own life—bears strong evidence of a remarkable change in this terribly afflicted but wondrously comforted young woman in her final days and hours on this earth. Her faith in God clearly had become less an assent to statements about God's characteristics and work, some agonizingly in conflict with others, and more an expression of pure, unbounded praise and thanksgiving. "Blessed . . . life . . . family . . . love . . . holy . . . holy . . . holy." Words that had once served the purpose of description became sighs of glorification.

There is a time-honored principle in Christian theology for defining and understanding the role of belief in the life of faith: *Lex credendi est lex orandi*. The rule of faith is the rule of prayer. Or, what people are to believe must be most fully evident in how they pray. The principle is most especially evident in the very first words of the Lord's Prayer, hallowing the One in whose embrace alone human beings have life in this world and the next: "Even your very name is holy." And it was powerfully present in Helen's almost inaudible prayer before drifting into a few minutes of sleep. "Holy . . . holy . . . holy." Beliefs do assert things, and in this respect they do take on the appearance of claims to truth about which it makes sense to ask questions, to pursue evidence, and to consider alternatives. But they also sing praises, before whose sounds the anguish of doubt, the din of debate, and the fine points of dogma give way.

Chapter 3. **The Gift And The Decision Of Faith**

As the congregation sang the last hymn of the morning, Pete slowly made his way to the front of the sanctuary, to be greeted by a smiling pastor and received at long last into church membership. Cajoled by church members too numerous to name, prayed over by family members worried about his eternal destiny, and blamed by his ex-wife, Eleanor, for dissing the church in front of their children every chance he got, Pete had stubbornly beaten back every effort of the pastor to lead him to faith. His favorite strategy was to wrap himself tightly in the strident words of his unbelieving father, “religion is for people who don’t have what it takes to get through life on their own.” Then, one Saturday afternoon, after watching his 18-year-old son walk into the river with the pastor to be baptized, he jumped into the swirling waters himself and asked to be baptized, too. To the astonished pastor, Pete murmured: “Jesus was standing there right beside me on the bank, telling me that he loved me and wanted me.” After the baptisms, Pete and his son returned to shore to the shouting and singing of church members eager to embrace them.

“At long last” were the pastor’s words of greeting to Pete at the next morning’s service, and they produced extended laughter from the congregation when it became apparent that Pete was laughing the most heartily of all. One worshipper, however, was not laughing. Eleanor’s caregiver, Polly, noticed it immediately and made sure to get to her as soon as the service was over. Their brief exchange went this way:

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Eleanor: God, Polly, I just want to get away from this place as fast as I can.

Polly: Well if you are going to split, can I at least come with you?

Eleanor: All these years, Polly, all these years. I've tried my best to be a good Christian, just like I was raised to be, and had to fight Pete all the way to do it, and now here he comes, like the Prodigal Son, and if anybody could get to a fatted calf, they'd start roasting it right in front of us. Nobody in this church ever, ever, prayed over me the way they did over him, and they've never ever said one word of appreciation for *my* being here. And I'm the one who finally convinced Billy to get baptized; I don't think Jesus had much of a part in that at all.

Polly: It almost makes you want to live your life all over again, but this time as the lost sheep that Jesus spent all that time trying to find.

Eleanor: I would have at least gotten a hell—sorry, Pol—of a party out of it.

Polly: I guess people like us have to be content with just being reminded that Jesus has always loved us.

Eleanor: Right now that's comfort of the very small variety.

Polly: I know. (Pause) But *is* it comfort?

Eleanor: (Sighing) Yes, Pol, it is. It really is. It really, really is.

Among God's most precious gifts to every human being is the ability to trust and believe, along with the power to exercise that ability without external constraint or coercion. Sometimes, trusting and believing seems to come more from God's direct action than from either one's upbringing or from figuring things out for oneself or both. This can make the understanding of God's workings difficult for people whose own maturing in the faith has come slowly from others' patient goading and from diligently seeking God's will on a daily basis, in spite of unanswered questions and insufficient acknowledgment. Shortly after she finished her work with Polly on post-divorce issues, Eleanor became a trained lay shepherd herself. She began ministering to Clarice, a middle-aged woman, who in spite of enjoying her church's praise as a pillar of faith to everyone around her,

told Eleanor that she (Clarice) was “nothing but a fraud.” The reason she gave was that she possessed none of the gifts of the Spirit—healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues—that she had come to view as the marks of true faith. As Eleanor reported to her peer group:

The one thing I most wanted to do with Clarice was give her a good talking to about how growing up Christian is just as good as being swept off your feet by some big, supernatural infusion of grace and power. She doesn't think she's good enough, and I just want to keep on telling her that she is until she believes it again. And there *I* go again, don't I? There's more of her in me than I like to admit. Maybe that was what made me so put out with God over Pete's conversion. I wish God had made being a Christian as easy for me as he made it for Pete.

At this point in the conversation, Polly broke in to share something of the difficult time she had had with a care receiver with whom she worked before meeting Eleanor, a care receiver whose own conversion led her to judge everyone else's faith by her own, and who could not seem to appreciate how off-putting she was becoming even to her closest friends:

She really seemed hurt when one of her friends told her that she liked her better when she wasn't a Christian. It was all I could do not to blurt out that I knew just where her friend was coming from! All of a sudden, it seemed like my own faith was being called into question, even though my care receiver had no knowledge of it at all at that point. And I knew that I would have to own up to what was going on in me in my own support group if I were going to be of any help to her.

As the sections to follow seek to show, faith may or may not begin with a deeply felt experience of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, but be genuine either way. Faith in its fullness involves not only God but us, too. It is neither pre-ordained, infused, nor prevented by the Creator. An important corollary of this assertion is that faith cannot become a mature faith if we allow it to be coerced by religious authorities bent on abrogating our freedom and

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responsibility to respond in our own way to God's presence and will.

Faith as God's Action

In the Book of Acts, Luke presents a chilling picture of the hate-filled man that St. Paul was before the risen Christ overtook him on the road to Damascus:

Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest and applied for letters to the synagogues at Damascus authorizing him to arrest any followers of the new way whom he found, men or women, and bring them to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2, REB)

However, as Luke goes on to relate, Saul's literally blinding encounter with the one whom Ananias called "the Lord Jesus" left him a changed man, forever.

This encounter is one of the most powerful expressions in all of Christian history of a faith based upon a deeply inward, personal experience with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In Paul's case, the experience came about through a gracious act of God alone; it was wholly unmerited on his part, and with it came the power to make its life-changing consequences permanent. From the several accounts of Paul's experience in Acts, many Christians have drawn the conclusion that only those who share his kind of encounter with the Christ at an identifiable moment in time, or at least are earnestly seeking such an encounter if they have not as yet received it, are qualified to call themselves true Christians. Absent a personal experience with Christ of one's own, these Christians believe, one's very salvation is still in question and far-off.

Clearly, this particular paradigm of faith has been important from very early times in the history of Christian communities. One especially powerful illustration of it occurs toward the beginning of The Gospel of Luke. A young girl, Mary, is confronted by an angelic messenger, who announces that she is to conceive "the Son of the Most High" by the overshadowing power of God. Overwhelmed, she can

only utter, "I am the Lord's servant; may it be as you have said." (Luke:1:38) As Luke depicts it, Mary's response represents a faith gestated in a state of pure receptivity that is as much God's doing as is her pregnancy itself. Mary is alone the Mother of God, but the kind of faith by which she will nurture her son, many believe, is precisely the kind of faith that God intends for everyone, a faith conceived by the Holy Spirit and born in souls caught up in wonder, gratitude, praise, and unspeakable joy.

As attractive as the Annunciation story is in Christian history, though, the paradigm of faith it contains is even more evident in other testimonies from all four of the Gospels that were in circulation before Luke's and Matthew's distinctive narratives of Jesus' conception and birth. In specific, all of these testimonies have to do with Jesus' resurrection from the dead following his crucifixion and with his own conveying of faith to his followers as he appeared to them directly. Their particular witness to the kind of faith that comes as a divine gift was expressed very simply, as John reported it, in the astonished words of another Mary, the Magdalene: "I have seen the Lord!" (20:18), and in Matthew's concluding reference to Jesus standing among the eleven in risen power, creating in them the very trust they would need in order to become his disciples to the ends of the earth and the end of the age. (28:20) For many in the church, there is only one conclusion about faith to be drawn from these narratives of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. It is that until in some way Jesus makes his presence felt, seen, heard, or touched directly, no one is able truly to believe in him or in the message he came to deliver on behalf of God. According to this paradigm, when Jesus *does* make himself felt, seen, heard, or touched by someone, though, that person can do nothing except believe, follow, and serve.

The hold of this particular understanding of faith became especially clear to me early in my own ministry, serving as a parish youth director. Each summer, Spiritual Life Camps for our congregation's upper elementary, middle and senior

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high, and college age youth became the central focus of my time, energy, preparation, prayers and, after my first days with the campers, dread. It only took two distraught eighth-graders to bring me to this state of spiritual unease.

By mid-week of my first experience as a camp leader, Pattie and Jimmy had fallen into a disturbingly deep state of sadness. The evening worship services were the source of their trouble. Every night, a number of their friends were testifying glowingly about how much their lives had changed since they had felt Jesus coming into their hearts. Three shared that the Holy Spirit had given them the ability to speak in tongues and that they were regularly exercising it in another church fellowship. Another spoke movingly that his experience with Christ gave him the patience and the love he needed to help his older brother cope with the consequences of a spinal cord injury. Other members of the leadership team were very enthusiastic about the positive things that they saw happening in the worship services, which for them were fairly typical for all our camps. Pattie and Jimmy, however, were feeling increasingly bereft of a kind and quality of faith they now believed they should have in order to be “real Christians.” They felt even worse when they realized that many of the youth, who did genuinely seem to enjoy a deeply felt, personal relationship with Christ, looked down on anyone who did not.

At a youth camp that should have been uplifting to their spirits, Pattie and Jimmy came perilously close to a state of despair over what they falsely believed to be an irreparably deficient personal faith. However, they remained receptive to taking a second look at the harsh judgments they were passing on themselves, in the light of a broader understanding of faith that their group leader, whom they especially trusted, offered them just in the nick of time:

You know, there are a lot of people here who believe in Jesus just like you do, without any blinding light or any voice from heaven coming on them. I'm one of them. And I think most people in church are people just like us. Now I don't know much about what things were like back in Jesus' day and all

that, but I'm pretty sure that he loves us just as much as he loved Saul on that Damascus road.

This young counselor's moving statement had interestingly different effects on Pattie and Jimmy. By the time the camp ended, Jimmy was sharing without embarrassment that he wanted to be like Jesus in showing care for people, but also that "Jesus hasn't talked to me yet, and maybe he won't." Pattie, on the other hand, woke up the next morning reporting a dream in which Jesus baptized her in the Jordan River, later responded with tears of joy to an altar call, and confessed him there and then as her personal Savior and Lord. While Pattie was receiving her welcome "down front," I leaned over to ask her group leader what he thought about what was happening. His reply was wise beyond his age: "Maybe telling Pattie she didn't have to be like the other kids in the group made her feel like she really could."

Seeing without Believing and Believing without Seeing

As satisfying as it may be for some people to proclaim that genuine faith is an utterly unmerited gift from God which comes only on the wings of ecstatic experiences, this understanding of faith neither was nor is the only one available in the Christian tradition. For one thing, the very same biblical narratives which speak so commandingly of the dramatic appearances that God makes in people's lives to bring them to faith also make plain that not everyone who finds himself or herself in the presence of deity is personally gifted with faith in the process. For example: "The eleven disciples made their way to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to meet him. When they saw him, they knelt in worship, though some were doubtful." (Matthew 28:16-17, REB) And: ". . . there he was, standing among them. Startled and terrified, they thought they were seeing a ghost." (Luke 24:36-37, REB) To be sure, Jesus' closest disciples soon believed, but, as the post-resurrection

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narratives consistently portray, not before he was able to persuade them that it really was he who has been raised from the dead, e.g.:

But he said, “Why are you so perturbed? Why do doubts arise in your minds? Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see; no ghost has such flesh and bones as you can see that I have.” They were still incredulous, still astounded, for it seemed too good to be true. So he asked them, “Have you anything to eat?” They offered him a piece of fish they had cooked, which he took and ate before their eyes. (Luke 24:38-43, REB)

Just as there were close followers of Jesus, for whom not even seeing him after his death brought them straightaway to faith, there were others who believed in him without ever having any direct, personal experience of him at all. For these followers of what the earliest Christians called the Way, it sufficed to take the testimony of the original eyewitnesses to the resurrection as sufficiently reliable to warrant their pledging themselves to Christ’s cause in the world without enjoying a personal experience of the risen Christ themselves. Perhaps it was these followers whom Paul had especially in mind when he laboriously recounted the number of people who saw Jesus after the resurrection. (1 Corinthians 15:5-7) By means of his account, Paul sought to remind at least some of the Corinthians that they chose to believe what they could not experience for themselves, because they trusted the witness of people who claimed to see the truth of God with their own eyes.

The Johannine tradition had such believers in mind also. Beginning at John 20:19, there is a striking account of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance to all but one of the disciples, who were cowering in Jerusalem following the crucifixion. The missing disciple, Thomas, subsequently received the others’ enthusiastic report of seeing the Lord, but then announced to them that he would not believe unless and until he saw the risen Lord for himself. A week later, the writer goes on to say, Jesus reappeared to his disciples, with Thomas now present. He invited Thomas not only to look

upon him, but to touch him. Thomas then believed: “My Lord and my God!” (vs. 28) Now, however, the story takes an unexpected turn. Instead of praising Thomas for insisting on seeing things for himself, Jesus extols the virtue of another kind of believer altogether: “Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith.” (vs. 29, NEB)

Christian history strongly suggests that the kind of faith to which Jesus refers in the story of “doubting Thomas” is shared by far more of his followers than is the kind of faith that is born in a once-in-a-lifetime, unforgettable, transforming personal encounter with God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, such as Saul’s on the way to Damascus. Many people do believe, deeply and genuinely, without seeing the truth of the gospel for themselves. How do they do this? For some, by taking at face value the word of people they trust, that what the church teaches about God is true. By way of examples:

What my parents taught me about God when I was growing up made all the difference to their lives. Why did they believe all of it? Not because they had any blinding light experience. At least, they never told me they had. They believed because everyone who mattered to them believed. And I guess that’ll have to do for me, too.

The church teaches us what we need to be saved. It’s Jesus’ church. So doesn’t it all come to just whether we believe what we’re told or not? That’s been good enough for my family for five generations now, and it’s good enough for me.

Yeah, sometimes I think it might be nice to “get saved” and all that. When I was in high school, a lot of the guys on the team were really into that, and I got pretty down on myself because it didn’t happen to me. It never has. But I still believe in Christ. A lot of people I know today say they experienced him just like the disciples did way back then. I don’t have any reason to doubt their word, but it doesn’t look like I’m ever going to have the kind of experience they say they’ve had. I hope it’ll be enough just to take the Bible seriously, because that’s all that I know to do.

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What is especially winsome about these testimonies is their sincerity and simplicity. A little more troublesome is their lack of reflectiveness. Trust like this may be well placed, if church leaders remain trustworthy representatives of Christianity themselves. But this is a rather large “if,” for the history of the church is deeply marred by the actions of leaders who misuse the authority which loyal constituents too eagerly bestow on them. Leaders who abuse the trust of those they lead are the first to reinforce the ideas that Mother Church knows best and that those whom the Lord loves most are those who meekly obey what the leadership says to believe and do. At its worst, this way of looking at faith regards unquestioning loyalty to the church instead of to God as the supreme spiritual virtue. At its best, it should provoke dedicated men and women of faith to demand, at the very least, that their leaders personally believe and act as they teach others to do.

Some people, then, come to faith by taking another’s word for the truth of the Christian gospel and seem to be able to live worthy lives without ever asking questions about, and without ever experiencing for themselves the source, ground and end of the gospel message itself. Others come to faith on the strength of another’s testimony, rather than personal experience, but not without thinking hard about that testimony, weighing it carefully, and determining for themselves that it does indeed cohere with everything else that they believe to be true about God, the world, and human destiny. Luke offers a glimpse into a very early expression of this kind of faith, in the 17th chapter of The Book of Acts.

After three weeks of teaching in a Jewish synagogue at the Macedonian city of Thessalonica, Paul was besieged by a mob that Jews who did not agree with him recruited for the purpose of stirring up civil unrest. At nightfall, the congregation removed Paul and Silas from the line of fire by sending them to Beroea, approximately 45 miles west and south. Even so, Beroea was not far enough away to dissuade those who were threatened by Paul’s preaching from further hounding him. Nevertheless, Paul found a receptive audience

in the Berean synagogue for what he had to say, “fair-minded” Jews who “received the message with great eagerness, studying the scriptures to see whether it was true.” (Acts 17:11, REB) Luke implies that the Jews in Berea who became believers did so on the basis, first, of listening to the Christian message and then of making up their minds about it after studying its evidence for themselves.

It is easy to understand how both believers and inquirers can yearn for the kind of personal experience with which God favored Thomas and insist that only such an experience counts as the foundation of true faith. But from the standpoint of the pivotal conversation between Jesus and his disciple summarized above, the insistence is indefensible and the yearning distracting. To alter Jesus’ reported words slightly, those who have not seen but have decided to believe anyway are as blessed as those for whom an overwhelming personal experience makes the decision for them. Here, then, are two very different understandings of what counts as genuine faith. Both carry the approval of the one and the same Christian tradition. As different as these two understandings of faith are in themselves, however, they share something very important in common. Both insist that faith involves decision.

To Everyone Comes the Moment for Decision

From the standpoint of the Christian tradition, every human being’s capacity to respond to God, whether with thanksgiving and trust or with indifference and resentment, is given with his and her created nature and with the freedom included in it. How one chooses to exercise that capacity, however, is finally up to that person alone. God invites, calls, and even summons people to enter into a relationship of gratitude and trust with him, through his saving work in Jesus Christ. But, with the possible exceptions of Moses, Mary, and Saul of Tarsus, God does not compel them to do so. Because our created nature includes both the capacity to give unending thanks and praise to one’s Maker and by God’s own design, the freedom to ignore and to

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oppose God altogether, faith is and always will be a matter of invitation and choice rather than of coercion and unthinking obedience.

Even those whom God visits in overwhelming experiences like Isaiah's in the Temple (Isaiah 6:1-9) can choose not to accept the summons the experiences contain. They do not become men and women of genuine faith because of their unique personal experiences of and with God. They become men and women of genuine faith because, standing before "the King, the Lord of Hosts" (vs. 5) with the God-given power to turn away, they choose to go where he desires to send them, as in "I heard the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' I said: 'Here am I! Send me.'" (vs. 8) As a fellow pastor once summed it up, "If we're supposed to say *Yes* to God all on our own, we've gotta be able to say *No*."

At the end of the Book of Joshua, God's people are pictured as finally settled in the land promised them, only to be presented with a new challenge by their leader. The universal meaning of the challenge resonates deep within the human soul at all times and everywhere:

Now hold the Lord in awe, and serve him in loyalty and truth. Put away the gods your father served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if it does not please you to serve the Lord, choose here and now whom you will serve: the gods whom your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But I and my family, we shall serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:14-16, REB)

This well known passage from the Old Testament reminds its readers movingly that God does not infuse in most people directly the trust, loyalty, and thoughtful obedience that are the hallmarks of mature faith. Rather, God creates within them the capacity freely to make such virtues their own, and calls upon them to decide and re-decide for themselves whether or not they will be faithful in the way God desires.

There is, of course, a potential stumbling block embedded in the text just quoted. Although Joshua makes a decision of faith all on his own, members of his household do not. Rather, he makes it for them. Such a practice seems to have been widespread in the Middle East at the time of the Hebrews' settlement of Canaan. It survives in the early Christian practice of baptizing whole households after their leaders became followers of Christ and later on in the forced conversion of families, tribes, and nations by their Christian conquerors. Imposing a particular form of faith on people and never permitting them to decide for themselves what they will believe is a practice that is still deemed acceptable in many societies all over the world. The major problem with the practice is that it demeans the worth and dignity of each individual before God and, in Joshua's words, the calling of every man and every human to choose "here and now" Whom he or she will serve. Expressed in explicitly Christian terms, the point is that each person must decide for himself and herself (a) whether to listen to the Gospel message at all, (b) whether to listen closely enough to it to gain an understanding of it, (c) whether to believe that its truth has eternal significance, and (d) whether to commit oneself to the cause of the One who is its ultimate source.

A New Testament parallel to the Isaiah and Joshua texts is Luke's depiction of the Day of Pentecost. It contains an especially illuminating illustration of how faith includes, first, hearing the message and, second, choosing to believe it. Following his description of the descent of the Spirit and summary of a sermon interpreting it, Luke writes: "Those who accepted what (Peter) said were baptized, and some three thousand people were added to the number of believers that day." (Acts 2:41, REB) What has always stood out vividly in this passage is the large number of newly baptized converts it extols. But it is the text's very first words that are the especially important ones. Each baptism followed upon someone's listening to what Peter said and upon choosing to believe that what Peter said is true. The faith that was the response to Peter's message delivered at

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Pentecost is like the faith that was and is the response to Jesus' message delivered throughout his earthly ministry.

One vital part of human beings' created nature, then, is the capacity to respond to God's self-revelation with gratitude, obedience, and joy, as well as with indifference, resentment, and defiance. The other is the God-given power to exercise that capacity on the basis of deliberation and choice rather than impulse. With the capacity and with the power comes a truly awesome responsibility, as Christianity understands it, for God calls upon every person to *decide* how he or she will respond to these great gifts; God does not make the decision for them. Even if one were confronted by God in an experience of overwhelming significance—perhaps of a burning bush, or a still, small voice, or a warmed heart—it would still be up to her, as it was to Moses and Elijah and the Emmaus Road travelers, to decide just who and what it is that she sees and hears and whether to put complete trust in the One suddenly appearing in power and glory.

The decision one must make in order to have faith is twofold. First, it is a decision about whom or what to trust, ultimately, e.g., one's family, a political system, country, wealth, karma, being thought well of, possessions, voodoo, one's own insights and abilities—or the great I AM, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, the prophets, and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Second, the decision of faith is a decision about what beliefs best make clear the nature of that to which people should give their highest allegiance, e.g.:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth forth his handywork. (Psalm 19:1 KJV)

There in the starless dark, the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings stretched across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all. (Archibald MacLeish)

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When a person realises . . . oneness with Brahman, he is oblivious of the idea that he is an embodied being. (Swami Nikhilananda)

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. (Psalm 8:5, KJV)

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. (Jean-Paul Sartre)

Deciding in what or in whom to put ultimate trust and deciding what to believe about the ultimate object of that trust can be as unsettling as it is momentous. Respecting the very measure of his own freedom with which he has endowed humanity, God invites but does not coerce people to believe in him. However, God does hold people accountable for whatever decision they do make about his invitation to relationship and call to discipleship. In the time of decision for or against the life of faith, therefore, everything that can ever matter is all of a sudden at stake and on the far side of a decision made, nothing will ever be the same.

Some people calculate their accountability before God in terms of securing an afterlife filled with unimaginable bliss and avoiding one filled with terror, grief, loneliness, and excruciating pain. Others frame the consequences of trusting or not trusting God in terms of ensuring a purpose-filled life here on earth, buoyed by gratitude and joy instead of deadened by the aimlessness and hopelessness to which unbelief inexorably leads. And just as one cannot avoid the decision of faith, one cannot trivialize it. Having faith is not simply one among many possible ways of living, toward the choice of which the Creator remains sublimely neutral. Whether or not people will make their relationship with God the vital center of everything that they feel, think, decide, and do as human beings is, from the standpoint of the Christian faith, the single, overarching question about human existence in the world, to which every other question sooner or later must and does give way.

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By way of a concluding illustration of this section and chapter, after Eleanor's initial outburst following her ex-husband's wildly acclaimed baptism, she and her caregiver, Polly, talked a lot about what coming to and maturing in faith is. Among other things, she gradually came to see that:

Eleanor: When you really get down to it, Pete wasn't swept into those waters that afternoon by some Spirit-caused cyclone. And Jesus certainly didn't throw him in. Pete went in on his own. And it had to be a little scary for him. He could just as well have told Jesus off, like he had been telling everybody else off for years.

Polly: He's certainly been making a lot of decisions since he came into the church. Who would have thought that he would be teaching Sunday School, and driving the van for seniors, and cooking the Men's Club breakfasts, and I don't know what else besides? Pete's life may never be the same and, to me, that can be a whole lot scary.

Eleanor: And then there's the tithing. It got to me—thank goodness for no more than a minute, though—when he asked if I'd agree to some reduction in child support so that he could do it. With all the hassling I gave him about coming to church, I guess I deserved this.

Polly: Well, you sure responded well to it. Just one more of those decisions you've kept making all your life about being a Christian.

Eleanor: You're right. I really could have turned him down. But I didn't. And I really could choose to stay mad about kind of being taken for granted in the church. I won't though. And it'll be a good decision on my part.

Polly: Kind of like Pete's good decision not to turn his back when Jesus showed up in his life.

Eleanor: One thing I've been thinking a lot about lately is how many times Jesus has shown up in my own life.

Polly: I'm not sure I know what you mean. It's been sounding like you think Jesus has pretty much avoided you.

Eleanor: I know. But maybe he's really been there for me all along. In all those Sunday School teachers, and the preachers, and the music, and the mission trips, and in my kids, and (hesitating) . . . right now, in you.

Chapter 4. **Believing Is Seeing: The Role Of Beliefs In The Life Of Faith**

Tucked neatly into John Calvin’s exposition of the Apostles’ Creed, and often overlooked there, is an intriguing idea about the uses of the Bible in Christian living. The scriptures are to faith, the great Protestant Reformer suggested, what corrective lenses are to vision: both are intended to help people see things more clearly, in heaven and on earth respectively. This chapter applies Calvin’s fruitful analogy in a little different way, to the beliefs that we hold as Christians and the contributions our beliefs make to our growth in faith. In specific, the chapter focuses on three ways in which beliefs bring more clearly into view the overarching vision and message of the gospel. First they help us distinguish the Christian story’s vital center from its myriad details. Second they help us direct our ultimate commitments to what is truly ultimate rather than to idols of our own making. And third they help us see in a bitterly conflicted world communities of faith praising God “with one mind and voice.” (Romans 15:6)

The Story, the Message, and the Details

This section begins with a brief story from a distant past—when most church colleges actually held worship services on their campuses during the week. (And sometimes, even on Sundays.) On my way from chapel to class on one of those mornings, two students walking ahead of me were in animated conversation. One exclaimed to the other in considerable frustration:

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I knew I was in over my head as soon as my Old Testament prof put that map up. The “possible routes of the Exodus,” he said. Oh, boy. There’s more than one? I never will get them all sorted out. Isn’t it enough just to believe that God led the people where he wanted them to go?

I happened to know this young man and appreciated both how deeply faithful he was and how unsophisticated he was in the ways of theology. Nevertheless, I could not help thinking to myself that in spite of his admitted confusion about a particular point of biblical interpretation, he was nevertheless exhibiting a solid grasp of a very important theological premise, that some beliefs count for more and some beliefs count for less in the life of faith.

Ancient Israel grasped this point well also. Long after the settlement of Canaan, the Deuteronomist relates, God’s covenant people lifted up for affirmation a very succinct summary of their historical self-understanding: “Once we were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt by his mighty hand . . . And he brought us out of there to lead us into the land he swore to our fathers he would give to us.” (Deuteronomy 6:21,23, Jerusalem translation) According to this passage, and its parallel version at 26:5-9, it does not seem to matter much whether faithful Jews and Christians remember all of the details about the Hebrew people’s wilderness wanderings and subsequent conquest of the Canaanites, as long as they remember Who it is who guided the process. And so it is with the church’s most important beliefs. Details provide context. Sometimes, only the devil is in the details themselves.

Many people recoil at the thought that there could be any detail at all in the scriptures that might be subordinated to a focusing on larger issues of belief. For them, God’s inspiration of the whole of the Bible is at once God’s direct inspiration of each book, chapter, and verse in it. One problem with this attitude toward the Bible is that its books do not always present the same details in the same way. What, for example, is the primary justification for insisting

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on sabbath rest? Is it to remember that God rested on the seventh day of creation? (Exodus 20:11) Or is it to remember that God brought enslaved ancestors out of Egypt and that those who are now servants to others deserve rest from their own labors? (Deuteronomy 5:15) Another example: according to New Testament texts, who first saw the risen Lord after God raised him from the dead? Mary of Magdala and the wife of James? (Matthew 28:1) Was Salome with them also? (Mark 16:10) Were there even more witnesses than these, such as Joanna and other women who had come to Jerusalem with Jesus from Galilee? (Luke 24:1) Might it have been Mary of Magdala alone? (Mark 16:9; John 20:1) Did Peter and John race each other to the tomb to confirm Mary's testimony for themselves? (John 20:3) Or was it only Peter? (Luke 24:11) Or was it that all of the disciples had already set out for Galilee? (Matthew 28:16; Mark 16:7)

In an evening Bible study, members were raising these very same questions about the witnesses to the risen Jesus. A particularly plain-speaking member of the group interrupted the text citations with some very apt words: "Good grief, how many details do we have to sweat to be good Christians? When I shout out with everybody else in church on Easter, 'He is risen!' I'll be saying all I need to say." This man's lenses of belief were in proper fit that evening. By means of them he saw clearly what the Christian story was *all* about, however varied are the ways that Christians have shared its details. Whether it is with the lenses of scripture or the lenses of belief, fixating on too many details in the Christian story is like staring at the lenses themselves, or trying to repair or replace them. A better alternative to both approaches is simply to look with anticipation *through* scriptural texts and beliefs, to the things of God.

Dealing with a Jealous God

A second way in which beliefs help us to see matters of faith more clearly is by helping us distinguish the creations of our own minds from the self-revelations of God. In the

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language of Genesis: “God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them . . .” (1:27) This is the exact opposite of the view that pervades modern life, to the effect that God is a contrivance of human imagination, that human beings create whatever kinds of gods they want, and that the gods human beings make for themselves are the only gods there are. Knowing the difference between the God Who is Being-itself—the great I AM of Israel’s faith—and the gods of merely human devising is absolutely essential to a mature faith. Beliefs play a major role in pointing out this all-important difference.

Toward the end of my freshman year in college, I excitedly told my mother that I had decided to major in philosophy. Because she was so supportive of my being the first in her family to go to college at all, I was surprised and somewhat disappointed by her reaction: “But philosophy is only about other people’s opinions, isn’t it?” With budding sophomoric arrogance, I mentally dismissed what my mother said as blatant ignorance on her part, and stammered out a memorably inane reply: “Well, I sure hope not.” Later, she loved to needle me whenever I began spouting off about my latest philosophical conquest. To one particularly long, involved, and self-congratulatory explanation—this time, of Plato’s theory of forms—Mom only said: “sounds to me like he worships his own theories too much.”

Years later, as a teacher of philosophy myself, I began to realize with gratitude just how deeply my mother had gotten through to me. What I still love about philosophy is its insistence on reasoned inquiry that leads to truths embraced with humility and openness to new discoveries. What most arouses my ire is the arrogance with which philosophers can so easily substitute for truth their own idiosyncratic beliefs—in both my Mom’s words and Plato’s, “opinions”—that not only close off further inquiry, but deaden the very spirit by which we pursue it. One of her own strongest beliefs, that I wish had been mine earlier, is expressed succinctly at Isaiah 55:9: “. . . as the heavens are higher than

the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (KJV)

Both Jewish and Christian tradition offer the same word to name what undermines everything that otherwise can be so worthwhile about the life of the mind, “idolatry.” As Ancient Israel came to understand it, idolatry is the act of giving ultimate loyalty to something that lacks ultimacy. It is a conferring of divine status on something merely human—e.g., ancestors, parents, lovers, and rulers; carvings, paintings, sculptures, and ideas; conceptual systems, doctrines, dogmas, and inflexible rules for conduct—and making them into gods. My mother understood well what my own idolatry was all about. From the very beginning of my love affair with philosophy, she constantly reminded me to resist the temptation to worship my own mental constructs. Once, she called some of my best philosophical notions “graven images.”

I still favor this seventeenth-century way of expressing the second commandment in English; the prohibition not only against worshipping images of deity but against fashioning them at all is a “grave” matter in more than just one sense of the word. The prohibition has to do not only with the fact that people often confuse their images of and beliefs about deity with the God they strive imperfectly to represent. It has to do also with the seriousness—the gravity—of the confusion. Paying homage to images carved from stone and metal, painted on walls and canvases, and spoken into being with words is something quite different from worshipping God. Giving more credence to our own goals, plans, and philosophies—and to the lack of them—than we do to God’s revealed will, is something quite different from serving God with the best that is in every human being. Worshipping the God Whom images help bring into focus is something quite different from revering the images as if they were God Godself. Together with the first commandment, the second demands revering God alone as holy. “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God,” the writer goes on. (Exodus 20:5) If, instead of to God, our “graven images”

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draw attention and loyalty only to themselves, they fit us not for everlasting life with our Creator but only for the grave.

“It’s the whole tribal religion thing that’s getting to me,” Denise told her care receiver, “and it’s making me call into question a whole lot of what I was taught about God growing up.” Before her father’s recent death, Denise had been attempting with minimal success to re-establish a relationship with both her parents after several years of living “on the wild side.” Accepting that loving her mother entailed loving her mother’s church, Denise began worshipping regularly with her mother but struggled as she did when she was a teen-ager with, as she put it,

having that angry, vindictive, grudge-nursing God I always kept hearing about pushed into my face over and over and over, all over again. I really want to make it in that church this time, but I keep going away angry, like I always did, and I’ve got to find a better way to deal with what my mother eats up like it was manna from heaven.

Denise’s care receiver, Sissy, soon realized that her sympathies with Denise’s plight and with her theology were threatening to get in the way of good listening and of encouraging her care receiver to deal with her problem in the only way that would make a good outcome more likely, with her mother directly. As Sissy expressed her issue to her peer caregivers: “What I really want to do is break out into a cheer for Denise and tell her to tell her mother that her God is too small, not to mention petty and un-pretty.” What follows is a brief summary of the ensuing dialogue between Sissy and another caregiver in the group, Wilma:

Wilma: I’m with you on that. But I’m guessing you won’t go that route with Denise.

Sissy: You’re right. I can’t react like that with Denise and be of any help to her.

Wilma: Tell me something, Sissy. I think I know why what I’m hearing about Denise’s pastor is getting to me, but I’d be interested in hearing more about why he’s getting to *you*.

Sissy: Because the God he’s preaching about can’t possibly be the real God that Jesus believed in. I think this preacher’s

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God is like the one I've heard about all my life too, a God made up by angry people who want their God to be just like they are.

Wilma: From what you've learned so far, does Denise's Mom seem to be this kind of person?

Sissy: I don't know, Wilma. I guess I need to ask Denise to tell me a little more about her.

Wilma: How about Denise herself?

Sissy: It's interesting that you'd ask. In our last session, she opened up with me about a lot of things she's been doing in the struggles for social justice and how angry she had been about how many human needs are going unmet all across the world today. And guess what she brought up next? That she thinks God is very angry about injustice, too.

Wilma: So maybe an issue for you is not with an angry God per se, but with a God who's being depicted as being angry about the wrong things. Maybe that's an issue for Denise, too.

Sissy: I wonder what might happen if I sat down with Denise's preacher to see if anything like this occurs to him, too. Maybe Denise and her Mom are only hearing parts of his sermons. Or maybe he just isn't getting across very well what he means to say.

Wilma: *I* wonder what might happen if Denise sat down with her Mom to see if she's thinking anything along these lines, too.

Sissy: Maybe she'd end up a little clearer about what her Mom thinks, deep down, is really real about God. I know that I never got very close to my own mother's personal faith until many years after leaving home, when I finally started asking her about it.

Wilma: Seems like you've got all kinds of follow-up possibilities here. Could I ask a favor?

Sissy: Just name it.

Wilma: Well, you've really got my interest up in Denise's struggles to reconnect with her Mom, and I sure would like to follow along with you as you guys keep working, especially on the God and church stuff.

The Group: Us too!

With One Accord

The third way in which beliefs keep spiritual vision in focus is by helping us to serve the world as a united body with a single message about God's promises and will for humanity. It was for unity among his followers that Jesus, facing imminent arrest, trial, and death, prayed so profoundly in Gethsemane: "May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (John 17:20-21, REB) These words appear toward the end of a long intercessory prayer that begins with Jesus' special concern for his disciples and ends with his hopes for those who will come to believe in him because of the disciples' own ministry. Of particular interest to the present discussion is the way Jesus refers to the basis for faith: "It is not for these alone (the disciples) that I pray, but for those also who through their (the disciples') *words* put their faith in me." (vs. 20, emphasis mine.) What the disciples *say* about Jesus will be crucial to others' coming to believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God, and to their enjoying life together and everlastingly through him. The disciples' words will also be crucial to building among all of Jesus' followers the kind of unity which alone can make their witness to a hostile world both appealing and credible.

This same theme of unity is announced boldly in the letter to the Ephesians: "There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all." (4:4-6, Jerusalem translation) To people besieged by conflicting philosophical and religious pronouncements about humanity's condition and destiny, whether in the first century or the twenty-first, there may be nothing more reassuring than hearing of a community of faith whose members are constantly uplifted by a sense of oneness with each other and with God. And at the same time, there may be nothing more discouraging than discovering that Christians

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are as divided among themselves over what to believe as people are everywhere else.

It has never been easy for even the most devoted followers of Jesus as the Christ to stay in agreement for very long about matters of faith. Not ten years after Jesus' death, Jewish and Gentile Christians were seriously at odds over the role of Jewish Law in shaping their new life as his witnesses in the world. Later, St. Paul was constantly struggling to keep his Corinthian congregation from splintering into factions. And to the Galatians he wrote with considerable exasperation: "I am astonished to find you turning away so quickly from him who called you by grace, and following a different gospel . . ." (Galatians 1:6, REB) Freedom of thought and expression—core values in all genuinely modern societies—make conflicts among Christians even more predictable and difficult to resolve than they were in earlier centuries. The church's present-day dilemma is a particularly painful one. How does it affirm our responsibility to make careful decisions about what we assent to as Christians and at the same time caution that too much diversity of opinion about the Christian message can erode its authoritativeness to a world otherwise receptive to it?

One way to resolve this dilemma is to insist that Christians hold exactly the same beliefs and mean exactly the same things by the beliefs that they hold. If there is indeed one and only one God, one and only one savior, one and only one church, the logic goes, then there can be one and only one set of beliefs for all Christians. Therefore, anyone who resists subordinating his or her own reflections on the gospel of Jesus Christ to the normative teachings of the church cannot be a true believer. Inevitably, this truncated reasoning ends with condemnations and ostracism. People who will not conform their beliefs unquestioningly to others' imperious demands are quickly dismissed from the church's purview of care. And so, what begins with a profound pastoral insight—that Christianity is more credible if Christians can present a united front to the

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world—can end with a diabolical suppression of human beings' God-given capacity to think for themselves and an arbitrarily-imposed uniformity that mires communities of faith in fear, dissembling, hostility, and guilt.

As these words were being written, a distressed pastor e-mailed to tell me how upset he was at the latest machinations of a small group of disgruntled clergy and laity to bring a member of their ecclesiastical hierarchy to trial. The issue, in the language of this particular denomination, was the dissemination of doctrines contrary to established doctrinal standards. "There's just got to be a better way, he wrote, to build unity in the church than by rewarding the suspension of thoughtful reflection and discussion for the sake of unquestioning uniformity and conformity of belief."

By means of comparing core Christian beliefs with lenses, the first part of this chapter has focused on seeing and understanding God's world more clearly by respecting the diverse ways that Christians express the very core beliefs that also bind them in unity. The beliefs that people hold as Christians, their reflecting upon them, and their assent to them, all play indispensable roles in learning to place ultimate trust, hope, and love in what is truly ultimate—God—instead of in the myriad "devices and desires" of the human heart. Even so, as the next section of this chapter emphasizes, in the life of faith there is room, and plenty of it, for differences of opinion about matters of belief, questions about what to believe and not to believe, and unity without uniformity in our churches.

Celebrating Differences of Opinion

Notwithstanding the definitive declarations of ecumenical and denominational councils and leaders through the centuries, thoughtful Christians have always had disagreements over what their churches should teach and what they themselves should believe. Sometimes, the disagreements are over relatively trivial matters—e.g., over whether the Last Supper was or was not a Passover meal—and at other times, they are over more basic ones—e.g., over

what kind of body it is with which we shall be raised. But disagreements there have been, are, and most likely always will be. The purpose of this section is to show how Christians can still be “one body” as Christ’s disciples and at the same time acknowledge that among themselves they represent sincerely held, but sometimes quite diverse, understandings even of those beliefs they also agree are vital to the life of faith.

The basics of Christians’ disagreements about beliefs

When beliefs are at issue, the disagreements that can cloud perception and judgment are of two principal kinds. The first is about which beliefs constitute the core of a common Christian understanding and which represent convictions about which we can still in good faith hold different opinions. For example, is the belief that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit *as* crucial to our salvation and place in the Christian community as the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead by God? Or, between the belief that Christ is bodily present in the Eucharist and that he is present there only in memory, which is the more important to faith? Or, is it sufficient to believe that the scriptures *witness* to God’s self-revelation or must we believe, in addition, that they *are* that self-revelation?

That there are core beliefs that constitute part of the very foundation of faith is beyond serious dispute, e.g., the belief that God desires the salvation of all humanity, but just what all the core beliefs together are has always been a matter for discussion and debate. Beliefs which some affirm as binding upon Christians at all times and everywhere, others see as expressive only of the special circumstances of particular groups at certain periods in the church’s history, e.g., the belief that Jesus’ death was a ransom paid to the Devil for releasing the human race from his dominion.

Just as conscientious believers can and do disagree about what is and is not a core Christian belief in the first place, they can and do disagree about the implications of the very beliefs that they concede to constitute faith’s core. For

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instance, what follows from the belief that God is the source, sustainer, and end of human life? That no one is to tamper with the natural course of any human life for any reason? That not only are contraception, *in vitro* fertilization, abortion, passive euthanasia, and stem cell research unjustifiable, but blood transfusions and any other medical treatments as well? Or, what follows from the belief that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ? That those who died before Christ's first coming, or who have never heard a witness to Christ's saving message and life, or who live Christ-like lives but by the convictions of another religion, cannot be saved?

If Christians can disagree with one another (a) over which beliefs constitute the core of Christian teaching, and (b) over what implications for the Christian life are contained in that core, then unity in the church clearly cannot depend upon mere uniformity of belief. Our oneness as Christians cannot entail that we must all believe the same things in the same way all the time. Instead, it must be capable of sustaining a considerable variety of honestly-arrived-at opinions about what faith does and does not, should and should not, stand for. It must encourage and not resist constant re-thinking of the Christian message in the light of new circumstances and challenges. The following section offers an illustration of what this process might look like with respect to one core belief of the Christian tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity.

Re-thinking the three-in-one

Although the belief that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has been one of the most celebrated of all core Christian beliefs for over 1700 years, there was and continues to be more disagreement among Christians about the status and meaning of this belief than ecclesiastical pronouncements admit. Acknowledging and respecting these disagreements can be especially relevant to understanding and overcoming a particularly dangerous conflict in today's world, one with the potential to destroy not only the world's peace, but the world's future. It is the

conflict between the leaders of the Christian and the Muslim religions, a conflict that has rapidly escalated into a clash between whole civilizations, with little less than the future of faith itself at stake.

What has always been especially divisive between the Islamic world and the Christian is the Christian belief that Jesus Christ is God incarnate and not merely one of God's prophets. For Christians, this belief necessitates a radical diminution of the status and authority of every other prophet, no matter how God-inspired, from Moses to Muhammad. For Muslims, it represents a blaspheming of the divine nature and an obscene denigration of the Abrahamic monotheism which alone represents the one true God to the world. A very thoughtful and well-read layman once shared with me a conclusion he drew from his own extensive study of Islam: "The more that Muslims attack making Jesus another god, the more intransigent our churches get in appealing to the Trinity. Is there any way through this impasse? "

Clearly, the answer to this question is Yes, and its amplification must begin with an honest acknowledgment that (a) Christians have for a very long time held very diverse opinions about the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and (b) "official" Trinitarian doctrine masks this diversity. Though in 325 the Council of Nicea strongly affirmed the belief that Jesus Christ is one in essence (*homoousion*) with God the Father, not all serious Christian thinkers at the time found this affirmation to their liking. The most serious alternative to the Nicene formulation took the form of affirming a likeness in being (*homoiousion*) between Jesus and God that, nevertheless, falls short of complete identity. Those who argued this second view did so primarily out of the conviction that God is one God, whose nature is forever indivisible. To them, believing that Jesus Christ, and later, the Holy Spirit, share one divine nature is tantamount to the reassertion of polytheism: God is no longer one, but three. This is exactly the kind of criticism

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that Islamic theologians make of Christianity. Historically speaking, though, it was other Christians who made it first.

From the end of the fourth century to the present, the official position of the church, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or mainstream Protestant, has been that the issues of the divinity of Christ and the tri-unity of God have been settled once and for all, to everyone's satisfaction. The truth, though, is that one party to the original debates (the homoousion party) simply beat out the other (the homoiousion party) when the Council members finally voted on the issue, and then set out to silence its opponents by anathematizing them. The anathemas have not worked. People in the church, now as then, continue to hold a variety of opinions about expressing both the finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the resurrected Jesus' place in the Godhead.

Early in my seminary teaching, one of my best theology students, Mel, brought the issue of divergent understandings of the same belief before me in an especially poignant way. After class one day, he anxiously told me that his upcoming ordination in another denomination had just been put on hold. "My problems," he began, "started with the Trinity:"

When the chairman of my review committee asked me how I understood it, I did my best to answer him, but his response was to call my view heretical. Then, I really got pounced on. It seemed like every member of the committee was all of a sudden interested in ferreting out everything else that I didn't hold the correct opinion about. I'm really in deep trouble, and I don't know what to do.

Mel was in anguish, not only because the fulfillment of his deepest sense of calling was in doubt, but also because mentors whom he respected and loved were telling him that his faith did not measure up. This situation became increasingly troubling to me. After discussing with several members of Mel's ordination committee, at their request, their concerns about his orthodoxy, I concluded silently that my student was better able than they were to discuss the very doctrinal interpretations in dispute. With many

Christians through the centuries, Mel strongly emphasized God's oneness, and spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three ways in which the one God, whose inner essence is forever beyond human conceptualization, appears to human beings. His committee refused to budge from its demand that Mel hew to the official Nicene party line—that each of the three persons of the Trinity is identical in being, and not just appearance, with God—on the (specious) ground that this is what the church has always taught and, therefore, that there is nothing left to be said about it. Eventually, my conscientious student left the denomination of his upbringing to affiliate with one more open to theological diversity than his was and still is. Currently, he is a highly respected pastor in that denomination.

As vital as it is, then, for the church to be able to speak with one voice when circumstances demand it, the one faith that it proclaims is still a oneness in, rather than in place of, diversity. Christians must remain free to re-examine in every generation what they consider to be their churches' essential beliefs, as well as the implications that flow from them for the present day. Egregiously inaccurate appeals to "what the Church has always taught," whether for the sake of enforcing compliance or of undermining it, can only subvert the very unity that such appeals purport to serve.

Getting the right prescription

This chapter has been exploring an analogy between sacred beliefs and mundane lenses: just as humanly wrought lenses can help to bring into focus the things of this world, divinely inspired beliefs can help to make clear the realm of Transcendence. In specific, beliefs can bring better into view the essential content and implications of what the church considers to be the heart of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. However, like eyeglasses, beliefs must be properly fitted to their users. Just as inadequately ground lenses can impair vision and damage eyes, incompletely formulated beliefs can diminish understanding and damage souls. The purpose of this final section is to make a fuller application of

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this lens analogy to the role that beliefs play, both for good and for ill, in the life of faith.

If beliefs are to the Christian message what lenses are to physical reality, then formulating a belief and making a lens share at least three important things in common. First both correct for the inability to see everything there is to see in the world and beyond with human eyes alone. Although many people do not need to wear glasses in order to deal with the everyday physical world, not even those with perfect vision can see unaided the very smallest and the very largest things that the earth and the universe contain. And no one, relying only on his or her own finite powers of comprehension, will ever be able to bring fully into view the greatest mysteries of faith, whose experience overwhelms every human capacity not only for description but even for utterance. In the words of the 4th century Liturgy of St. James: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand."

Not even the most conscientiously thought out beliefs about Christ—died, risen, returning—can fully comprehend the power and the grace that lie eternally in the unfathomable otherness and holiness of God. They can, however, help Christians to say at least *something* about God's greatness and goodness, dispelling enough of the "cloud of unknowing" to bring humankind's likeness to and future with God into a clearer, even if not perfect, focus. In the final analysis, however, all words, symbols, and beliefs must finally fail to do full justice to their ultimate Subject. The adequacy of beliefs depends finally upon the sufficiency of God's illuminating grace: "No one can truly say that Jesus is the Lord, unless thou take the veil away and breathe the living Word. Then, only then, we feel our interest in his blood, and cry with joy unspeakable, 'Thou art my Lord, my God!'" (Charles Wesley)

A second feature shared by both beliefs and lenses is a value that is instrumental and not intrinsic, that is, their

respective reasons for being have to do with the purposes they serve rather than with their own form and appearance. Like lenses, beliefs are meant to be looked through and not at. For example, we might momentarily gaze at particular pairs of glasses because we find their frames especially beautiful. Typically, though, we look at them only long enough to determine whether we can see other things better with them. The important thing about lenses is not how old or new, large or small, clear or colored, fashionable or unfashionable they may be in themselves, but whether or not we can see clearly enough by means of them. Like lenses, beliefs are not the principal objects of value. They are only aids to a better understanding of the realities that, given the ultimate and transcendent mystery of God, they can refract only imperfectly.

Finally, beliefs and lenses share in common an adaptability to the needs of those who make use of them. Whether in formulating a belief or grinding a lens, one must keep constantly in mind those whom the effort is intended to benefit. No matter how perfectly made, lenses ground to only one prescription cannot help everyone to see the same physical objects more clearly. People's vision requirements vary too much. Similarly, no matter how widely and thoroughly discussed a particular belief may be in the church, not every member will come to understand the Christian message more definitively by means of it.

The wide spectrum of divergent beliefs that exists across Christendom strongly suggests that the structures of human receptivity to God's revelations may be as varied as the structures of the human eye's receptivity to physical appearances. With respect to the former, many Christians find convincing only those beliefs that focus on tangible realities described concretely, e.g., God's face shines on those he chooses; Jesus is a friend; Hell is a place of everlasting fire and torment; Heaven is a place whose streets are paved with gold. Others, however, respond better to more abstract expressions of basic Christian truths, e.g., God is infinite, all-powerful, and all-knowing; Jesus is the light of the world;

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The kingdom of heaven is within; Heaven is a state of eternal rest and peace in God. For some believers, truth emerges in describing the things of God factually and literally, while for others it is to be found by rendering these same things symbolically and even mythically. To put the differences in still another way, some believers dwell serenely in the world of suggestive images, while for others only clear concepts will suffice.

Because beliefs mean different things to different people, then, both in content and form, if we are to understand their meaning at all, we must be open to learning and teaching many alternative formulations of basic Christian beliefs, in the same way that eye doctors must be open to writing very different prescriptions for the lenses that their very different patients require. Adjusting our minds to different formulations of belief is as crucial for seeing spiritual things as adjusting our eyes to new prescription lenses is to seeing physical ones. Pressuring people toward a uniformity either of belief or of doubt is like forcing them to buy glasses with identical lenses in identical frames. It is like taking greater delight in grinding and polishing lens than in seeing better through them, like admiring beliefs more than adoring the God reflected in them.

Chapter 5. **Keeping Things Simple, But Not Too Simple**

Early one morning, several good-humored theology students were waiting for me at my office door. Feigning genuineness, they told me they had spent several evenings talking together about how to help me improve my teaching. With perfectly straight faces they said that, overall, I was a good teacher but that I had one very distracting habit. Their good news was that my habit is easily broken: I must practice conducting my classes with one arm tied behind my back. With mock seriousness, I asked them why. Their answer: “Well, then you wouldn’t be saying as often as you do, ‘On the one hand . . . but on the other . . .’” At semester’s end, we enjoyed another laugh together over my underlining in red ink the same phrase wherever it occurred in their final exams. It delighted me that the students came to use it often, and that they so clearly understood why they needed to.

On the one hand . . . and yet, on the other . . . Beyond a certain point, most people become frustrated with phrases like this. As one parishioner expressed it: “Figuring life out gets overwhelming, and I just want things boiled down to the essentials, like when they were this way, period, and that was that.” She said this to me poignantly during a Bible Study, as she gently chastised me for worrying her with complicated questions to which I did not give simple enough answers. The purpose of this chapter is to show how to give appropriate respect to people’s heartfelt cries for simplicity and certitude in matters of faith and at the same time (yes, and on the other hand) to encourage their opening

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themselves to the deeper realities to which faith witnesses by dwelling patiently in the inescapable paradoxes that accompany understanding faith in its fullness.

This-Or-That/Yes-Or-No, and Get to the Point Right Now

Many Christians fail to appreciate the fullness of faith because they cling tenaciously to a very limited and limiting perspective, that in God's world things go either this way or that, decisions are either right or wrong, beliefs are either true or false, and only the godless, the profligate, and the academics are confused about any of this. The plain fact is, however, that things, people, situations, and systems often defy all our best efforts at definition in clear and simple terms. Life's complexity makes its appearance in interestingly different ways, e.g.:

Yes, it's a nice house in many respects. Beautiful kitchen, large bedrooms, clean and tidy. Small lot, though, no family room, needs some work. But it's in our price range. Guess we're going to have to think some more about what we can give up and what we can't.

I just don't know what to think about that guy. He can be the most focused person in our meetings, and then drift off into never-never land when we begin to zero in on strategies.

As your therapist, I know you want me to tell you that your ex-husband is nothing but a self-centered, manipulative exploiter whom you can't count on. Well, what I can tell you is that you're definitely partially right. The trouble is, he's also a pretty sensitive guy when it comes to caring for his aging parents, providing for your kids, and staying out of trouble.

And the complexity compounds rapidly, e.g.:

Kinda strange how things work sometimes, isn't it? A lot of people are out of work, and we're saying that society is better off when everybody who can work does work. But the experts keep telling us that some unemployment makes for a healthier economy. Here's an idea: you work, and I'll make the economy healthier!

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Everybody is supposed to obey the law, right? But we let this guy off because he was on drugs and couldn't help what he did. Am I missing something here?

So you're telling me that the basic stuff of the universe is both particle-like and wave-like? What am I supposed to do with that?

Behind all of these statements, mundane and extraordinary, are people's persisting struggles to hold together features, characteristics, values, and ideas that appear both not to fit together well and yet somehow to be essential parts of a larger whole. A house can be the "right" house for someone, without being right in every respect. An employee or spouse—as well as a friend, neighbor, extended family member, casual acquaintance, and even an enemy—can be reliable in some settings and unreliable in others. Some people's not doing good old fashioned hard work may be better for the economy than everyone's fulfilling the work ethic perfectly. Everyone is accountable for his and her actions, but some seem more and some seem less accountable than others. The most solid building blocks of the universe are also like perturbations in a void.

Reality is usually more complex and confusing than it first seems to be and than people always want it to be. Because this is so, the words, phrases, sentences, and symbols that we use in order to describe what we believe to be real often defy categorization in the simple logic of This-And-Not-That, or of Not-That-But-This, or of A-Thing-Is-What-It-Is-And-Nothing Else, e.g.:

What am I going to do? I can't live with him, and I can't live without him.

With the kids where they are in school, this is the very worst time to pack everybody up and take that assignment in Hong Kong. It really is hard to say whether what they experience over there will be worth the disruption. And then there's the issue of stalling out on the promotion ladder if I don't go. That can affect my whole family big time down the road. Wow.

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Anything you do could be just the right thing or just the wrong thing.

Every time I think we may be making at least some progress, something awful happens somewhere that didn't have to happen, and I'm back wondering whether we're really going anywhere, or whether it all comes down to just the "same old, same old."

There is an important lesson to be learned from listening to people talk in these ways, and it is that, sooner or later, describing how things really are will require using more than just one hand. "On the one hand, and yet, on the other . . ." It will require using a very different kind of language than that of ordinary description. As the next section shows, it will require using the language of paradox.

Making Friends of Paradoxes

From coffee klatch exchanges of unfiltered gossip all the way to scientific conferences on highly technical research, people share many kinds of feelings, information, and ideas that convey multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings all at once. We say one thing, and then something different, and then something else besides, all the while struggling with the awareness that what we are saying may not be fitting together well. One very effective lay caregiver told me recently that his care receiver was becoming very impatient with his therapist. "All I get from that guy," the care receiver bemoaned, "is 'well, maybe, and then again maybe not; yes and no; this, but that too.' How am I supposed to get better listening to this kind of stuff?" I liked very much the way the caregiver responded: "It's frustrating not getting simpler answers. But do you suppose things might be at least a little more complicated than you'd like them to be?"

Frequently, things are indeed more complicated than we would like them to be, and so is the language that we must use to express the complexities. One way to describe this state of affairs is in the words of a faculty colleague whom I remember fondly from the first college I served: You know,

many things about life are just so, so, paradoxical, aren't they? My colleague was a highly respected accounting professor, with a carefully cultivated distaste for ambiguity and loose ends both in people's financial records and in their lives. His choice of words, therefore, came as a surprise, so much so that I lapsed for a moment into the gentle chiding mode we had come to enjoy together: "I thought guys like you lived to get things all tied up in neat boxes, and here you are, all of a sudden talking about paradoxes!" He smiled politely, but immediately went on to elaborate on his remark:

I put this word back into my vocabulary because I began to appreciate how many connections there are between things that either we miss altogether or just perversely keep separate. "Paradox" says this better than any word I know—ideas going together that we don't normally think about together. Ok, now here's where I really get weird. I've been making a verb out of the word. It's like, life is always "paradoxing" us.

In my colleague's newly discovered sense of the word "paradox," all of the statements cited in the previous section of this chapter become good examples of not only a "both-and logic," but also of the paradoxical character of what we try to say coherently about our most important experiences of life. The closer we get to bedrock descriptions of how things are and are not, "really," every statement we put forward suddenly begins to draw to itself feelings and thoughts that look for all the world to be mutually incompatible, forcing us to re-think, again and again, our every effort to get at clear, that's-the-way-things-are descriptions. But, as frustrating as it may be to confront troubling paradoxes at every step of the way toward a better understanding of reality, the alternative is far worse: a rigid form of either-or thinking that demands simplicity at any cost, e.g.:

Well, if it isn't the right house, it isn't the right house. Don't settle for anything but the right one.

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I don't care how focused the guy is in some meetings. He isn't focused in others, and that's that. Let's get rid of him.

Yeah, I admit that my ex can put on a good show, but behind the big-hearted exterior is nothing but a self-centered rat.

For Christians, acknowledging and appreciating paradoxes should come as easily as reciting the Lord's Prayer. After all, most of the core beliefs of the Christian faith are rife with paradoxes, which simplistic thinking will never comprehend. The previous section offered several examples of paradoxically stated beliefs about our everyday engagements with ordinary things. To those can now be added several beliefs that Christianity affirms and celebrates as foundations of its faith:

The One True God is the unity of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is fully divine, and fully human.

All who have died in Christ will be raised, as he was raised, with a spiritual body, not a body of flesh and blood.

Human beings are wholly responsible for their condition under God and wholly captive to de-humanizing conditions inherited from the past and replicated in the present.

The kingdom of God is here, and it is also yet to come.

As out-of-the-ordinary as these affirmations are, what makes them paradoxical in character is really no different from what makes any other affirmation about any other kind of reality paradoxical. Christian beliefs are paradoxical because they conjoin in unexpected and novel ways ideas that seem mutually exclusive and at the same time necessary to a mature faith, e.g.: one God, in three persons; one savior, humiliated by those he came to save; one person, two natures; full responsibility, antecedent determination; divine rule all around us but far off, too. Like all paradoxes, these affirmations of faith push us beyond the reductionism of either-or thinking toward a more inclusive understanding of reality that requires for its expression the far more adequate language of "both-and" and "neither-nor."

The paradoxical nature of many Christian beliefs—as well as the continuing debate about how to interpret them for today’s churches—sometimes leaves people more confused and frustrated than illumined and comforted. The confusion and frustration can be especially disturbing when the need for clarity and solace from faith is intense. Then, even the most open-minded believers can retreat, at least momentarily, into the very kind of either-or thinking that paradoxes otherwise transcend. Generally, the retreat is by way of misconstruing paradoxes as logical contradictions and affirming, in the interest of conceptual tidiness and affective equilibrium, only one side of the paradox in question to the exclusion of the other, e.g.: Jesus was a man with a divine mission, but he was not God. The next section offers a way beyond this less than adequate approach to faith’s intrinsic paradoxes.

Only the Right Choice Counts, Or Does It?

The vital center of the Christian witness of faith is inescapably paradoxical in character, in the sense that it embraces from necessity a number of ideas and affirmations that those who hear it cannot be expected readily to conjoin (one *and* three, divine *and* human, free *and* foreordained, etc.) Many people both within and outside the church have concluded from this fundamental fact about Christian speech that the essential structure of Christian thought is inherently contradictory, and have gone on to treat the paradoxes of Christian belief just as logicians treat mathematical conundrums, not as mysteries for the soul to contemplate, but as problems for the mind to solve. “Solving” faith’s paradoxes almost always has meant that one side of a paradoxical belief is forced to give way to the other side.

The inevitable consequence of this approach is that what begins with a passion for speaking the whole truth about divine things eventually gives way to a smug reassurance that troubling inconsistencies can be made to go away and that God’s truth is always simple and certain. God is either one or three, not both. Jesus is God or a mortal man, not

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both. Believers either take their bodies with them into heaven, or they do not get there at all. If sin is not punished, God cannot be just; if it is punished, God cannot be merciful. The kingdom is either turning things upside down right now, or is very, very far off. And the Bible is either the Word of God in its entirety or not at all.

This last example of reductionism illustrates especially clearly how Christians can oversimplify the church's witness of faith to the detriment of presenting that witness in all its fullness, however complicating to people's lives the whole gospel message both is and always must be. The current widespread and highly vitriolic debates about biblical authority force believers to consider aligning themselves with one or the other of two equally faulty lines of reasoning: (a) Since the Bible is the revealed word of God, it cannot contain error of any kind, or (b) Since the Bible contains error, it cannot be the revealed word of God. As is the case with all of the paradoxes that Christian beliefs contain, the full truth here encompasses both of its oversimplifications. The Bible is both God's Word and human representations of that Word, and the errors that it does indeed contain are to be discovered and put in context always and only in reference to the very Word that they sometimes distort.

Most controversies in the church about what to believe begin by setting a particular interpretation of a core belief over against an allegedly contrary interpretation of that same belief, and then go on to insist that only one or the other interpretation is the correct one. The key word here is "only." Only my interpretation is the right one, someone bellows; if another's differs, his or hers must be wrong. Unless one possesses enough raw power to silence the other completely, the other may bellow back that it is his or her interpretation that is the right one. Or, he or she might decide just to back off, convinced that further discussion would be pointless. Both responses will leave the particular disagreement unresolved, and both participants will come away from their truncated discussion more convinced than

ever that the other is either uninformed, closed-minded, or both. This kind of arrogant, indefensible certitude has always been a major threat to the unity of Christian believers, whether it is exhibited by only two people wrangling in an empty church hallway or by hundreds and thousands hurling epithets during deliberations of whole judicatories.

The essentially paradoxical character of core Christian beliefs, then, constitutes a genuine and irresolvable complexity that must of necessity remain frustrating and confusing to people who need things to be kept simple at all costs, both in life and in faith. There is nothing inherently wrong about questing for simplicity. The problem comes from making things too simple. In the life of faith, part of the gospel may be better than none, but the whole gospel is better than either. I have been richly blessed over the years by students who not only grasped this well, but appreciated how important figuring this out can be to people struggling to get beyond what often seems like endless wrangling in the church over whose opinion is the right one about this matter of faith and that.

Wrestling with Paradoxes While Looking for Angels

My year-long theology course was almost over, and I was frustrated that several students had yet to raise on their own any probing questions about their respective church traditions. One member of the class, Lane, had put forward a particularly unsettling reason for his own obstinacy: all that his church teaches, he proudly announced to the class, is directly revealed by God and, therefore, not subject to human interpretation of any kind. I struggled within myself not to caricature Lane as yet another closed-minded believer, who would never think for himself, for whom my seminary would remain only a hotbed of controversial characters (his words) bent on destroying genuine Christians' faith.

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During one of our last class sessions, though, Lane all of a sudden broke into an animated interchange between three other students and myself with a wholly off-the-point testimonial that quickly shut down our conversation:

I know most of you think that I'm beyond help theologically, and you may be right. But I hope not. It's taken me a year of listening and rejecting to get me finally to where I am now. You guys have gotten through to me about two things. One is that it really is all right to look at a church teaching from different angles. I think I can handle even the idea that God wants us to do this. But the second thing has me *way* out there and wondering if I can ever get back. I'm not sure I can handle the idea that whether any of our teachings is really true is an open question. And yet, I'm more and more afraid that this is just how it is.

What captured everyone's attention was Lane's making himself vulnerable for the first time, emptying himself of officiousness and sharing honestly what was going on in his personal faith. One of Lane's strongest antagonists blurted out the first reaction:

Good grief, guy, where did *that* come from? You're saying things that I can agree with you about! And all this time I thought I had you figured out.

Lane took the question seriously:

What I said, I guess, has to be coming from the Holy Spirit; I sure didn't get to a place like this all by myself.

There were two things in particular about that theology course that made life difficult for Lane and some of his peers. The first was my conviction that given what core Christian beliefs are about, they must mean far more than their words can possibly convey in the straightforward manner of everyday assertions about everyday realities. The second was my invitation, in matters of faith, to think less concretely and more symbolically, less sequentially and more allegorically, less literalistically and more paradoxically. The very last part of that invitation is the subject of this exploration. The sections to follow focus on embracing

paradoxes as the most adequate language that Christian believers have for paying homage to God's ultimate mysteriousness and unfathomable grace and love. The major premise is, if we are truly to embrace the essentially paradoxical character of Christian beliefs, we must be prepared to ask more questions, reconsider more assumptions, and re-examine supposedly settled issues. What finally makes it possible to do all these things, as a way of loving God with all of our minds, is the trust that the God, in whom we want to believe unconditionally, will never abandon anyone in his or her search for more adequate ways of expressing faith in him fully and joyfully.

When in doubt, re-define.

When the paradoxes that are inherent in core Christian beliefs threaten to mire thinking in logical contradictions, there are always more options available than those to which the church has all too often turned. In specific, believers do not have to choose between one side or the other of a paradoxical statement of belief, and they do not have to treat people who choose the other side as deviate, heretical, apostate, wrong-headed, faithless, or damned. The most obvious alternative to this approach is to re-examine the definitions that give rise to the apparent contradictions in the first place. A close second is to look more deeply into the beliefs that paradoxes hold in tension with an eye toward discerning their underlying and inalienable connectedness. The first approach is the subject of this present section. The second is the subject of the next.

The first time I introduced Zeno's paradoxes of motion (to the effect that the propositions, "Things move" and "Nothing moves" both appear to be true) to a group of students just beginning their studies in philosophy, almost every member of the class reacted in the same way. "Professor, I don't know what a 'solution' to these paradoxes is supposed to look like," one student offered, "but it just has to have something to do with definitions." Eager to hear more, I asked her to go on. "Well," she said, "it looks suspicious to me that Zeno

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would come up with just the definition of motion that he needs to prove what he wants to prove about it. It makes me think that there's another way to define it that avoids all the contradictions in the first place." At the end of the discussion, another student summed up the class's discovery exceptionally well: "You know, if we're not careful, we can let somebody else's definition of a problem cause us a whole lot of grief." Thoughtful people instinctively take this approach toward overcoming contradictions in thinking, whether they are philosophically trained or not.

Soon after I began teaching theology along with philosophy, this same issue came up in the context of Christian belief. I had just finished summarizing the major difficulties the church faced in the fourth and fifth centuries in asserting that Jesus Christ was both fully divine and fully human. The following is an abbreviated version of the lively discussion that followed:

Wendy: So if I'm getting this right, one of the really big issues was that people thought divinity and humanity just didn't mix and that Christ had to be one or the other but not both.

Sam: Yeah, and they were right. That's why I have to go with the idea of a wholly divine Christ. Another human being like ourselves can't save the rest of us from anything.

Harry: He doesn't save anybody from anything, Sam. God does. Jesus was just the messenger telling people what God wanted to do for them.

Sam: But every religion claims its founder was a messenger of some sort. What would be unique about Christianity, then? I'll tell you what's unique. Jesus is God. If he were really man, he couldn't be God. What could be clearer than that?

Sally: Maybe this, Sam. I just can't help wondering if things got so contentious because of arbitrary definitions. What if "divine" isn't the opposite of "human" after all?

Mary: I'm wondering about something else besides, Sally. Isn't what you just said exactly what those theologians were trying to get across?

Ted: According to the people we've been reading, that's true for at least some of those theologians. Didn't the Incarnation

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mean for them that, somehow, human nature *can* be a vessel for God?

Some of the most satisfying moments for teachers are those in which they can sit back, listen to, and take delight in what their students are teaching one another. This particular discussion became earnest when Wendy first suggested (rightly) that certain aspects of early Christological debate revolved around the notion of two natures or essences (viz., “divinity” and “humanity”) whose mutual exclusivity was simply taken for granted. Sam and Harry immediately used the definitions that Wendy was wondering about in order to shore up their hardened, either-or, and opposed positions that Jesus is either divine or human, and that there is no third alternative. “OK,” Sam then said, preemptively, “Let’s see what the rest of us think. Is Christ divine or human?”

Sadly for me, the majority of the class immediately cast a vote one way or the other. Only Sally, Mary, and Ted abstained. Mary put it well: “That’s exactly what I think is *not* the way to get through this. We need both-and; not neither-nor.” As I walked back to my office that afternoon, I was struck with how accurately my students had just replicated centuries-old divisions of opinion across Christendom about the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. I also felt somewhat awed at how difficult it was for so many of them, as for so many in the church as well, to see that difficulties with belief are so often made inevitable by the way the terms of beliefs are defined.

When in doubt, look deeper

The best way to resolve seemingly unavoidable contradictions in thinking is to re-examine the definitions that give rise to them in the first place. Closely related to this approach is to re-formulate their mutually exclusive elements as parts of a larger whole. One Sunday, I had the privilege of preaching in a church about which I had heard many positive things, but which I had never visited. During the Sunday School hour preceding the morning worship service, I visited an adult class whose members were

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studying various doctrines of biblical authority. Walking as quietly as I could toward the one remaining chair, I heard the teacher ask the group: “Ok, then. Now what does it mean to you personally to say that the Bible is God’s Word?” Part of their discussion went as follows:

Ben: I guess it’s always been pretty simple to me. My Daddy taught me early in life to honor the Bible because God was in every last word of it, even when we don’t understand the words too well.

Jennie: Your Daddy was a man of his word himself, and I can see why he’d look upon the Bible that way. I wish I could, but there’s just too much in it that doesn’t seem very godly to me.

Betty: Sometimes it looks like that to me too, but my faith tells me that if I study and pray more, I’ll eventually see how it really is God’s book and that everything in it comes from Him.

Ward: But Betty, the books are written by people, not God. People can make mistakes, and they can misunderstand things, even when they’re trying to write down the things of God.

Nora: I believe God saw to it that ordinary human failings wouldn’t affect the writing of the Bible. If there were any human failings in it, it just wouldn’t be God’s word to us.

Ed: So either God inspired it all and everything about it is divine, or human beings made their own mark on it and it’s only a human document.

The Teacher: That’s a heck of a choice to have to make, isn’t it?

Nora: Not really. Either you believe or you don’t.

Betty: When you put it that way, it sounds harsh, but I guess that’s pretty much where I am, too.

Ward: I just can’t go that route. There has to be a way to say that the Bible is both God’s word to us and human words about Him. Maybe in the way that Jesus was both a man and God. If he was both, couldn’t our words about him be both, too?

Jennie: Maybe what God’s asking me to do is believe just what you said, Ward, even though it seems so contradictory. Faith above logic, and all that.

Ward: It’s hard for me to see how God could give us the power to think and reason, and then tell us to turn off the

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switch when it comes to faith. There has to be truth to both things I want to say about the Bible, and it just can't be illogical to think this way.

It was hard leaving this class early, even though I had to in order to be ready for the worship service. Jennie, Ward, and Ed were struggling with questions that Ben, Betty, and Nora—in different measures, to be sure—regarded as settled. Jennie was looking for a way to read all of her Bible more respectfully, but had no clear idea about where to begin her search. Ward knew where he wanted to end up on the question of biblical authority, but did not know how to get there. And Ed was more certain about what he did not believe than about what he did believe. I left their discussion with a strong desire to learn about how others in the class would take up the issues raised. And so, I was pleased when the teacher of the class greeted me after my sermon that morning, and accepted my invitation to write me at the end of this series about how it all came out. Several weeks later, his letter came. Its concluding paragraph is especially pertinent to the present discussion:

I wasn't at all sure for a while whether we were going to get a handle on the inspiration question as a class, and I worried that we'd end the series on a really low note, discovering how very far apart we were on an issue that Christians need to be more united about. After all, isn't the Bible the whole church's book? But a really wonderful thing began to happen. Ben got it started by sharing how much he had been thinking about Ward's stance. He (Ben) questioned whether what he called his own "all or nothing" approach really was helping him appreciate how much courageous human effort had gone into putting the Bible together, and how much more complicated most things are about faith than he usually wants them to be. Well, by the end of the series, I think most of us were feeling the need to be more humble about our inability to respect complexity enough and our tendency to smother important parts of faith just because we can't easily get them together with other parts that we're more comfortable with.

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I especially cherish the few minutes I spent with this class because its members brought home so clearly how intertwined are the two approaches to avoiding contradictions in core beliefs that are the focus of this and the previous section. Ward had put himself in some jeopardy, at least before Ben and Nora, by proposing an understanding of the Bible as both God's Word and as human words. When Nora immediately challenged Ward's both-and approach, Ed mildly caricatured Nora's statement, perhaps in the hope that she could better appreciate how one-sided it sounded. However, all that Ed accomplished by taking this approach was to push Betty into Nora's camp before she was really ready to join. Jennie seemed to be moving in the other direction, toward Ward's way of looking at things, but was genuinely at a loss as to how to take the next steps by herself.

Although Jennie seemed somewhat confused about what Ward was saying to her, her response to him nevertheless had just enough clarity to help him advance the class discussion a major step forward. Ward did not have available to him at the moment any new definition of inspiration which might have made room for both God and human beings in the words of the scriptures. But what he did draw upon was something just as important: a firm conviction, poignantly expressed, that faith should make room for reason, no matter how difficult it may be at times to do so. Reason was telling him that in matters of faith there has to be a way of affirming the underlying unity of ideas and things that appear incompatible, even when the nature of that unity eludes people's best efforts to describe it. Hopefully, Ward will continue to search for some new definition of what looks initially like irreconcilable opposites (God's perfect Word/Human beings' imperfect ones) that makes it possible to affirm their co-existence in all experience of and testimony about God.

To this day, I treasure the letter quoted above, especially its reference to respecting complexity and to resisting smothering those aspects of faith which cannot easily be

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reconciled with others. Re-defining terms, and gathering what is re-defined into more encompassing unities of thought represent the two best ways of preserving the essentially paradoxical character of core beliefs. They offer powerful correctives to overly simplistic expressions of Christian belief that can only undermine the credibility of the church's message to the world and make personal struggles with that message all the more difficult to resolve.

Chapter 6. **Nurturing And Encouraging Conservative Christians**

Throughout the planning of my first book on lay pastoral care, *A Pastor in Every Pew*, I asked a lot of questions of a lot of caregivers in a lot of congregations and worked into the final version of the book as many of their care receivers' concerns as space allowed. One issue that came up in our conversations and correspondence comes up even more forcefully in many of our churches today. From a church leadership perspective, the issue is the divisiveness of conservative and liberal understandings of the Christian faith. Can anything can be done about it besides choosing up sides and hurling epithets at one another, in the misguided interest of keeping the church's message free from contamination by wrong-headed theologies? From a caregiving perspective, the issue is the healing of hurt in relationships contaminated by demands that every party to them be of one persuasion to the exclusion of the other. Can there be room for acknowledging strengths as well as weaknesses in the opposite point of view? The discussions in this chapter and the next are attempts to answer these questions in a way which respects the theological perspectives of both conservative and liberal Christians.

At the Center of Conservative Christianity

Toni, a very capable lay shepherd, recently shared with her peer group how personal the growing conservative-liberal divide in her congregation had become for her:

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I'm one of those so-called "recovering fundamentalists" who was miserable in the ask no questions church I grew up in, but I can't just all of a sudden throw aside everything I learned there about God and Jesus and other stuff, even though my friends keep pushing me to do just that. Their oh-so-liberal church is driving me as crazy as my be-like-us-or-go-to-hell one almost did. The conservatives I've come to know recently are truly wonderful people, but they're calling up so many bad memories in me that it's hard to listen to them for very long. I'm a mess, aren't I?

What provoked her sharing was an impasse to which she and her present care receiver had come, over the question, in Toni's terms, of how conservative a Christian had to be and still claim to be a Christian. "Pretty clearly," Toni told the group, "I'm not Christian enough for her, and that is hitting me right where I live, because I'm not sure I'm Christian enough for me either." The exchange that especially caught the group's attention was presented by Toni this way:

Care Receiver: I can't believe that we could actually wind up divorcing over religion. My husband knew how important my church was to me when we got married, but all I hear from him lately is how no thinking person could possibly believe what they hand out there. To him, it's all mythology; to me it's revelation. He's a deep thinker, and I love him for it. But do I have to give up the church and maybe even God to keep my marriage vow to love and cherish him, no matter what?

Toni: Surely it can't be either-or. Maybe if you were willing to listen more to what it is that's bugging him specifically about your beliefs, you might be able to find a compromise. Who knows? You might even discover that you actually agree with him about some of his criticisms.

To the group, Toni then interjected: "See what I mean? That response of mine was about as far from what we've all been trained to give as I can imagine. I let my own struggle with being a good conservative override my listening to my care receiver, and all of sudden I'm defending my own slant on it rather than helping her clarify hers."

As Toni later related, the single most important thing that she took away from the discussion which followed in her

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group was that there are many ways and not just one of expressing faith gratefully, joyfully, and intentionally from a conservative outlook and theology. By way of examples, Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics all consider themselves conservative in belief and practice, even though their respective outlooks contain significant differences, especially in the area of how much room they give their members to think for themselves. For all the diversity that conservative Christianity as a theology represents, conservative Christians themselves share a number of basic affirmations about God's nature and will, and about human destiny as God continues to make it known throughout the created order. One care receiver, a self-proclaimed conservative Christian, put it this way to a caregiver whom she thought might be too liberal for her: "I think I'm pretty open-minded on a lot of things, but there is still a bottom line for me when it comes to faith, and I don't think anybody can help me with my questions who can't or won't respect it." As it turned out, her caregiver was in fact more liberal than she in her understanding of the Christian faith, but not too liberal to respect her care receiver's "bottom line." That bottom line is the subject of this section. It will be defined in terms of four convictions which are at the very heart of conservative Christian belief and practice.

The Scriptures

The first of these affirmations is that the Bible, in its entirety, is the principal representation of God's Word to humankind. The emphasis here is deliberate, and crucial. To conservative Christians, it is only by paying attention to all of the Bible—its convoluted genealogies and tendentious law codes included—that anyone can ever hope to grasp all of what God is revealing and doing on behalf of a suffering, desperate, and disconsolate humanity. If people rely only on the passages in it with which they are comfortable, as "modern" (by conservative standards) theologians all tend to do, they cannot possibly come to a full understanding of the whole truth of God, and they will never become the fully

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mature Christians that God calls every genuine follower of Jesus Christ to become.

One venerable “catholic” way—that is, a way that is both Roman Catholic and Orthodox—of expressing this perspective is in terms of a fetching suggestion by Alexandrian Christians of the third century, that the Spirit of God often hides in the texts of scripture, awaiting careful, respectful, and prayerful searching before making an appearance in petitioners’ lives. What makes this notion especially worth reflecting upon is that it rules out in advance any knowledge of which scriptural texts are the ones in which the Spirit will most likely be found. Believers simply must be open to all of them. A Protestant way of making the same point is in terms of Martin Luther’s teaching that every passage in the Bible can be read both as an expression of new law—e.g., people must show love to their neighbors, or else—and as an expression of divine grace—e.g., God’s love inspires and empowers people to love him and their neighbors in return.

Christianity and Culture

The second major affirmation of Christian conservatism today is that the Christian faith is a unique orientation toward life which must be carefully distinguished from the myriad social, cultural, and religious ideas and practices that distract true believers from furthering the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. During a particularly heated discussion in a Christianity and Culture class, one of my students, Andy, began gently admonishing his peers this way: “We always need to keep our minds on the church’s real business, of offering the world an alternative to all the other philosophies out there, because they just don’t work.” I appreciated the genuineness with which Andy offered his perspective, and felt more than a little chagrined over several students’ hasty dismissal of it. Andy’s God was the God about whom St. Paul spoke before the Council of the Areopagus in Athens, “the universal giver of life and breath,” who judges all who claim not to know him by the one man,

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Jesus, whom he raised from the dead. (Acts 17:25, 31) And the “philosophies” which troubled Andy so much were just the sort of embodiments of human naiveté and pride that Tertullian would condemn 150 years later in his famous question about what Athens could possibly have to do with Jerusalem.

Whether Jesus Christ is the inner substance of all culture, as Paul may have believed, or above culture altogether, as Tertullian almost certainly did believe, he is never merely “in” or “of” it, and it is a principal task of Christians in every generation to make plain to all that this is so, and why it is so. Rather than accommodate willy-nilly the Christian message to other value systems and world-views in the service of relevance, conservative Christians believe that the church must instead make plain the unique significance and saving power of the message on its own terms. Then and only then will Christ’s mission to draw all men and women to himself, on his terms and not theirs, be fulfilled. (John 12:32)

Proclaiming and living the Gospel message

Christian conservatism affirms that the church must take a comprehensive approach to communicating the gospel effectively by transmitting sound teaching authoritatively, by conducting worship according to biblical guidelines, and by defining Christ-centered standards for personal decisions and for social action on behalf of people in need everywhere. Central to this approach is the conviction that no one, whether a believer or not, should ever be in any doubt about what makes living as a Christian different from living according to any and every other value-system, philosophy, or religion.

In the aftermath of 9/11, when many of us were working hard to bring about a new level of understanding between Christian and Muslim members of our community, I had a pleasant and informative chat with a Muslim leader about his perceptions of Christian congregations here and around

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the country. By the end of our time together, he began to trust me enough to tell me what he really thought:

With respect, Leroy, I have to say that sometimes I just don't know what to make of your churches. Their members look to me like they believe pretty much whatever they want, worship any way that suits them, and argue all the time about what their leaders tell them to do. (With a broad grin) Things are so much simpler at the mosque!

Although I wondered silently whether life at any mosque is ever that simple, I had no doubt that the opinion of this faithful Muslim was wholly congruent with what most of my conservative Christian friends were saying was wrong with our churches today.

From a conservative Christian perspective, insisting upon sound doctrine, biblically-based worship, and clear rules for deciding and acting is the necessary complement to differentiating, as described previously, what is Christian from what is not Christian. Behind both kinds of effort is the common concern to express a distinctive Christian identity that is at once personal, social, and ecclesial. It is very much like the commitment of Jews, past and present, to maintain themselves as one people under difficult and even catastrophic conditions—of captivity and enslavement, of pitched battles with inhabitants of a land believed to have been promised them by God, of invasion by one alien power after another, of seduction by the allurements of foreign cultures within and beyond their own borders and finally, of forced dispersion across an incomprehensively large and hostile Empire. More especially still, it is like the commitment of first century Christians to remove any possibility of their ever being identified with the pagan world to which they had set themselves in strictest opposition, e.g.:

. . . there are many whose way of life makes them enemies of the cross of Christ. They are heading for destruction, they make appetite their god, they take pride in what should bring shame; their minds are set on earthly things. We, by contrast, are citizens of heaven, and from heaven we expect our

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deliverer to come, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transfigure our humble bodies, and give them a form like that of his own glorious body, by that power which enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Philippians 3:18-21, REB)

Experiential religion

Finally, conservative Christians affirm that all followers of Jesus Christ should actively seek a deeply inward, transforming relationship with him as their personal Savior. Believing with all of one's mind that Jesus is Lord is necessary. But by itself, it can never be enough. One must also believe with all one's heart, with a heart kindled by the powerful sense of being known and loved personally by the One who is also about the work of reconciling the whole world to himself. (2 Corinthians 5:18) Believing on the basis of others' experiences, testimony, and admirable lives—though necessary at the formative stages of faith—nevertheless can never constitute spiritual maturity in its fullness. With the Beloved Disciple, all genuine followers of Christ must be willing to race to the tomb, enter it, and see for themselves that their Lord has been raised from the dead—for all. (John 20:8)

About the interpretation of the three affirmations described previously, I have found very little disagreement among the most articulate conservative Christians that I know. The situation is a little different, however, with respect to this fourth affirmation. For some conservative Christians, personal encounter with God in Christ or as Holy Spirit is an absolutely essential condition of salvation; without it, no one can rightly claim to be fully a Christian. Others, however, do not see it quite this way. For them, what is essential for faith is hoping and praying openly, honestly, and constantly that Christ will enter each person's heart and mind and re-create him or her in his own image. But experiential confirmation that Christ has in fact done so is faith's fulfillment, not its necessary condition. Although this difference of opinion about a matter believed vital to faith is important, it nevertheless does not weaken the fundamental

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conviction underlying both of the positions just described, that the ground of true faith is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. What these differences of opinion best illustrate is that the most adequate theological orientations are those that provide within their premises, inferences, and transitions room for honoring unique experiences of God, diverse levels of relationships with the church, and independent thinking in general. If they did not, they could not help people very much to honor the commandment that we are to love God with all our minds.

When the Center Fails To Hold

It is difficult to imagine that any truly earnest follower of Jesus Christ would find major fault with conservative Christian theologies at their best. Together, they offer a clear path toward keeping the church's witness of faith centered in what God is revealing about who he is and what he intends for the world. And they offer a solidly-anchored framework for carrying forward the Christian community's on-going struggle to understand God's Word as it is disclosed in the scriptures, interpreted by tradition, and communicated effectively in terms of contemporary experience and reasoned reflection.

For all the strengths of conservative theology as theology, however, Christian conservatism in practice sometimes falls short of its promise to embrace people in ever widening circles of genuinely Christ-centered faith and love. Instead, what happens is an erosion into a steadily hardening dogmatism that drives people into warring camps disputing fruitlessly with each other over whose members are and not really Christian. Tragically, some of the warfare is among conservative Christians themselves and not only with liberals, the uncommitted, and the skeptical. For instance, Fundamentalists and Pentecostals remain deeply divided over how best to understand the relationship between the Divine Word and the Holy Spirit in the life of faith. Further, Pentecostals are at odds with one another over how to integrate the gifts and the fruits of the spirit in the life of

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faith, just as Fundamentalists are in disagreement over how broadly (viz., “moderately”) to interpret the divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. There may be nothing wrong with these varieties of understandings in themselves; scripture and tradition offer ample support for all of them. What is wrong is their advocates’ hard-heartedness to anyone who in conscience subscribes to an understanding that differs from their own.

To borrow a famous verse from Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” whenever its center does not hold, conservative Christianity unleashes anarchy both upon itself and its mission to the world. Rather than celebrate God’s great gift of consistently reliable witnesses to him, uncentered conservative Christians cling frantically to increasingly rigid dogmas of biblical literalism, inerrancy, and infallibility. Rather than open themselves in wonder to the possibility of God’s presence in every human society at all times and everywhere, they denigrate other peoples and religions arrogantly and viciously. Rather than strive for ever deepening understanding of the Christian tradition as a whole—its doctrines, its worship practices, its moral and social teaching—they proclaim their own parochial viewpoints to be the only ones that matter because they are the only ones directly revealed by God. Finally, rather than studying the many ways that men and women come to believe in Jesus as the Christ, they judge the validity of other people’s Christianity solely by the presence and absence of some single kind of experience, whether a blinding encounter with Jesus, a pledging of loyalty to a statement of acceptable beliefs, a conversion experience at an identifiable moment in time, baptism by immersion, speaking in tongues, or whatever. Conservative Christians who are struggling with the possibility of remaining conservative while avoiding these excesses deserve caregivers who are able to help them find their way back to what is best in the conservative outlook.

For all of the anarchy that overly doctrinaire conservative Christians set loose upon Christendom today, nothing within

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conservative Christianity itself demands a combative attitude like theirs. By returning to its central affirmations, and rejecting the many distortions of them that plague church life today, conservative Christianity can continue to proclaim the Christian message and life with transforming power to people everywhere who are yearning for vision and for reason to hope. Constantly returning to its origins for the sake of recovering its originating power is what conservatism most basically is, whether the conservatism is oriented toward art, social and economic policy, philosophy, politics, or religion.

Getting Back to the Basics

In its most carefully considered formulations, Christian conservatism is more than capable of proclaiming the gospel faithfully and convincingly. Its troubles begin when a hastily contrived version of its outlook is wrongly identified with the outlook as a whole, and then hurled at its opponents—conservatives of other varieties, liberals, uncommitted inquirers, and outright de-bunkers of Christianity alike—out of a false sense of certitude that God's truth is one truth only, and expressed in one way only. Recovering the vital center of conservative Christianity and distinguishing it from the oversimplifications and outright distortions that weaken its credibility unnecessarily, is the subject of this final section.

The parts and the whole of the Scriptures

There is a better way to emphasize the truth of the whole of the Bible than by insisting upon the inerrancy and infallibility of every word in it. This better way is the way of carefully distinguishing the message *of* the Bible *in* the Bible and of interpreting every biblical passage according to the Bible's message as a whole. By way of illustration: as every Christian knows all too well, there are many passages in the Bible that convey a terrifying vision of punishments to be unleashed by an outraged deity, in the name of exacting recompense for the offenses of a sinful humanity. In their terror, or equally often in their revulsion, faithful Christians

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and disrespectful skeptics and deniers alike all too often fail to ask the single most important and obvious question about any of these passages: Does it represent the central core of the Christian message, as that message emerges by looking at the Bible in its entirety? Or does it play some other role in the life of faith besides that of defining exhaustively who and what God is? It is difficult to believe that biblical texts that describe only unmitigated wrath could possibly express the whole truth about the Bible's God, as the following samples from the Revised English Bible's rendering should make plain:

How can I hand you over, Ephraim,
How can I surrender you, Israel?
How can I make you like Admah
or treat you as Zeboyim?
A change of heart moves me,
Tenderness kindles within me.
I am not going to let loose my fury,
I shall not turn and destroy Ephraim,
for I am God, not a mortal;
I am the Holy One in your midst.
I shall not come with threats. (Hosea 11:8-9)

Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God's proof of his love toward us (Romans 5:8)

. . . as the result of one misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all. (Romans 5:18)

[God's will] is that all should find salvation and come to know the truth. (1 Timothy 2:4)

God's omnipresence

There is a better way to conserve a sense of Christian identity than by rushing to convert everyone else to one's own religious point of view. It is the way of seeking out God's presence, power, love, and grace not only among fellow Christians, but also and especially in societies, culture, ideas, and practices that are quite different from those that Christendom has typically embraced and nurtured. To be

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sure, the church must always remain faithful to its apostolic mission of bringing people to Christ (by persuasion and not by force.) But its mission is seriously compromised whenever its missionaries fail to recognize the Christ who is already in the midst of those to whom they presume to bring him. The God whom Christians adore is the Maker of the heavens and the earth—*all* the earth, and all who have ever dwelled upon it. Before anything else in creation was, the scriptures make plain, God's eternal son also was. Before we were, other people were, and the Son was among them, too, shining in their darkness as well as in ours. (John 1:3-5)

One time, I had the opportunity to share this perspective with some very able theological students in an extremely conservative seminary. During the discussion period following my final presentation, one student offered what to me was an especially insightful and helpful response to what I had been trying to say:

Here's where I'm going with what I think you're getting at: don't look at Jesus so much, because he'll blind you. Look at what he's looking at, from where he's doing the looking. Then what God is up to everywhere in the world, and not only in us, will be easier to see.

Immediately, another student jumped in to challenge this statement, on the ground that if we were to take it seriously we would in effect be relegating Jesus to the periphery of our faith as Christians: "It's pretty simple, really," he said, "if Jesus is everywhere, he's nowhere." While I was struggling for the words I wanted to use in responding, still another member of the group contributed an analogy that clarified well the issues that all of a sudden had loomed up before us:

I can see how it might look that way, and it does look that way to an awful lot of people in my church. To me, though, what it comes down to is this: when I'm working on a paper in my dorm room, I don't pay any attention to my desk lamp unless the bulb goes out in it. I'm too busy paying attention to what I can see by it. I'm hoping to be a missionary overseas someday, but I absolutely don't want to be the kind of

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missionary who goes around grabbing everybody else's light bulbs and taking them away.

The gospel in an age of religious pluralism

There is a better way to bring out the distinctiveness of the Christian faith than by dogmatically (that is, fearfully) insulating the beliefs one holds, the framework within which one worships, and the rules by which one acts from reexamination and revision. It is the way of openness to new perspectives on Christianity's past, to the possibility of fresh disclosures by God in the present, and to the central role that convictions of conscience play both in a religiously pluralistic world and in the salvation process itself. For some conservative Christians, this kind of openness suggests an indifferentism to the established foundations of a common faith. Nothing could be further from the truth. As envisioned here, openness serves the purpose of discerning rather than negating the vital center of Christian belief, worship, and ministry.

At coffee hour following a worship service one morning, I quietly listened with several others to a brief exchange between two church leaders whom we knew well and respected greatly:

Shirley: I try really hard to get it through my head what theologians are telling us about what we should believe, but I'm lucky to follow even a third of what they say. And the third I do understand is usually somewhere in the middle of their big sentences and paragraphs! So you can imagine the mish-mash I usually end up with.

Tom: I'm with you Shirley. Faith just shouldn't be as complicated as these guys make it out to be. What is it that hymn says—"faith of our fathers," and all that? But you know what? I'm just not as sure about what that is as I once was. What I do know is that I can't talk about it the way I learned it, at least with people like the Hindus and Muslims I work with now. I don't like all this questioning and changing things around, but what else can we do?

Shirley: I know what you mean. Remember, I joined this church after being a hard-shell fundamentalist all my life, and

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I still feel guilty even having some of the books we've been reading on my desk, not to mention studying them. I guess I haven't lost all of my faith yet, though, because I'm still trying my best to hold onto what it means to be a Christian, and not something else.

Tom: Me, too. We've just got to have *some* consensus among us about what we believe, and we ought to worship like Christians and not like rock concert patrons or all those New Age types.

Shirley: I'm ready to concede that a lot of our so-called moral absolutes may not be all that absolute anymore, but I still think that there has to be a code of conduct that we can all agree to as Christians, and that we have to keep on studying and arguing until we get it worked out.

Tom: And praying for God's guidance in the process.

Struggling as they are with modern life's many challenges to Christian traditions, Shirley and Tom see clearly that the church can have neither identity nor integrity without Christ-inspired core beliefs, without Christ-centered worship, and without Christ-led decisions and actions on behalf of God's people everywhere. From at least the middle of the first century, Christian communities have relied heavily on Paul's summary of the Christian message at 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 to represent the core beliefs without which there can be no faithful witness to the saving work of God in Jesus Christ at all. Further, following the example of the first disciples, most Christians take for granted that the remembrance of Jesus and his ministry is the very center of Christian devotional life, from private prayers through agape meals to sacramental observances. Finally, however difficult it may be to apply ethical principles from times past to present-day moral dilemmas, no true Christian fails to hold dear Jesus' centering of all Christian action in the two-fold obligation to love God with all one's soul and to love the neighbor as one loves oneself.

It is one of the greatest paradoxes of all for the church that, underlying the many differences in its beliefs, worship practices, and interactions with the world, there nevertheless abides among its most faithful members a

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sense of being united in the calling to proclaim and embody one message, one God, and one destiny for all humankind. Fulfilling this calling in an ever-changing, increasingly vulnerable world will most certainly require a greater depth of understanding and conviction than many believers now have about what people very different from them really need. Even more importantly, however, it will require a broader range of openness and receptivity to express that understanding and conviction in ways that will help people everywhere to experience God on God's own terms and not their own.

The varieties of religious experience

Finally, there is a better way to invite people to seek a personal relationship with God than by imposing upon them the idea that their experiences of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit require validation by some one particular and traditional sign. By way of examples, some have insisted that one must be driven to one's knees or the ground in ecstasy, or speak in tongues, or be baptized by immersion, or have a warmed heart, or prophesy truthfully, or offer physical and spiritual healing. For conservative Christians, the better way is to acknowledge God's gracious, unpredictable, and transforming manifestations of himself under conditions and circumstances very different from those under which his son lived all too briefly in what at the time most of the world regarded as history's backwaters, far distant from its forward-moving currents.

A highlight of my seminary teaching career was a meeting my school hosted with a leader of the Mar Toma Church in India, a community which its members believe was established by Jesus' disciple, Thomas, in the early fifties of the first century. This much respected and loved man was in our city to visit members of his communion, including several of the seminary's own students, and he kindly agreed to our holding a luncheon in his honor, to which we also invited a number of faculty members from neighboring colleges and universities. Our conversation with the Bishop

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was courteous, frank, enlightening, and very much appreciated by those who attended the luncheon—especially by an Indian faculty member who was loyal to his Hindu upbringing. As we left the building that afternoon, I asked him what he thought of the meeting. I got more of an answer than I bargained for:

I liked it, but probably not for the reasons you might think. As I listened to the Bishop, I kept thinking back to my coming to America thirty years ago from India. I didn't know what to expect, coming as a Hindu to a country so full of Christians. All our neighbors, so many of my colleagues, the kids at our daughter's school—all Christians. My wife and I figured we'd better find out more about Christianity, and quick. We read your Gospels, and we couldn't get beyond Jesus' saying that he came to bring a sword, not peace. A very violent message. Then, we began to see how important peace actually was to this man. Do you really see this? What I took away from studying your religion was that I have really known Jesus all my life, as the principle of non-violence that is at the center of the Hindu faith. When the Bishop talked about St. Thomas' coming to India, what went through my mind was that he saw your risen Christ there, already.

I continue to think about this brief exchange, as I do another from years later, with a Buddhist I met at an urban renewal meeting. Not too gently, he asked me if I were "one of those Christians who thinks every other religion is wrong." Before I could answer, he went on to say: "The Buddha taught that craving material things is the source of all suffering. Jesus told his followers to seek the kingdom of heaven first. You know what I think? They are one and the same person!" The better I got to know this socially aware young man, the more strongly convinced I became that he meant exactly what he said, literally and fully. When I shared this exchange with a faculty colleague, whom I knew to espouse a form of Fundamentalism with great passion, he surprised me with his response: "This is a possibility I want to think about some more." All of a sudden, my colleague's

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conservatism seemed less doctrinaire than I had been thinking it was.

Chapter 7. **Liberal Christians Need Encouragement, Too**

In spite of our best intentions to the contrary, strongly held and insufficiently examined theological convictions and attitudes can get in the way of careful and thoughtful listening to people's questions about faith. The previous chapter examined how a narrow theological conservatism can contribute to empathic failures on both sides of a helping relationship, and how caregivers' appreciation of Christian conservatism at its best can enhance helping conservatively-inclined care receivers find better conservative answers to their own questions about faith. The sections to follow approach Christian liberalism from the same perspective and with the same goal in mind, this time of helping caregivers to help liberally-inclined care receivers find better liberal answers to their own questions. Both chapters build upon the same assumption: caregivers have theological orientations, too, of which they carry a special responsibility to be aware, to ensure that their theologies support the goals of good listening and of encouraging their care receivers to think more deeply about their own.

The Heart of Liberal Christianity

For decades, a small rural church I once briefly pastored put on an annual ice cream social which by all accounts was the surrounding community's biggest summer draw. For me, the best part of it was the opportunity it provided to mix serious slurping with listening to lively people who were as

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varied in their points of view as they were in their choices of toppings. Typical of the exchanges was one between a much venerated history teacher in the local high school and several friends she began chastising for “not protesting the recklessness of our country’s political discourse.” With feigned expressions of shock, her friends listened amiably as she went on to express exasperation with self-proclaimed conservatives and liberals who look for everything wrong in the other’s position and ignore anything right in it. “Their mud-slinging,” she said with an eloquence from which not even melting ice cream could distract, “undermines values that our democracy needs in order to survive.”

Standing beside this delightful lady and her group of adorers was the lay leader of our congregation, who chimed in that the conservative-liberal divide in churches worried him even more: “How can people claim to be part of the body of Christ and then tear each other down the way they are doing? When will we learn that we have to take each other’s point of view as Christians seriously, no matter what we may think about it personally?” As discreetly as I could, I inched into the circle in order to hear what another member of the group started to say in reply: “You make yourself sound so fair and objective and above it all, but the truth is that you’re just as much a liberal as our old history teacher is. No offense, Mrs. Atkins.” At that point, I could not stop myself from asking what was so “liberal” about what our lay leader had just said. The answer I got was eye-opening: “It’s like this, preacher,” my parishioner said with a smile, “liberals talk like they’re more interested in getting everybody’s opinion than they are getting to the truth.” And there I was, wondering in front of every ice cream chug-a-lugger for a mile in every direction whether, in more recent parlance, I was being exposed as one of “those liberals” after all! Evidently, my congregation had seen through me almost from the first. With laughter all around, the lay leader made a point of reassuring me with mock seriousness: “they all love you anyway, Reverend.”

Later that afternoon, the history teacher and I consoled one another, in between mouthfuls of yet more ice cream, over how easy it is to forget that striving to be fair and objective about our politics and our faith is not theology-neutral. It is, indeed, a form of liberalism, but not of the sort that we had heard about earlier. For us, we agreed, getting others' opinions is a more reliable way of getting at the truth than pursuing the task all on our own. But there are still truths to be gotten at, and these are not reducible to mere opinions alongside a plethora of other ill-founded opinions without value to the determination of what is really true and what is really false. In a word, just as conservatism has a heart, or a vital center, liberalism does too. My own characterization of what that is will follow the pattern of the previous chapter and lift up four convictions for special attention.

Jesus-faith

First and foremost, Christian liberalism affirms that Jesus of Nazareth—in his life, ministry and personhood—represents the standard by which everything else in the Bible and in the Christian tradition must be understood and measured. Jesus is alone the one whom the Old Testament finally anticipates, the New Testament attests, the church remembers, and Christians at all times and everywhere embody as Savior and Lord with rejoicing, thanksgiving, and loving self-sacrifice on behalf of others. Jesus is the canon within the canon of Holy Scripture, the principle by which alone men and women of faith grant the rest of the Bible its place and its rule in their hearts.

An important corollary of this first affirmation is liberal Christianity's commitment to weigh carefully what the church in every generation says and does in the light of what is known on sound historical grounds about the life and faith of Jesus and his earliest followers. In seeking to fulfill this commitment, liberal Christians sometimes find themselves raising questions about even some of the most tenaciously held teachings of their churches—for instance, that Jesus

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knew he was Israel's Messiah and the world's Savior from a very early age. Increasing knowledge of the Jesus of history, in contrast with the Jesus of later imagination and dogma, can even lead to outright rejection of ideas that other Christians have regarded as definitive of genuine faith—for instance, the predominant view of the nineteenth century that Jesus was neither a prophet nor a revolutionary, but only a wise ethical teacher committed to non-violence as a way of life.

From a perspective gained with “eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith,” (Hebrews 12:2), some church traditions can be seen clearly to deserve immediate and summary dismissal. Prohibiting women from speaking or teaching in church is one. Defending slavery as God's everlasting will is another. Other traditions, however, such as projecting the return of Christ far into the future, serve important functions in the life of faith even if their precedents are less clear in the teachings of Jesus or the early apostles. Separating out accretions of tradition from the historical kernel of Christian belief and practice, therefore, does not necessarily lead to rejecting the accretions and trusting only the kernel. Rather, it means that many of the difficulties and dilemmas that accompany Christian believing and acting over the centuries have no clear precedent in the apostolic age and, as such, raise questions that earlier generations did not think about and that demand fresh interpretations of the gospel message constantly. After 9/11, for example, how are people in every country as well as in the United States to determine not who their neighbors are in times of peace, but who their enemies are in the midst of terrorist attacks? Or: for how long should a mercilessly abused wife continue to honor her marriage vows? Or: which desperately ill patients should receive scarce organ transplants first? As liberal Christians view it, tradition is a process of applying a Jesus-centered faith, that is always open to growing historical knowledge, to situations with which Jesus' own history and time may have neither envisioned nor coped.

One Lord, many appearances

The second major affirmation of Christian liberalism is that Christianity has always meant different things to different believers and that acknowledging and celebrating the differences is essential to sharing the gospel with integrity, whether in non-Christian societies and cultures or in one's own. This affirmation follows from the commitment to express the Christian message foundationally in terms of what history discloses about Jesus of Nazareth. For the same historical research that leads to Jesus also opens up a great variety of opinions about and experiences of him in the lives of his earliest followers. Discerning who the "real" Jesus was and is from what those who knew him in the flesh said about him is, therefore, a task that each believer must complete for himself and herself, as must the communities of faith of which they are a part. To the question that Jesus put so personally to his disciples—"And who do *you* say that I am?" (Mark 8:29)—there are many ways of answering, positive and negative.

The diversity of the answers began to appear very early. Paul's Jesus was the Jesus raised from the dead by God; little else from his life, except the crucifixion, seems to have aroused Paul's interest. Mark's Jesus was a man with a message, about God and not himself. John's Jesus was the Incarnate Logos, whose earthly existence manifests in every detail divine knowledge, power, and purpose. Some of Jesus' followers extolled him as the mediator of Law-annulling Grace, while others insisted that his coming changed neither the words, the letters, nor the obligations of the Law. Some saw Jesus as a political revolutionary, while still others saw him as a prophet of world catastrophe, as an otherworldly ascetic, as a drunkard and glutton, or as a pathetic victim of events and powers he neither understood nor controlled. Who, then, *is* Jesus, really? Is the Jesus-faith of liberal Christianity merely a collage of wildly varying words and images from Jesus' time and shortly thereafter, pasted loosely together by people who flit randomly from one anecdote about him to another on the whim of the moment?

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The answer of liberal Christianity is: the historical Jesus is the Jesus who was confessed by those who knew him best to be the Savior of all humankind. It is this Jesus, and no other, to whom faith's dependence upon historical inquiry is intended, first and finally, to lead.

Just as the diversity of people's understanding of Jesus became evident early in Christian history, so did the necessity to accommodate it constructively. For Jewish Christians, whose spiritual roots remained in the land believed theirs by divine right, Jesus was primarily the liberator of their own nation alone, whose saving work on behalf of non-Jews could be seen only through the light of their own patrimony. For Gentile Christians, however, whose concerns reflected the ethos of an Empire that appreciated Palestine's strategic geography far more than it did her spirituality, Jesus was himself their light, and the Judaism to which he was born was destined only for darkness, dispersion, and death.

Liberal Christianity takes the incorporation of different understandings such as these—e.g., between Christians who saw Jesus as Messiah for the Jews and Christians who saw him as Savior of the world—into a single tradition, respectful of the great diversities that enrich it, as a model for today's churches to follow. The model is of an inclusive rather than exclusive fellowship, whose members cultivate openness rather than self-protectiveness, and whose witness to others is offered in a spirit of welcoming love rather than of chastising judgment.

Re-visionism

Liberal Christianity affirms the central importance of every generation's discovering for itself new ways to express the beliefs, patterns of devotion, and principles for action that make up the life of faith. The rationale for this affirmation, too, is historical. It begins with the observation that things did not turn out quite the way that Jesus' earliest followers—and perhaps even Jesus himself—expected, and that the Christian community has been adjusting to this fact

ever since. In specific, the end of the world, that to the first Christians seemed imminent, failed to occur, as it has failed to occur down to the present day. New societies, cultures, and even civilizations continue to rise and fall, each with its own ways of looking at things, to which the church—itsself an institution acknowledged only gradually and with reluctance—has had to accommodate. To the extent that anyone can predict, the process of accommodation may continue indefinitely.

One reason, then, for revising cherished ways of expressing basic Christian beliefs and practices is that, until the Christ does indeed come again, believers will continue to encounter people within and outside the church who are unable to grasp the meaning of the gospel in the renderings with which they themselves are the most comfortable. If these members of God's family are ever to become Christian disciples, liberal Christians hold, their first encounters with Jesus as Christ will have to be on terms more familiar to them than traditional Christian language may be. As the Holy Spirit once spoke to a crowd of Jews "from every nation under heaven," the church must speak to each person in every generation in his and her own language and experiential framework. (Acts 2:5,6)

An even better reason for remaining open to new ways of glorifying God is that Jesus himself—possibly with John's offer of baptism for the forgiveness of sins in the background—set the example for doing so, by proclaiming to his own people God's liberation from the staggeringly large, detailed, and oppressive system of rules, laws, and obligations under which they had languished for centuries. Paul continued the process in his mission to the Gentiles, struggling with his fellow missionaries to render a message about God's Messiah that would have saving power for people who did not share the outlook of the Palestinian Jews for whom the message was intended originally. By way of just one example, Paul did not hesitate to overturn dietary laws and the requirement of circumcision, when Christians

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not raised as Jews found it difficult to see anything of religious significance in them.

From the perspective of liberal Christianity, the church cannot hope to fulfill Jesus' "Great Commission" to share his teachings throughout the earth (Matthew 28:19,20) unless it is willing, first, to pay constant and close attention to changing historical conditions and circumstances and to trust that God is working in and through all of them for the world's good. Then, the church must risk, as St. Paul did, making Jesus' message of God's grace, love, and new life heard and understood in forms of expression that may be very different from those with which tradition was comfortable. For example, with the ordering of societies, nations, and institutions by means of hierarchical structures and inequitable distributions of power and resources on the wane, the church will have to become far more lay-oriented, democratically governed, and less patriarchal than it is today. Or, with the earth's population now large enough to drain natural resources irreversibly, even if its rate of increase continues to decline, some of the church's most venerable teachings about the family—most especially that begetting offspring is the primary if not the exclusive justification for marriage—will become not only less credible but pernicious. Or, with people who declare no religious belief or affiliation representing the most rapidly growing "religious" group today, at least in America, most of the traditional ways of giving expression to the Christian faith—especially in the structuring of worship—will have little credibility or power to "win their souls" to Jesus Christ.

Social action

Fourthly and finally, liberal Christianity affirms that Christian congregations must have as their primary concern building inclusive fellowships of believers who are ardent about ministering to people in need. Whether their members also satisfy certain experiential and doctrinal tests (e.g., mystical encounters with Jesus, speaking in tongues, orthodox beliefs, etc.), is of distant importance only. As

Liberal Christians Need Encouragement, Too

biblical support for this affirmation, most liberal Christians appeal to two texts in particular. The first is Luke 4:14-30. At the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth, Luke wrote, Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and read the lesson of the day, from the prophet Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord Yahweh has been given to me,
For Yahweh has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,
To bind up hearts that are broken;
to proclaim liberty to captives,
freedom to those in prison;
to proclaim a year of favour from Yahweh . . . (Isaiah 61:1-2,
JB)

Then, Luke continued: “Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and all eyes were fixed on him. He began to address them: ‘Today,’ he said, ‘in your hearing this text has come true.’” (Luke 4: 20-21, REB) The second text is Matthew 25:31-46, an apocalyptic vision of Jesus’ return to earth and his final separation of those favored from those unfavored by God, on the basis of how well people care for the hungry, thirsty, homeless, unclothed, and imprisoned. As Matthew renders Jesus’ words, anything that believers do for these, their brothers and sisters, they do for him.

Two movements within the church over the past 100 years have exercised particular influence on the development of liberal Christianity. One is the “Social Gospel” movement of Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch, with its emphasis on bringing about the kingdom of God on earth by means of a transformation of institutional structures through people especially committed to social justice. The other is the great variety of “liberation” movements of more recent decades, each concerned with the oppression of particular groups of people—the poor, women, the handicapped, people of color, the aging, to cite only a few—and with proclaiming God’s work of ensuring for them equal justice and opportunity, and their fair share of the created order’s abundant resources. Leaders of both

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these movements draw heavily upon the biblical texts just cited and those like them in both Testaments, interpreting them in the direction of defining the Christian life itself as a life of serving others, and in the process contributing to others' experiencing the abundant life promised them in Jesus Christ. People are indeed saved by God's grace, through faith. But, as liberal Christians also emphasize strongly, "faith divorced from action is dead." (James 2:26, REB)

Resolving Liberal Christianity's Current Crisis of Faith

For conservative and liberal Christians alike, holding onto the best that their respective outlooks contain, and letting go of the worst, is what their churches most need in order to present the gospel message of grace, hope, and love convincingly to individuals, families, tribes, and nations who are on the verge of becoming utterly overwhelmed by mutual suspiciousness, scornfulness, and despair. Just what the best is in liberal Christianity has been the focus of this chapter up to this point. But liberal Christianity does not always express itself at its best. What to do about it is the subject of this section.

Faith beyond the limits of historical awareness alone

Liberal Christians sometimes become overwhelmed by the difficulties that accompany their own commitment to pursue God's truth by means of historical inquiry and fall into an unhealthy skepticism about the reliability of the historical information now widely available about Jesus of Nazareth. One especially vivid example of this process is the notorious "Jesus Seminar" of a few years ago. This seminar attracted random assortments of biblical scholars to a series of meetings attempting to determine once and for all exactly what Jesus did and did not say and do during his lifetime. The primary purpose of their efforts was to extract the true gospel from the many versions of it that they believed the

early church contrived without adequate historical warrants. A major influence on many seminar members was the 1945 discovery at Nag Hammadi in Egypt of documents believed hidden for safekeeping in the fourth century because they conveyed understandings of Jesus significantly at variance from the texts of the New Testament. What made these documents—especially The Gospel of Thomas—particularly intriguing was the (indefensible) claim of several scholars both within and outside the Jesus Seminar that their sources pre-date those of the canonical gospels. Early on, seminar members bogged down in major disagreements over the extent to which the New Testament itself represented Jesus' words and deeds accurately. Incredibly, its leaders proposed to resolve the disagreements by putting the reliability of each passage from the Gospels to a vote. Then, they gathered passages with the greatest number of votes on their reliability index into a new, fifth Gospel that they pretentiously offered as superior to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

If the Jesus Seminar and the newest quest for the historical Jesus based on the Nag Hammadi materials are taken as examples of liberal Christianity's contribution to interpreting the Christian faith for today, it is little wonder that many conservative Christians write liberalism off as either hopelessly mired in conjecture and controversy, or as grandiosely making up the gospel as it goes along. But these ventures are anything but good examples of liberal Christianity at its best, most basically because their methodologies exclude from the outset the cardinal liberal tenet that the Jesus of history is also, always, and most importantly, the Christ of faith. Thus, the faith of Jesus' followers is as much a part of God's work in history as the events of Jesus' life and ministry are.

When it is a question of what was and was not said and done in the past, believers must always be open to what historical research has to say. When it is a question of how to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, though, faith must speak to faith and historical study can never by itself fully

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determine the process. For example, when St. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the importance of believing in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead—“ . . . if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void, and so too is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14)—the Jesus about whom he wrote was not, is not, and can never be a subject amenable to purely historical reconstruction. For even if the resurrection of Jesus were itself a directly observed historical event—or, as some philosophers and theologians put it, the kind of historical event that is observable in principle even though not observed in fact (no one was in the tomb at the moment of God’s action)—his Lordship can only be inferred from the outward expressions his followers gave to an inward transformation of their own hearts. History can describe the outward expressions but not the inward processes that gave rise to them. The latter are accessible only through the kind of contact with the Gospels that faith, and not mere historical research, makes possible.

On not re-creating history in our own image

For liberal Christianity, the life of faith inevitably includes a struggle to reconcile two indisputable statements of historical fact: (a) Jesus of Nazareth is the center of the church’s faith, and (b) At different times and places, the church has affirmed very different understandings of Jesus’ message and meaning for a suffering world. Most of liberal Christianity’s critics find the second of these statements especially troubling. To them, the admission that historical reconstruction yields many opinions about Jesus, and not just one, implies that every believer is left to his or her own devices to make sense of the church’s pluriform witness to Jesus as the Christ. Jesus becomes anything that anyone wants him to be, and every church tradition becomes just as good as any other. There is some justification for this concern. In particular, some liberal Christians have become so bewitched by recent discoveries of extra-biblical traditions about Jesus that they have granted to them an

authenticity that more careful historical analysis does not support.

One example of such bewitchment is the Re-Imagining agenda of radical feminist groups in both Roman Catholic and Protestant communions. Immediately following a Re-Imagining Revival meeting, a former student of mine, Karen, wrote me that she had “had it with feminism” and that she was heading to see her bishop to ask for forgiveness and to be permitted to “return to the fold.” I knew that her (female) bishop would be pleased but was surprised at Karen’s apparent change of heart. For years, she had been an ardent and eloquent spokesperson for more radical forms of women’s spirituality, including rituals created exclusively for women, with some even devoted to the praise of “our maker, Sophia.” As she had described it in some of my classes, the Re-Imagining movement, particularly its recasting of Jesus as Sophia’s (Wisdom’s) child rather than Son of God, represented the best hope women had for a Christianity that could speak to women’s issues long ignored or even rejected by the institutional church.

After reading Karen’s letter, I called her to find out more about the new direction in which she seemed to be heading. One interchange in our conversation went as follows:

Leroy: So what happened up there, for heaven’s sake?

Karen: You wouldn’t have believed it. It was one long denunciation of everything about the church that I grew up with, but had been working to change. None of my gang ever thought that celebrating the Eucharist with milk and honey should replace doing it with bread and wine. It’s only a way of reminding folks that women are important to God, too. Sophia is another name for God, and a valuable one. But Sophia isn’t God, and neither are we. I knew I had to get out when the Nicene Creed came up at the conference and everybody broke out with jeering. And then there was that business with biting apples as a symbol of resistance to patriarchy. I can’t be part of a church that is open to only half the human race, even if that half is female rather than male.

One of the most important critics of both naiveté and of radical skepticism about what we can know about Jesus is

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still the great musician, theologian, physician, and missionary, Albert Schweitzer. In his monumental scholarly study of a hundred years ago, entitled in English *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer reviewed in detail the efforts of nineteenth-century scholars to reconstruct an historically accurate life of Jesus and concluded that even the best of their biographies failed to rise above the biases that they brought to the writing of them. Many regard Schweitzer's devastating dismantling of naively constructed biographies of Jesus to be the heart of his study. However, Schweitzer also went on to argue that responsible historical study still yields a picture of Jesus of Nazareth sufficiently reliable to serve as an anchor for faith, even though the picture that finally emerges is of a strange, apocalypse-oriented prophet whose vision of how things work in the present and how things will be in the future remains at odds with much that modern men and women people take for granted about nature and history.

As Schweitzer finally had to acknowledge that if the rational examination of the New Testament is to be faithful to historical methodology at all, we will have to admit, however reluctantly, that its texts contain well-attested testimony to phenomena that liberal Christians tend not to dwell on, especially demonic possession, exorcisms, spiritual healing, and miraculous acts in general. Further, the New Testament as a whole—in contrast with compilations of passages such as those of *The Gospel of Thomas* that depict Jesus only as a wise, if sometimes enigmatic, teacher—situates him at the very center of all this testimony as exorcist, healer, and even wonder-worker. Liberal Christianity at its weakest summarily dismisses such references as reflecting only the erroneous misunderstandings of a by-gone age. By contrast, liberal Christianity at its strongest lets historical evidence, and not merely modernist world-views, determine what the church can and cannot proclaim in the name of a responsibly grounded biblical faith.

The One in the many

Respecting and honoring “indigenous” forms of Christianity—beliefs, worship, and action situated in people’s own native languages, customs, and attitudes—is for most liberal Christians essential to communicating the church’s message effectively in a pluralistic religious world. Sometimes, however, indigenizing the expression of the gospel message enhances one group’s understanding and appreciation of it at the expense of another’s fear of losing its own sense of Christian identity and unity.

Some time ago, I led a weekend retreat on what church leaders were writing about “indigenous Christianity,” and on what their writings could contribute not only to missional outreach in general but to revivifying their own congregations. In general, the reactions to the materials we reviewed together were very positive. But they also conveyed a fair amount of anxiety over what one thoughtful pastor called “winding up with a gospel that not even we could recognize anymore.” Other pastors quoted some equally distressed reactions of people in their own communities and parishes, such as:

My last visit in the home of our refugee family really took me aback. There I was, being asked to kneel before a little makeshift altar dedicated to venerating all of their ancestors. It was all I could do not to ask, “Aren’t we supposed to leave kith and kin behind for the sake of following Jesus?”

On my last business trip to Africa, some Christian friends there introduced me to a group of church leaders who practice and advocate polygamy. Just like King Solomon did! This is Christian? And that wasn’t all. To a man, those leaders told me—I’m putting it in my own way—that a non-polygamous Christianity just won’t attract followers in that part of the world. That’s going way too far.

The single most startling expression of what was worrying the participants about the indigenization of Christianity came toward the end of the evening session:

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Look, folks, if we really believe that the risen Lord is with us, it doesn't make a dime's difference what beliefs people hold, how they worship God, and what they think they have to do, as long as they are truly convinced that they're living as God wants them to. We have to get over making people genuflect to our official party lines.

The issue that needed attention then, and still does, is the issue of showing how belief in Jesus as Lord is at once a matter for individual decision and life and also the basis of a genuine community of faith shaped by a set of commonly-held norms—always subject to reassessment—for belief, devotion, and service. For liberal Christianity in its most compelling forms, Jesus-faith is an actively shared faith with an intentionally universal appeal. It is not a set of only personal beliefs dictated by each believer's own conscience, or a congeries of parochial outlooks each lived out in small gatherings of only the like-minded, after the fashion of Third World "base communities." Even though Christian history provides ample warrant for expressing what is believed to be God's Word in a manner that is as accommodating as possible, liberal Christians are also keenly aware that there are limits beyond which accommodation cannot go, if the church's message is to have any integrity at all.

A faith that works

Finally, for liberal Christians the fact that the church has held very different understandings of Jesus' message and personhood through the centuries should in no way undermine the integrity, confidence, and rejoicing with which it still proclaims the Lordship of Christ to all the world. The primary reason that this is so is that the foundation of Christian unity has always rested less on doctrine than it has on action. In specific, it rests on the commitment to express love for God especially by reaching out to people in need, wherever they may be. The first Christians made their own impression on the world less by the eloquence of their preachers and teachers, and more by the willingness to share their own resources for the benefit

of all. (cf. Acts 2:43-47) Today's Christians must do the same. Most especially, they must meet in every way they can the immediate needs of the poor, the oppressed, the helpless, the sick, and the dying while also remaining at the forefront of today's struggles for lasting justice and peace.

No conscientious Christian could quarrel with the idea that faith must actively seek remedies for the debilitating conditions under which billions of people all over the world are suffering. However, many Christians object strenuously to what they see in liberal Christianity today as a misguided effort to frame the gospel message in terms of social activism and nothing more. As one layperson put it, "I'm getting pretty suspicious of theologians who tell me that the only thing that counts in my preaching is whether it motivates people to identify with the oppressed, and most especially, with the poor." He shared this as we left a worship service at which the preacher announced boldly that God loves *only* the poor. For this preacher, heaven seems to be a place to which the rich need never apply.

When Jesus hinted to his fellow Jews in Nazareth that he was himself the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of liberation (Luke 4:21), he gave to the church that would follow him the perspective on Christian activism in the life of faith that is a benchmark for understanding liberal Christianity at its best. For the prophecy that Jesus said was coming true in its very hearing was coming true as the work of God and not just of God's servants in the world. What this means is that all who help to make Isaiah's words come true in their own hearing of them must do so in the full knowledge that their actions are but signs pointing beyond themselves to the God who alone is their guarantor.

Just a little more from an ice cream social

After we had folded the last of the tables on the lawn and returned them to the church basement, Jack, a member of the social's planning committee asked if we might chat a little about the conversation that took place earlier that day. Abbreviated slightly, it went this way:

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Jack: It bothered me a little that Ted (the lay leader) and you sort of left it in limbo about liberals being so open and all.

Leroy: I've been wondering about that myself, Jack. Limbo is a place I've never been comfortable with.

Jack: I'm sure you didn't know that Ted has been my lay shepherd for a while.

Leroy: No, I didn't, but I'm sure you know that I'll keep this information to myself.

Jack: Lately, we've gotten into some questions I've had about the direction my faith is taking, and he has really been helpful as I've tried to sort through them.

Leroy: That doesn't surprise me. To me, Ted is a great listener and a very insightful man. Would you care to tell me a little more about the sorting through?

Jack: The big thing is with my confusion about all the different and conflicting ideas about even what I used to think were the non-negotiables about our beliefs. I got myself confused in the first place because I was so excited about all the possibilities out there. I didn't want to miss out on anything. That *Da Vinci Code* book, for instance, really turned me on.

Leroy: And lately?

Jack: Well, I guess the best way to put it is that I'm working hard to get un-confused.

Leroy: In what way?

Jack: By trying to figure out what's basic to my sense of being a believer, even if I also have to see it as something I can change my mind about down the road.

Leroy: Like, not non-negotiable?

Jack: I promise not to tell Mrs. Atkins about the double negative, but yes, that's it exactly.

Leroy: So for you Ted isn't an anything-goes kind of liberal.

Jack: No he isn't, but he's also not the kind of liberal who tells someone they have to think things through just the way he has.

Leroy: He's a real blessing to you right now, isn't he?

Jack: I'll have a scoop of chocolate on that. Care to join me?

Chapter 8. Reasoning Together About Beliefs

In one of the Old Testament's most memorable passages, God issues his people an invitation to come and reason together. (Isaiah 1:18, KJV) There are other ways of translating the word "reason" in this passage: e.g., "talk this over" (JB), or "argue this out" (REB). But whatever English words may be chosen to express it, the invitation itself is as germane for our churches today as it was for Israel's Divided Kingdom three thousand years ago. Now as then, those who respond to it in faith and obedience find that their sins, once "as scarlet," can become "white as snow."

The particular "scarlet" sin with which this chapter deals is the sin of condemning people who do not share one's own understanding of what Christians should and should not believe. How to overcome the impulse to judge and condemn, and to resolve disagreements about faith, belief, and action in a spirit of mutual respect and gratitude for other believers' presence in and impact on our lives is the principal concern of the sections to follow. The discussions will draw especially upon guidelines previously offered for talking with people whose questions reflect a conservative or a liberal orientation toward the Christian faith.

Keeping Belief and Faith in Proper Perspective

To all who have felt the effects of hostile and usually fruitless debates about who is and is not "really" a Christian, the Christian tradition as a whole offers three especially important insights into the relationship between the beliefs that nourish the mind and the faith—that is, unconditional trust in God—that sustains the soul. Making these insights

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our own is the first step toward reasoning constructively about our sometimes very different understandings of what faith requires of us.

The first insight is that beliefs about God, the world, and the future play an indispensable role in the life of faith. Christianity, then and now, is anchored in the proclamation of a message about a loving God revealed in Jesus Christ. From everyone who hears the message, those who deliver it ask not just an acknowledgment but a two-fold response: (a) believing that the message is true, and (b) trusting enough in the message to shape the whole of one's life in accord with it. The New Testament uses the same word for both kinds of response: faith. Thus, though faith is more than merely believing to be true certain things that are said about God, the world, and humanity's place in it, faith is not less than such believing. Trusting in the Christian message with all our heart is inseparable from believing the truth of the message with all our mind.

The second insight of the Christian tradition into the relationship between belief and faith is, that though the Christian message contains beliefs that are essential to a saving relationship with the world's Creator (e.g., the belief that there is no God but the one, true God), some of these beliefs can be difficult both to understand (e.g., the belief that it was necessary for the Son of God to suffer an ignominious death by human hands) and to accept (e.g., that Jesus was raised from death by God, with flesh and blood intact.) That this is so and has been so from the very beginnings of the Christian community, carries important implications for how Christians are to live out their faith in today's world. One is that every believer has both the right and the responsibility to ask and pursue every earnest question he or she may have about what the church says people should believe and do. To express this point in biblical terms: we must test the spirits moving among us to see if they are truly from God. (1 John 4:1) Another implication is that it is never easy to give a credible account of what Christians are to say to a world filled with people of

radically different religious orientations, and with people of no religious orientation at all. Though beliefs are an essential component in faith, they are far from self-explanatory as to their meaning and anything but self-evidently true.

The Christian tradition's third insight about belief and faith is that uncertainty and doubt about what we have been taught to believe can seriously impair the ability to give ourselves wholly to a joy-filled relationship with God and with those who share a common faith. In specific, when faith as belief is in jeopardy, so is faith as trust. To an honest confrontation with this unnerving possibility, there are two typical responses, one healthy and the other not. The healthy response is to articulate confidently the foundations of Christian belief with clarity and conviction, while treating the uncertainty and doubts of sincere inquirers, including our own, respectfully and caringly. The unhealthy response is to cling either to the church's authoritative teachings or to the skeptics' doubts as if for dear life, while dismissing any questioning of our chosen stance haughtily and judgmentally. The cases to follow illustrate concretely the differences between these responses.

When faith and belief collide

A seminary student of mine, Anne, once shared with me a deep crisis of faith: I'm terrified that I don't know what I believe any more, and the guilt I feel about losing part of my faith is just overwhelming. It all began, Anne went on to say, when she tried to counter her agnostic boyfriend's negative attitude toward Christianity, especially its teachings about the providence of God, the divinity of Christ, and the promise of eternal life. The more she tried to defend her faith, the more doubtful of it she herself became:

I was so smug in my certainties, and I just knew I would be able to answer all of his questions. Instead, the questions he threw at me just blew me into very deep water, and I've been barely treading it ever since. What kind of a Christian can I be, losing hold of the very beliefs I was trying to share with someone who matters to me so much?

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For Anne's pastor, the resolution of her crisis was simple. He counseled her to give up her unbelieving boyfriend and to stop taking "his kind" of questions seriously. Reluctantly, she took the first step, and broke off the relationship. But the second step proved impossible. Her boyfriend's doubts had become her own, in spite of her pastor's best efforts to frame them as inspired by the Devil.

Anne could not finally accept her pastor's view that the best way to overcome doubts is either to refuse to acknowledge them at all, or to deny that there might be some basis for them. Instead, she allowed herself to trust that the best way to overcome doubts is to track them to their most frequent source, the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of what Christians do and do not believe, and why. Anne began reading and studying harder than she ever had before, and sought the counsel of the most competent faculty members our school had to offer. Instead of continuing to try to make something out of the very worst expressions of her faith tradition, Anne worked on developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of the best that more conservative expressions of Christianity have to offer, and in the process became a helpful mentor to fellow conservatives struggling with issues similar to her own.



For another of my students, Kit, things did not turn out as well. Kit grew up in a strong Fundamentalist household that equipped him poorly to deal with fellow Christians who think deeply about their beliefs, who take for granted that questioning strengthens both the belief and the questioner, and who insist upon having good reasons before assenting to any belief. Whenever Kit was challenged to think for himself in matters of faith, he took refuge in a popular doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, usually referred to as the doctrine of "plenary inspiration," and used it to stifle further conversation. Basically, Kit viewed every word of the Bible as directly inspired by God and, therefore, inerrant and

unquestionable: "It's an all or nothing proposition for me: the whole Bible or none of it. I choose to accept all of it. It's all I need, and it should be enough for anybody."

Today, having left seminary without graduating, Kit only reluctantly ventures out from the tight enclave of an ultra-conservative congregation whose members welcomed him with open arms. "Out here in the real world," some of his friends have told me, Kit is floundering in his efforts to combat alternative faith-perspectives which people all around him find convincing. He frequently encounters at his work faithful followers of Islam, who not so gently put it to him that it is the Qu'ran and not the Bible that is directly authored by God. He is also chided by many of his Christian friends to take a closer look at the very Bible he imposes on people so confidently.

As these friends see it, though the Old and New Testaments are vitally important for faith, they include books that contain errors both of fact and of understanding. The clear implication for them is that some biblical books are more reliable and valuable than others. One of Kit's friends once said to me with a gesture of incomprehension, "Who in his right mind would let himself get tied up in knots over the Book of Lamentations, for God's sake?" Without blinking an eye, he went on to say that the Bible would be more believable had some books not been included in it at all. He is not alone in his conviction. Since at least the second century, many of the church's most influential teachers have raised important questions about the authoritativeness for faith of more than just one book of the Bible, e.g., Esther, James, Hebrews, Revelation, and more surprisingly even Matthew, Mark, and John.

At mid-life, Kit's defensive strategy of refusing to consider seriously any perceived threat to his belief-system is not working. And he does not know what to do about it. People he respects and admires, including the several Muslim co-workers whom his fellow believers call "infidels," and his more liberal Christian friends are raising questions which he cannot answer about his most cherished convictions. It

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remains to be seen whether Kit will risk reaching out for help from more knowledgeable Christians than his own narrow circle of believers contains.



Recently, a pastor friend told me about what it was like for him as he struggled to become more probing in his theology while remaining respectful of his denomination's fairly conservative teachings:

I started out with a vengeance, believing that I had to go over what I was taught as a Christian ten times over, to make sure that I dealt with every question, every objection, and every alternative before I re-committed myself intellectually to anything. And you know what? When I got through, I didn't believe anything at all! The worst of it was that I picked up more Christian friends by being skeptical like this than I ever did by being loyal to my church. It was then that I knew something was out of whack.

Things became really interesting in this conversation when another pastor broke in to scold my friend for losing his nerve, theologically:

I liked you better when you weren't so weepy-eyed about losing touch with our tradition! Truth is better than tradition any day, and the only way we'll ever get to truth is by reminding ourselves that most of the official views about truth have always been designed to keep the officials in power. Old Constantine knew that pretty well, don't you think?



Finally, one "liberal-and-proud-of-it" Roman Catholic laywoman stood up in a class, that I was teaching in her parish one evening, to proclaim proudly: "I began to grow spiritually when I started giving contraception priority over doctrine." It interested me that her parish's priests were laughing as hard as everyone else was, as if they, too, were giving up on the importance of defending allegiance to one of

their church's most clearly defined and ardently proclaimed doctrinal positions.



These cases are intended to illustrate what can happen to faith when the vital middle ground between believing too much and believing too little becomes mushy. Or, they illustrate what happens when taking beliefs seriously—crucial for a truly mature faith—either inflates into taking beliefs too seriously, at the cost of making the church a battleground instead of a haven, or collapses into not taking them seriously at all, at the cost of making the church an assortment of spiritual narcissists instead of a caring community in ministry. In truth, a maturing faith is a “graying” faith. It recognizes both the necessity and the difficulties of dwelling in the gray areas between the more colorful extremes of rigid dogmatism and incorrigible skepticism, of legalism and libertinism, of fanaticism and nihilism.

“Talking things out,” then and now

In its larger context, the ancient invitation to come and reason together meant something considerably more limited and limiting than what many of our churches most need today. What the prophet Isaiah had in mind was that his people would simply give themselves over to God's own persuading, that they would stop doing what they had fallen into the bad habits of doing and start doing what God told them to do instead. The problem with taking this interpretation at face value, and applying it whole cloth to resolving modern-day questions about beliefs, is that too many church people are arrogating to themselves the role that God plays in Isaiah's vision and, as a result, getting nowhere in persuading others to think as they do.

If we are ever to accomplish the goal that the ancient prophet had in mind, therefore, we will have to adopt a somewhat different strategy. Reasoning together, as we

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might understand the ancient prophet's words for today, will depend first and foremost upon cultivating a willingness to examine our own fetish for certitude and colorfulness in faith and to search more earnestly for a connectedness in the grayer areas of thinking and deciding at faith's wider boundaries. It will depend upon cultivating the openness to learn from, rather than the passion to convert, one another. If we reason together only to convince people to accept our own pre-conceived ideas, there is little likelihood that any bridges between us will ever be built. At the extreme, we will simply go on bellowing at each other across an ever-widening chasm. On the other hand, if we are truly desirous of becoming agents of reconciliation in the church and the world, then not even our most heart-felt disagreements about what we should believe need prevent us from taking the essential first step of all genuine dialogue: listening carefully, empathically, and non-defensively to the other.

One kind of listening is especially needed. It proceeds from a willingness to set aside what we may think is wrong about the convictions of a fellow believer or inquirer in order to focus on the truth that he or she is struggling to express by means of them. The listening itself must be attuned to the other's intended meaning more than to the other's explicit words. One lay shepherd, Bill, set a good example of this working principle during an exchange he had one evening with some very agitated members in a Men's Bible Study he was leading:

Cal: I'm the kind of guy who'll forgive people for most anything, because I don't see how we can be sure what the right thing to do is anyway.

Don: You can talk all you want about how hard it is to figure this stuff out, Cal, but you know what? It's really easy—very easy. Here's how to do it: Jesus is the way, and if we don't do what he says, we're going to hell. Period. End of story. What could be simpler?

Tex: Good Lord, Don, what kind of a Jesus is *that*? Not the one who's in *my* Bible!

Leader Bill: Hold up just a second, Tex. I know Don's got you riled up, but I don't think he's saying what he most wants

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to say right now. Don, help me out here. As I've heard you reacting to some of Cal's ideas before, I think what's getting to you is that his philosophy sounds too much like an "anything is okay" kind of thing, and that you want some rules to live by.

Don: I can go along with that. Maybe the Jesus-or-else way is a little over the top, but I know I'm not willing to go the do-it-if-it-feels-right route.

Cal: I hear you, Don. For whatever it's worth, I'm not willing to go that far either. I guess I'm gonna have to think a little more about how I ought to be saying what I want to say here.

Leader Bill: I move that we table this particular debate until we've all had a chance to figure out another way of putting what's most important to us about the beliefs we hold. Do I hear a second?

It is not easy to listen in the way that Bill did that evening. When issues of belief are in dispute, everyone is vulnerable to sudden attacks of certitude that his or her understanding of what should be believed is better than anyone else's. Even experienced pastors and counselors, trained and practiced in the art of listening, can become momentarily bewitched by their own authority and hurl into the middle of their conversations with parishioners and counselees some astonishingly ill-timed declarations of what religious people should and should not think about this issue or that. Predictably, the outcomes are usually negative, as the following two examples illustrate vividly:

I knew I was in trouble as soon as I said it. I worried out loud that my daughter would go to hell if she got an abortion, and my pastor (Susan) started in on me about how things are different now than they were for the people who wrote the Bible, and that we shouldn't get hung up anymore on rules and laws made, literally, by men. I'm sure she thought she was being helpful, but I just wanted the conversation to be over and to get the heck out of there.

Harry was begging me not to leave him, and in desperation we went to our pastor for help. I prayed he'd cut me even the tiniest bit of slack, but I knew he wouldn't. And sure enough, Pastor Jim read me the riot act. He threw Bible verses at me,

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and laid the guilt on really thick by blaming me for even thinking about doing something that would make our kids' lives so miserable. He never once asked me what I thought Jesus would say about Harry's contributions to our marriage collapsing. Actually, Jim acted like he didn't think I was even a Christian. So, I walked out of the session, the marriage, and the church.

Failing to listen respectfully, to be supportive, and to communicate a genuine desire to understand others' experiences and point of view—however different they may be from our own—will doom not only our best efforts at persuading others to see things our way, as Susan discovered to her chagrin, but will threaten our very relationships with them as well, as Jim learned the hard way to his parishioner's detriment and to his own.

I first learned about these encounters when Susan and Jim sought me out to explore together how they had let things deteriorate so dramatically in their respective situations and how they might prevent anything like this from happening again. One question I asked both of them was what they might say to their anguished parishioners if by some magic they could start all over with them. The answers that Susan and Jim gave show real insight:

Susan: Wow! Another chance! Please, Lord, just one. If I ever did get another chance, the first thing I'd say would be: Art, it's tearing you up something awful to see your daughter about to do something you believe to be so wrong in God's eyes.

Jim: To me, divorce is wrong, period. But I know I drove Beth away by failing to give her the one thing she had a right to expect from me as her pastor—empathy. It was uncaring of me to try to push her in a different direction by laying on her something she already was tortured by. Maybe I might have been able to get her to look at repairing her marriage if I had been more respectful of what living with Harry had actually been like for her, and of how guilt-ridden she already was for letting everybody—God included—down.

Clearly, Art and Beth were struggling with crucial decisions, another's and their own, and they needed the

support that their pastors' attentiveness, empathy, and understanding could have provided them in abundance. Instead, as Jim acknowledged, they only got pushed around by people they had counted on to know better. Both Art and Beth reacted to the spiritual bullying in the same way, by putting as much distance as they could between themselves and their tormentors. Reasoning together, beginning and ending with good listening, might have made things turn out much differently, and much better.

Feelings, Ideas, and Faith: Connecting the Dots

When a deeply felt discussion about faith and belief gets out of hand, it is generally because those who generate them fail to put their discussion partners' needs to be heard above their own needs to speak. They listen neither to others' ideas nor for the feelings that lie behind them, and before long their disagreements are beyond mutually satisfactory resolution, at least until someone calls to mind the single most important principle of all good communication, whether about faith or anything else: listen patiently, try to understand the other's experiences and perspective, and work to say less rather than more. This section sketches what can happen positively when proponents of conflicting beliefs begin to put as much emphasis on this principle as they did on their militant advocacy.

Getting to the feelings behind thoughts

Some time ago, I gave a talk to lay members of parish worship committees on theology's contributions to liturgical reform. During the lunch that followed, a life-long Episcopalian, Lila, shared with our table how much spiritual pain the revisions of her denomination's Eucharistic liturgy had caused her over the years. Insensitively, I stated right away my appreciation for the more positive view of human nature that these revisions contained, in contrast with sixteenth century depictions of humanity's utter sinfulness before God (e.g., ". . . and there is no health in us . . ."). Politely, Lila interrupted me:

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I'm sure that what you say is right, and that I ought to be more accepting. Maybe I'm just an old lady too set in her ways to enjoy anything new anymore. But I miss so much (she begins crying softly) how beautiful the older language is—the sense of mystery in it, holiness all around, the wonder of it. Most of my friends just don't appreciate how important all of that is to me, how much I feel we've lost.

By this time in the conversation I realized that for this new friend, participation in the liturgy has less to do with the focusing of understanding than with the expression of feelings and, even more, of deep spiritual needs. While inwardly kicking myself for trying to offer her erudition instead of empathy, I asked her if she might be willing to tell us a little more about the feelings she used to experience in worship. I have never forgotten her response:

I felt safe, so very safe. I didn't have to think—I knew all the responses by heart, you know. I didn't have to worry about not keeping up or about doing something wrong. And all the while I was saying the words, I just felt like I was in the presence of a great mystery, and the mystery was about love, and assurance that everything was going to be all right.

Wherever it is manifested—in families, societies, or the church—the desire to “conserve” and the satisfaction that comes from being a good conservator root in a deep spiritual need for security, as well as in the vulnerability to anxiety whenever safety and security are perceived to be threatened. As I drove back to my office that day, I began thinking also about unappreciated spiritual needs that underlie more liberal orientations to the Christian faith. Almost immediately, I recalled an important lesson that I learned much earlier in my ministry, comparable to the one I had just received from Lila.

During my first pastoral appointment as a United Methodist pastor, my denomination was engaged in creating a new statement of its doctrines and doctrinal standards. The project was a mandated part of a just completed merger with the former Evangelical United Brethren Church. Reports coming out of the Theological Study Commission

guiding the work upset more than just a few of my parishioners and none more so than Henry, one of the congregation's most devoted leaders. One afternoon I sat with him at a work table in his barn, watching him repair a tractor part while he told me how angry he was with our church's "getting a whole bunch of new doctrines." When I tried to explain what I thought the Study Commission was and was not trying to do, he got even madder.

Pastor, the big reason I'm a Methodist is because I can believe what's right to me and not to a bunch of church officials and—excuse me for this, doctor—theologians with their heads up in the clouds somewhere. For three generations before me, my family were all strict Lutherans who toed the line on everything and never let me raise even so much as a murmur about what they told me I had to believe. It's taken a lot to get out from under all that, and now here comes the this new, "United" (his voice is dripping with sarcasm now) Methodist Church to tell me how to shape up all over again.

In the light of what disturbed Henry about our new denomination's theological self-appraisal, it is somewhat ironic that the major criticism of its final report was that it left too much room for individual opinion about what and how Methodists should believe. I wanted very much to get this deeply faithful man's thoughts about how the doctrinal study eventually came out, but he died before the work was completed.

The reactions of Henry and Lila provide valuable insights into why Christian disagreements about beliefs and practices in the church involve so much more than coming to different conclusions on the basis of purely rational discussion and deliberation. Lila needed to keep her grip strong on a doctrinal orientation that many thoughtful Christians regard as outmoded, because it gave her a sense of security. By contrast, Henry needed to cast aside ecclesiastically defined doctrines because they threatened his hard-won sense of freedom to think for himself as a Christian accountable to God and not the church. What made Lila and Henry so different is not the particular beliefs they

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held, but the deeper spiritual needs that they were attempting to meet by means of their very different approaches to belief in the life of faith.

Judging the worst by the best

A characteristic feature of the current debates between staunchly conservative and liberal Christians is the intensity with which each camp focuses on the very worst expressions of their opponents' outlook as the basis for their attacks. For instance, conservative Christians excoriate liberals for picking and choosing only the biblical passages that appeal to them instead of submitting themselves to God's Word as revealed in the Bible as a whole. And liberal Christians chastise conservatives for deforming the gospel message into a staccato citation of one biblical text after another, torn from the Bible's own God-given context as an anticipation of and witness to Jesus Christ. Or, liberal Christians pillory conservatives for presenting the Christian message to a non-Christian world with a give-no-quarter, take-it-or-be-damned attitude that is in the most literal sense of the word, dis-grace-full. And all the while, conservatives condemn liberals for selling out the very heart and soul of Christianity for the sake of winning the acceptance of non-believers on non-believers' own terms.

In spite of all this, however, there are still many conscientiously conservative and liberal Christians in the church who are less interested in converting people to their theology than they are in helping people develop a Christ-centered faith. To them, advancing the cause of "isms"—whether conservatism, liberalism, or any other kind of "ism"—can only be the Devil's work. As the following narrative will indicate, just about all but the most doctrinaire Christians grasp this fundamental point almost instinctively.

During a Christian Beliefs course I once offered to college students in a retreat setting, a young woman asked me in front of everybody if I would please "cut to the chase" and give them the short version of what I thought Christians should and should not believe. The group's laughter told me

that she was not the only one impatient to hear about the “Basic Christianity” I kept promising to talk about. “Ok, you’re on,” I said. “Let’s take our break now, and when you come back I’ll have a list of core Christian beliefs on the blackboard for us to look at together.” While the group was out of the room, I decided to experiment a little, and put up the four affirmations discussed in a previous chapter of this book that I believe to be at the heart of every form of conservative Christianity. “Tell me,” I asked the members when they returned, “whether you think this list is something like what you had in mind.” Several asked questions for clarification and others took modest issue with one or another of the statements, but by the end of the session there was a general agreement that the list represented reasonably well what they thought Christianity stands for.

At the next session, I continued my experiment, and began by asking the group whether anyone had any second thoughts about the way we had previously defined the basic beliefs of the Christian faith. No hands went up. “Well,” I offered, “I couldn’t help doing a little more thinking myself across our quiet time, along the lines of maybe adding a few things to the list we’ve already talked about. Would you be willing to look over what I came up with, and tell me what you think?” The group agreed enthusiastically, and so I wrote four new affirmations on the board, this time ones that I consider to represent liberal Christianity at its best.

After a short pause, one member of the group, Darlene, remarked that even though what I had just written looked different from what we discussed earlier, it also said pretty well what Christians probably do believe. By contrast, Wylie focused on the differences and wondered whether the lists could be combined at all. “Well,” Cary offered, “they sure don’t seem to be saying the same thing, but maybe they’re trying somehow to get *at* the same thing. Does that make any sense?” Lynette broke in with a positive answer to Cary’s question: “It sure does to me. See, these two lists we’re looking at—I want to say ‘Yes!’ to both of them. Please don’t

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tell me that I'm just totally confused." Before I could respond to Lynette's plea, Wylie jumped back into the conversation by saying, "Lynette, if you're confused, then I know I must be, because I'm right where you are on this: I don't want to give up anything on either of these two lists!"

For several months prior to this particular class, I had been immersed in conversations and correspondence with pastors, seminary students, and church leaders who felt caught between conservatives and liberals over how the church should transmit its message especially to the unchurched and the non-believing. I enjoyed conducting my little experiment with this group of college students on retreat because it gave me a chance to test out a hunch that was forming in my mind as a result of these previous months' labors. The hunch was that whenever conservative and liberal theologies are put forward as positive expressions of the gospel rather than as denunciations of anyone else's understanding of it, and in their best rather than their worst characterizations of core beliefs, then most Christians will see and affirm the truth in both perspectives and resist accepting one at the expense of the other. In the just described conversation, Cary's response to Wylie expressed especially well what I was struggling to make clear to myself at the time. In essence, both conservative and liberal expressions of the Christian faith are attempts to get at something that all believers can hold in common.

Every time I have had an opportunity to conduct this little experiment with other groups of inquirers, the result has been almost exactly what it was the first time. If the responses of these groups is any indicator, therefore, then conservative and liberal Christianity in their most visionary forms—and not in their most entrenched ones—seem to be equally credible and powerful expressions of the Christian faith at its very center. Employed together by communities of faith for whom unity rather than uniformity of belief is the goal, both conservative and liberal theologies can lead believers and inquirers alike to a better understanding and appreciation of what Christians should agree on, of what

they can continue to disagree about, and of how they will know the difference.

Taking back our projections

A while ago, I listened to two family law experts debate amending the Constitution of the United States to define the marital relationship as heterosexual, monogamous, and based upon mutual consent. In her opening statement, one of the participants told us that her lesbian partner had just given birth to their first child from an ex-husband's sperm. Not surprisingly, she argued for laws that would expand, not constrict, the kinds of marriages our society should recognize. The other speaker, a devout Mormon, gave an account of the State of Utah's efforts to enforce its long-standing ban on polygamous marriages. He argued for better enforcement of present prohibitions against being married to more than one person at the same time. Toward the end of his presentation, he revealed that he had himself grown up in a polygamous family of Mormon separatists. The discussion following this fascinating debate quickly became heated, even more so after an elderly Hindu man rose to ask anxiously whether people from his community are going to be imprisoned for arranging the marriages of their daughters.

Over lunch, I asked my fellow attendee, Roger, what he thought about the morning. Expecting to glean some wisdom from him about marriage and the Constitution, I was somewhat surprised by his answer:

Roger: I can't get over how intense we all were in there. It was as if we were in a life or death struggle to prove our point of view to the next guy. What's really getting to me is how defensive I got.

Leroy: Defensive of your point of view?

Roger: No, worse than that. I consider different points of view all the time and it doesn't bend me out of shape. All in a day's work kind of thing. But in there, it seemed like what we were defensive about was our own egos. At least, I know I

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was. It was like I absolutely had to have people agree with me. Is my ego that shaky?

It interested both of us that we were veering away from the content of the debate we had just heard, toward the participants' behavior during it and the listeners' defensive reactions after it. The conversation continued:

Leroy: Don't take this the wrong way, but I think you've got a pretty good size ego to worry about its getting shaky.

Roger: Ouch! Ok, I'll give you that one . . . I think what I'm really trying to get at is that I couldn't admit to myself that the lady lawyer and the Hindu gentleman had some points worth considering. So I went after everybody who agreed with them like they'd committed some terrible crime.

Leroy: Tell me a little more about why what they said upset you so much. I've always thought of you as the kind of guy who never gets flustered about new ideas.

Roger: But these are ideas about marriage. The sanctity of marriage. Like God intends it to be. Or does he?

Leroy: Watch out now! You're right on the verge of taking a second look at what you've always thought God was saying.

Roger: I think maybe I am, and it's got me scared and angry at the same time.

Leroy: I get the scared, but I'm not sure I understand the anger.

Roger: Well, it's like this. As a Christian, I should be like the Mormon speaker, coming down hard on the side of traditional marriages. But a lot of what the lesbian and the Hindu said in there was very attractive to me, and I'm angry with myself for letting it be.

Leroy: And maybe a little angry with them for making you feel bad about yourself?

Roger: Yeah, I have to admit that what you say is true. I do this a lot—get torqued at people who make it so easy to be like them when I know I shouldn't want to.

Sometimes, the things we see in other people that make us judgmental and combative are the very things that we will not admit are attractive to us. Roger, a competent and highly regarded family law practitioner, found himself all of a sudden giving credence to views of marriage that he thought he should be opposing with all his strength. He began

dealing with the incongruity in a way typical for him, by forcing his own position on others vehemently and angrily. To his credit, Roger accepted responsibility for his destructive behavior: "Better to be angry at them for saying what they said, than at myself for liking what I heard. Really mature, don't you think?"

Like Roger, most people who disagree strongly about matters of belief and action get angry with each other not when the other's point of view seems the most flawed, but rather when it seems the most credible. Afraid to admit that people on the opposite side of the fence might see things more clearly than we do, we distort their point of view in as inflammatory a way as possible, and then pour character assassination on the flames while fuming at our opponents' wrong-headedness. "Conservatives are just plain mean," one liberal Christian friend once said to me. Another Christian friend, a very conservative one, had his own thing to say about liberals: "They're naive and stupid." Modern psychology refers to the kind of behavior exhibited by both friends in terms of defense mechanisms and projection. Jesus spoke of it in a folksier way, contrasting the fixation on specks in others' eyes with the ignoring of logs in our own. (Matthew 7:3)

Although some of the animosity between Christians who understand faith differently has to do with specific beliefs and doctrines, a good bit more of it is the detritus of blocking out the fear of uncertainty and the embarrassment of finding plausibility in beliefs prematurely determined to be erroneous and dangerous. The first kind of animosity can be remedied by taking a closer look at the Christian tradition as a whole and rediscovering in it that affirming the right beliefs and asking the right questions are inextricably intertwined. The second kind can be remedied by declaring a moratorium on blaming others for holding the "wrong" opinions and by looking for ourselves more honestly in the negative images we project on them. If the moratorium holds long enough, believers of very diverse theological orientations can discover that learning from, instead of

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attacking one another, is the single best way of achieving just the kind of unity in the church for which every genuine Christian most earnestly yearns.

Chapter 9. **Core Beliefs: Maybe, Maybe Not**

All conscientious Christians worry from time to time about their ability to fulfill God's call to share clearly and well their core beliefs with others. They worry that they may lack an adequate grasp of these beliefs to start with and/or that they may not know the right words to express the grasp that they do have. They worry that what they do believe may not be congruent with what they think their churches expect them to believe, and that their take on the Christian faith could get in the way of others' developing their own. They worry that they may not understand a care receiver's question(s) about faith, and that their inability to answer the question(s) satisfactorily might leave the care receiver in unnecessary distress. In general, our vulnerability to worries like these is a good indicator of a growing faith and a deepening sense of obligation to honor God by expressing his love effectively in concrete situations of need. When our worrying becomes excessive, though, it may be time to examine one or more of the assumptions that typically give rise to it.

One assumption is that "real" Christians know what they believe and never get confused about it. Closely related to this assumption is another, that they know what others should believe and how to point this out definitively and convincingly. Underlying both of these assumptions is a still deeper one, that Christian beliefs have always and everywhere been the same, that they will withstand every test of earthly time, and at the pearly gates everything in them will be confirmed firmly and finally to be true from everlasting to everlasting. The fact of the matter, however, is that from Jesus' time to the present, his followers have held

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very diverse understandings of his message (and even of his identity) and, that in order to do these understandings justice the church that ministers in his name has learned to rely on a process of thinking that at its best makes room for and does not stifle wide-ranging, complex, and even contradictory-sounding affirmations of Christian truth. By way of examples: God is one *and* three; Jesus is God *and* man; Believers are raised bodily *and* spiritually; They are culpable *and* forgiven; The kingdom is here *and* not yet. The list of crucial conjunctions goes on and on.

Unhappily, Christians have not always shown a willingness to acknowledge and deal with this all-important fact about the so-called core beliefs of the faith. One telling sign of the church's failures as the Shepherd of Souls in the name of a loving Jesus is the perverse delight with which some of its leaders have pronounced condemnations of people courageous enough to disagree with arbitrary Papal, episcopal, and/or conciliar determinations of what is and is not the True Faith. Their denunciations have succeeded only in dividing people into warring factions, whose mutual disrespect, and sometimes even hatred, makes acknowledging the divine image in each other all but impossible. The history of controversy among Christians over right belief ("orthodoxy") is filled to overflowing with sadistically imposed pronouncements of accursedness along with terrifying images of amphitheaters, torture chambers, and battlefields. Even cathedral steps have been strewn with the bloodied and burned, whom their opponents managed only to expunge, never to love.

A tragic consequence of this jihadist approach to the establishment of core beliefs is the glee with which many disaffected people repudiate virtually anything and everything about the Christian tradition as arcane, parochial, obscurantist, patriarchal, world-denying, misogynist, and conscience-eviscerating. For them, the established churches are little more than walled-up fortresses of oppression which should be torn down as quickly as possible, in order to free the human spirit either to find or reject God on its

own terms. At both extremes of opinion—the rigidly orthodox at one end and the debunkers (e.g., the “new atheists”) at the other—there is the same unwillingness and inability to honor diverse understandings of the Christian message as an essential part of loving God and the human nature—especially its rational side—which he is creating.

The Importance of Sound Doctrine

Once, I shared ideas like those expressed in the previous paragraphs at a weekend seminar with a group of highly read, thoughtful, and deeply caring laypersons. At my first pause to take questions, the group’s convener, Arnie, interjected a comment that occupied all of our attention for the remainder of the session:

Are you saying, then, that we shouldn’t ever criticize anyone at all for what she or he believes? That seems a little extreme to me, even though I’m probably the first to insist on following our own conscience on matters of belief, and not leaving it to someone else to tell us what to assent to. Nevertheless, some beliefs are Christian and some aren’t, right? And don’t we have to give at least some priority to the one over the other?

Arnie was right on target. It was, is, and always will be crucial to the church’s integrity and credibility that Christians sort out sound doctrines from misleading ones, truth from falsehood, beliefs that build up from beliefs that tear down, and what faithfully represents God’s good news from what distorts it. The fact that many abuses have arisen as a result of the church’s doing this work badly in no way implies that the church ought not to be doing it at all. The fact that human beings are saved by God’s grace, and not by what they believe or do not believe about him, in no way implies that one belief is as good as another and that Christians should never challenge anyone else’s interpretations of God’s nature, will, and works.

Toward the end of the discussion that Arnie’s question provoked, another member of the group, Sandra, summed

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up well what is at stake for Christians in, as she put it, “straightening out what we believe”:

It’s the vertical and horizontal all over again. My relation with God is a kind of up/down thing that is a lot more his doing than mine, and that I experience better if I don’t analyze things too much. But my relation with all of you, and you with me, is something else. It’s an earth-to-earth thing between us, that depends a lot on what we believe together. If we don’t believe at least some things in common, then we don’t have a lot to say as a community to people in the world looking for what we have to offer.

Fred added a qualifier to Sandra’s statement that rounded things out well: “I agree that we need common beliefs to keep the horizontal dimension of our lives together in order. But what I believe gives me a focus for my relationship with God, too.” Beliefs are indeed as important to individual relationships with God as they are to a sense of unity in a community of faith. Holding sound beliefs protects against both idolatry and schism.

As important as Fred’s concern is to the fullness of faith, it is Sandra’s that is the primary focus of this section. Her concern is for beliefs that bring people together rather than divide them, for beliefs that proclaim one gospel to the one world God is creating, through people who rejoice deeply over being of one mind and at peace with one another. Crucial for fulfilling this central concern throughout the whole church is a commitment to represent the whole of the gospel, and not just a part of it, in every witness that Christians make to it. Whenever this commitment flags, divisiveness is the inevitable result, a divisiveness that church leaders and institutions (religious and secular) all too often and wrongly attempt to crush by imposing upon people either beliefs or doubts that are as limited and limiting as the stance for which they are the supposed corrective. The point of these considerations for faith care in helping relationships is this: when preoccupation with getting beliefs right is motivated by the desire to be a part of a genuinely inclusive community of faith, it can properly be

said to be inspired by God. However, when it is motivated by a desire to find grounds for condemning conscientiously doubting and dissenting believers and inquirers in the name of the allegedly true followers of Christ, it is just as surely inspired by God's enemies.

Across the centuries, the church has made use of a particularly charged word in its distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable opinions about the Christian faith. The word is "heresy." Theologically unsophisticated believers incorporate the word into their vocabularies about as easily as members of the Spanish Inquisition once did. One lay shepherd recently quoted delightedly a remark her care receiver dropped casually into their conversation: "Julie, you're probably going to think I'm the world's worst heretic, but I just don't believe that anybody will go to hell for not believing that Jesus rose bodily out of that tomb." The most widely understood meaning for "heresy" is as a synonym for beliefs officially designated as erroneous, offensive to God, and undermining of the church's fundamental message for the world. People who hold such beliefs, it has been taught, must be made to change their ways or suffer punishment from both true Christians and from God. Wherever it has arisen, this understanding of heresies and heretics has compromised almost every attempt of the church to be a credible example of what a community of grace, joy, and peace can be like for all people. There is a second way of understanding heresy, however, that fully justifies the church's concern to deal forthrightly with what Christians should and should not believe.

The second understanding shares with the first the notion that a heresy is indeed a "wrong" belief. However, it differs considerably in how it views a particular heresy's "wrongness." Upon this understanding, a heresy's primary deficit is its incompleteness; heresies are partial truths, but not the whole truth, and it is in this sense that they constitute "wrong" beliefs. Rather than summarily dismiss beliefs with which they disagree as totally false, people who subscribe to this second understanding instead look for the

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truth that every heresy does indeed contain, even though that heresy renders at best only an incomplete picture of the truth to which it aspires. Heresies can be plausible and even convincing assertions about God and God's saving work in Jesus Christ. But by either deliberately or from ignorance omitting something essential for faith, they confuse a part of the truth with the whole of it. In the light of an earlier chapter's discussion of the essentially paradoxical nature of core Christian beliefs, one way to characterize a heresy is as a statement of belief with the element of paradox left out.

Looking at heresies as partial truths differs in a second way from looking at heresies as total and dangerous errors. The latter situates heretical beliefs in the context of official deliberations within the institutional church and of catalogues (*syllabi*) of errors whose repudiation is necessary in order to escape divine and ecclesiastical punishments. By contrast, the former intentionally cultivates an openness to the ways in which heresies, understood as often attractive but always incomplete formulations of Christian belief, manifest themselves in personal faith and in everyday conversations under very ordinary circumstances between people who have few agendas to impose, axes to grind, or things to prove, in their struggles to make God's Word more effective in their daily lives. Heresies are more interesting, less threatening, and easier to deal with when they are viewed as containing truth rather than as excluding it. They mislead us not because there is no truth in them at all, but only because they confuse the partial truths that they do convey with the whole truth of God. Julie, the caregiver mentioned above, exhibited a deep appreciation of this understanding of so-called deviant opinions when she said to her care receiver, "Maybe it comes down to flesh and blood not inheriting the Kingdom of God, or something like that. But without a body at all? That doesn't quite get it for me, I guess. A 'spiritual body', perhaps?"

Contrary to what church leaders are often reluctant to admit, "deviant" opinions about God's Word abound everywhere in the church, as they always have. And they

cannot be dealt with responsibly by arbitrarily imposing one particular understanding of the gospel on fellow Christians and then expecting their disagreements with that understanding simply to go away. What is necessary, instead, is to learn a healthy respect for what each understanding of the gospel, our own included, does and does not contain of what is believed to be divine truth and to remain open to discerning more about that truth by exploring the many ways that Christian people across the centuries have sought to discover and apply it in circumstances very different from their own. This process leads inevitably to a deeper appreciation of the necessity for both-and rather than either-or language in bringing it fully to expression. The next section illustrates this process concretely.

Beliefs and The Gospel: Part and Whole

Throughout my ministry, I have been privileged to worship with many earnest, searching fellow believers—pastors, students, parishioners, counselees, friends—who gladly shared with me some of the hard-won and deeply-felt expressions of belief that anchored their personal faith. Six core beliefs from some of our conversations may be especially helpful to the present discussion:

God is a loving heavenly Father, not a stern-faced Judge who sends people to Hell.

Communion isn't about taking a little bread and a little juice; it's about meeting Jesus wherever we may be.

If you believe strongly enough, you can take whatever you most want to God in prayer, and God will give you everything you ask.

Everything in the Bible is inspired by God.

God helps those who help themselves.

Once saved, always saved.

It is difficult to imagine that any one of these strongly held beliefs could be put forward among most gatherings of

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Christians today without generating immediate and strong reactions. The reactions will be positive, negative, and in many shades between, and they will be accompanied almost certainly by heated discussion. However, for all of the intense feelings that beliefs like these inevitably churn up, there is one reaction to them that is almost certain not to occur: the denunciation of any or all of these statements of belief as “heretical.” One reason is that few Christians are any longer prepared to single out those with whom they disagree for the more extreme forms of punishment—e.g., humiliation, condemnation, and torture—that were more common in earlier areas. The other is that for most Christians, pronouncing a belief heretical, if it is to be done at all anymore, falls under the purview of church hierarchies and not of the larger body of the faithful.

These reasons are compelling, and naming any belief with which one differs a heresy will undermine constructive discussion under almost any conceivable set of circumstances. Nevertheless, it is just such beliefs as those quoted above that expose the inner essence and logic of all genuine heresies, whether designated ecclesiastically or nurtured personally: the confusion of a part of divine truth with the whole of it. These six passionately advocated beliefs, and so many others like them, share with one another a fundamentally non-paradoxical, either-or, and as a result partially misleading understanding of the nature of core Christian teachings. God is loving only, never a righteous judge. Jesus is everywhere, never here rather than there. There are never unanswered prayers along with answered ones. The words of the Bible are only God’s, not human beings’. God gives people only what they deserve, never what they have not earned. Salvation is a state of being infused by God, never a process that human beings can contribute to or frustrate. The only’s and never’s tell the story here, a story of reducing the mystery, grandeur, and paradoxicality of God’s nature, grace, and sustenance to unnecessarily simplistic affirmations that divide and diminish people rather than unite and enhance them as

pilgrims following a common way and sharing a common calling.

A very different care receiver from Julie's, Gennie, expressed her own faith-question this way:

I get so angry with my son when he starts picking apart the beliefs we've tried so hard to teach him. There's only one way to be a true Christian, and that's to believe what we're supposed to believe, period. Take Jesus' birth, for instance. He was born of a virgin, wasn't he? I just don't know how to get across to my son that believing this, and other things alike it, is what being a Christian is all about.

Actually, it isn't. Believing as a Christian is not, in fact, a matter of learning what everyone else is supposed to believe and then assenting to it. It is a matter of keeping our minds and hearts open to the ultimate mysteriousness of God and the unfathomable richness of God's grace. The opinions which have caused both believers and doubters the greatest harm are those that have sought to collapse one side or the other of what are essentially very complex, both-and statements that can be understood only by taking each side of each statement as seriously as one takes the other. Holding both sides of the statements in tension and exploring their depths together is what believing is all about. Believing as a Christian is a matter of willingly sacrificing uniformity of assent for the sake of honoring a God who cherishes the staggering diversity that believers in God have manifested at all times and everywhere. The closing section of this chapter seeks to make this perspective clearer by means of an extended discussion of the belief that Gennie is finding so important and of the resources that she and her caregiver, Antonia, might both find helpful.

Jesus' Conception and Birth: the Facts and the Symbol

One particularly contentious issue across all my years as a teacher of the faith has been the question of Jesus' supernatural origins. My struggle with it began early, when a

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parishioner took me to task for quoting a particular theologian in one of my first sermons. She agreed that what I quoted was pertinent to the sermon's topic (the Holy Spirit's gifts to the church), but she also thought that I should not have made reference to that theologian at all because he did not believe in the virgin birth. From that time to the present, wherever I go, one of the questions that I can still count on being asked is: "Doctor, do *you* believe in the virgin birth?" A second question almost always follows: "Do you believe that Jesus was God?"

Once I regarded most of my reluctantly-engaged-in conversations about the virgin conception and birth as tedious and as tangential to what I peevishly thought my listeners ought to be thinking about. Now, I look back on those sessions with belated appreciation for their helping me to see more clearly (a) that both the narrative and the doctrine of Jesus' origins exemplify a distinctively different logic from the one we use to interpret and confirm beliefs about the physical world in general, and (b) that it is this very different logic that defines the character of all the core beliefs we hold as Christians.

Fact and meaning

Most core Christian beliefs appear at first glance to take a form very much like that with which we are familiar in our dealings with the physical world. In specific, they seem to be rather straightforward descriptive statements about agents, actions, recipients of action, states of being, and circumstances like those we are familiar with and curious about from our everyday experiences. To be sure, the realities to which they refer are anything but purely physical ones; core beliefs strive to direct our attention to transcendent realities that are higher than the heavens themselves. But the way in which we refer to "sacred" things seems little different from the way in which we refer to "mundane" ones. For example, proclaiming that Jesus was raised from a tomb by God does not seem all that different in form from announcing that a baby was delivered from his

mother's womb by a doctor. Both statements seem to be about observable matters of fact, about particular actions performed on someone by someone else with consequences that may or may not be easily predicted. And their truth seems equally determinable by some combination of direct evidence and the inferences that direct evidence permits.

A closer look at both of these statements, however, will show just how deceiving their surface appearances can be. One describes what a mortal physician did on behalf of a very much alive pregnant woman, while the other celebrates what the Creator of the Universe did on behalf of an entombed body! What makes the first an uncomplicated assertion of fact is (a) that the kind of act it describes is repeatable and directly observable, and (b) that any observer could make clear to anyone else how he or she might go about observing and confirming similar kinds of acts for themselves. What makes the second something quite different is that, in its context, it refers to an unrepeatable act that was neither observed in fact nor is observable in principle. What many people believed they observed following Jesus' death was Jesus himself alive and well: "We have seen the Lord!" What they did not and could not observe, however, was *God's* act of bringing Jesus back to life. Even if some of them had been with Jesus in the tomb itself, watching for the precise moment of his resurrection, they could only have seen Jesus waking up, as from a sleep. They could not have seen God's act of awakening him. Why? Because, in the words of the Fourth Gospel, "No one has seen God at any time." (1:18) Certainly, someone's believing that God raised Jesus from the dead is itself an observable, describable matter of fact. What the belief states, though, is not and can never be.

What is true about this particular affirmation of belief is true about other core beliefs as well, such as the beliefs that God created the world out of nothing at all; that God is present everywhere at every moment of time; or that all things will come to their appointed end according to a pre-ordained, divine plan. These may look like ordinary

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descriptive statements whose truth can be established on the basis of indisputable evidence and credible, convincing logical reasoning. But once we set out to compile evidence and formulate arguments for them, their “ordinariness” begins to slip away from us before our very eyes, primarily because we can neither image, conceptualize, or verbalize in any ways familiar to us exactly what it is that each of these beliefs is asserting, factually. They remind us forcefully that, given who we are as finite and imperfect creatures and who God is as the infinite and perfect Creator, there must always be an incompleteness to everything that merely human interpreters of the faith can ever say about the divine nature, will, and work in the world. God’s being and rule forever exceed all that finite creatures can ever imagine, think, and say on the basis of their own perceiving, reasoning, and understanding, and because this is so, no humanly articulated belief ever does full justice to God’s greatness, goodness, and graciousness. It is only from a perspective such as this that we can possibly hope to fathom the great mystery contained in one of our faith-tradition’s central affirmations, that God became flesh and dwelt among us.

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive . . .”

On the face of it, the affirmation that Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary seems to be about an impregnation without human sperm and a delivery without a broken hymen, both extolling the greatness of God and the uniqueness of the resulting offspring. The question for faith, however, is whether it is at this surface level or at some other level of affirmations like these that God speaks most fully. The witness of the apostolic tradition as a whole, and the Jewish foundations upon which its witness rested, strongly suggest that the second possibility provides the better answer.

Although the traditions upon which the doctrine of the virgin birth is based are clearly laid out in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, they are mentioned only rarely elsewhere in the New Testament. By way of the most

important examples, neither Peter, Paul, Mark, John, nor the authors of Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, and the Pastoral Epistles pay any attention at all to the traditions about Jesus' birth that seemed to be so important for Matthew and Luke. Indeed, if Paul's single reference to Jesus' birth at Galatians 4:4 (" . . . born of a woman . . . ") is any indication, their emphasis fell not so much on Jesus' divine origin as on his very human one. For them, the distinctive fact about his origin may have been simply that his mother was young rather than old.

For Matthew and Luke, of course, the emphasis is not on the human, but on the divine origin of the Nazarene, and their testimony must be taken seriously. Taking the respective narratives seriously, however, does not entail construing them as either (a) composed of statements whose primary meaning is the literal description of a supernatural occurrence, or (b) statements the assent to which is essential for genuine faith, or (c) both. A closer look at the context for both the Matthean and Lucan accounts of Jesus' conception and birth should make this plain.

Clearly, Matthew and Luke drew freely upon varied efforts of early Jewish Christians to present the details of Jesus' life against the background of ancient prophecies about a coming Deliverer (Messiah) of Israel from all her enemies and from every kind of harm. Most typically, these efforts sought to demonstrate Jesus' Messianic identity by showing how everything he said and did and everything that happened to him fulfilled exactly what had been prophesied through the centuries about what God's chosen Messiah would be like. A prominent feature in at least some of these demonstrative arguments—obviously, in those favored by Matthew and Luke—was the idea that Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies not only by his death and resurrection—the primary emphasis of Paul and his followers—but also in his conception and birth. Especially important for this purpose, as the first chapters of Matthew and Luke indicate, was a particular Isaianic prophecy: “

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Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14, KJV)

Revered as this passage is in Christian circles, however, it simply cannot bear the weight that Matthew and to a lesser extent, Luke, placed upon it originally. What makes this conclusion inescapable is the fact that the text itself had so little significance in pre-Christian times to the very Jews for whom anticipating the coming of a Messiah represented the very heart and soul of faith. Of the hundreds of Old Testament passages that shaped the Messianic expectations of the Jewish people from the Exile in Babylon to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, Isaiah 7:14 was one of the least frequently relied upon, if indeed it was relied upon at all. In spite of the hold that this particular prophesy has had on Christian sensibility and belief, Messianic prophecy in Old Testament times showed little if any anticipation that the Messiah would be one who comes into the world through a supernatural conception.

As a whole, then, the apostolic tradition strongly challenges the view that the doctrine of the virgin conception and birth expresses a core belief for all Christians, the assent to which is essential for faith. It also calls into question the view that the doctrine's primary purpose is to assert as fact a supernatural happening under the conditions of time and history. In specific, and contrary to the standard Christian interpretations of Isaiah 7:14, the Hebrew text of this passage speaks of a young woman (*alma*), and not a virgin (*betula*), giving birth to the coming Deliverer. It is true that in one Greek translation of the passage a hundred years before Jesus' birth (the Septuagint), the mother of the coming Messiah is referred to explicitly as a virgin (*parthenos*). However, later Greek translations of this passage do not repeat the practice; instead they use *neanis*, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *alma*. Further, the Septuagint rendering itself offers little support for interpreting Isaiah 7:14 as the Christian tradition frequently does. What its Greek says literally is that a woman, who is now a virgin, will at some future time conceive. It does not

say unequivocally that at that future time, also, the woman will be a virgin.

Keeping the facts from spoiling Christmas

One Advent Sunday morning, I happened to overhear an interchange between two friends in a hallway on my way to the worship service. I had just finished teaching a class on the seasons of the church year, and was reviewing in my mind how I had dealt with the history of celebrating Christmas. Otherwise, I might have missed picking up on the conversation altogether:

Anne: What a downer! Here we were, primed and ready for Christmas, and our teacher suddenly decides to tell us that the Christmas story is just that—only a story! That'll make a nice conversation around the lunch table today! I sure hope the kids are getting a different version of things.

Sue: (Laughing) What can you expect from a religion professor?!

Anne: Probably just about what I got! But she *did* start us thinking about some things that at least *I* hadn't thought about before.

Sue: And that's all she said she was trying to do. Maybe she did come on a little too strong, though.

Anne: This Christmas thing is really a pretty big deal for me. Did you know that I was baby Jesus in our church's Christmas pageant when I was two months old? It "took!" I've been hooked on it ever since.

Sue: I've never been in one, but I'm just as hooked on pageants as you are. I get a lot out of seeing not only real live people up there on the stage, but people I know. They all make Jesus' humanness and vulnerability so vivid to me.

Anne: When I was in that manger, I guess it didn't matter a whole lot whether my Mom was a virgin or not!

Sue: Maybe it didn't matter to the shepherds and the wise men either.

It is because I am a loyal veteran of Christmas pageants myself (alas, as a spectator only: I never got my own part in one) that I cherish so deeply the memory of this brief conversation. What pageants do best—and live Nativity

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scenes do even better—is to keep the focus more on the baby and less on his mother. They prepare viewers better to discover their Lord’s divinity by contemplating his weakness rather than his power, his dependence rather than his sovereignty, his entering into rather than his rising above the human condition, the flesh he became as well as the Logos he was. Certainly, the story of Mary’s conception and birth played and plays an important role in shaping one early understanding of Jesus’ divinity as present from the very beginning of his life as well as after the resurrection. Paradoxically, though—and this is what I heard my two friends saying so well to one another that morning—his divine nature is sometimes most evident in his very acts of emptying himself of it. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Clearly, there is far more to the affirmation that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary than the description of an occurrence on the plane of ordinary human history. At best, what the affirmation says can only hint very enigmatically at what it intends to mean. The faith that still gives rise to it is a faith that, when logic’s limits are reached, willingly relinquishes clarity for the sake of honoring mystery, in particular, the literally indescribable mystery that God Godself became flesh and dwelt among us. It is the very transcendence of its subject (the Son of God) to its language (a humanly constructed proposal for others’ assent) that has made the doctrine of the virgin conception and birth so vulnerable to overly imaginative as well as overly literal renderings that sacrifice both historical accuracy and intellectual credibility.

In sum, then, core Christian beliefs convey far more than the mere declarations of fact that are also embedded in them. Indisputably, for example, Jesus experienced terrible pain at the end of his life “under Pontius Pilate”—this fact is beyond reasonable dispute. That Jesus is “God’s only Son,” however, can neither be established nor disconfirmed by objective historical investigation of facts alone; this is a quite extra-ordinary “fact” that only faith can finally determine. The particular assertion that has been the subject of this

section is that Jesus was born of a woman named Mary and the confession of faith in her own virginity and in Jesus' divinity that surrounds it. It is the confession, and not the facts embedded in it, that point to the ultimate ground of all existence, to the reason why there is anything at all and not just God, to the delight that the Creator takes in all the works of his hands, and to that love alone which binds and knits all things together. Like all core beliefs, what the Christian tradition says about the meaning of Jesus' conception has always transcended whatever facts that the belief itself contains—even parthenogenesis as an empirically established possibility. Overly literal descriptions of only the facts themselves inevitably get in the way of those genuine encounters with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit that are finally expressible, in St. Paul's words, more by sighs than by words.

Chapter 10. **Learning From Our Mistakes**

Even with the deepest commitment to listening and encouraging, conscientious Christian caregivers will make mistakes from time to time in their caregiving relationships. Learning from present mistakes for the sake of preventing future ones is the primary concern of this concluding chapter. It begins with a brief summary of what this book has already said about faith-talk at its best, and then goes on to provide some concrete examples of how things can go wrong in it and of how to get the conversations back on track. The major emphasis throughout the discussions that follow is on acknowledging prayerfully our humanness and fallibility as Christian friends and caregivers, and on trusting in God's power and grace to overcome the mistakes that we do and will make in striving to minister to people in His name.

The Answering is in the Listening

People who are struggling with questions about faith and belief need and deserve answers that reflect both the best that is to be found in the Christian tradition and the best that their own reasoned judgment and conscience can bring to life's challenges in the here and now. In general, the most helpful answers are those whose truth is discovered for oneself, with the encouragement of others. Nevertheless, earnest questions about the Christian faith are frequently met with highly general exhortations and pronouncements which allow little room for exploring why a particular question is of concern to the particular person asking it, and almost no encouragement to discover more than just one

way of answering it. A life-long Episcopalian, distraught over the possibility that her diocese may break from the denomination over the issue of homosexuality, is told: “You just have to trust that our leaders are telling us only what God is telling them, that we have to disaffiliate.” A father of two severely troubled teen-agers, painfully second-guessing before his Fundamentalist pastor his decision to divorce their mother two years ago, is comforted with the proclamation: “You don’t have to worry about your sin if you trust in the Lord; he already paid the price for it in full on the cross.” A staunchly pro-life advocate, still in shock over an unexpected pregnancy at age forty-four, is advised by her Catholicism-bashing good friend: “Abortion is your decision and yours alone to make.”

As “answers” to both stated and unstated faith-questions, all three of these sincerely-intended affirmations are more than passably Christian. And any or all of them might be true and right for any or all of these struggling believers at one time or another. But whether they and other affirmations like them are helpful in the particular circumstances that give rise to them in the first place can only be known by patient and respectful listening, waiting, asking questions, and then listening and waiting some more. This is a process which resists giving answers—whether our own or others’—and instead encourages people in need of them to begin composing the answers that will make the best Christian sense to them on their own terms.

“This idea of listening, and listening, and listening some more really grabbed me when you first introduced it to us,” Patrick told me. It had been quite a while since he completed one of my training classes, and during that time he had become an experienced and effective caregiver of whom I was very proud. “And it sounded so easy,” he went on:

Boy, was I wrong. Listening well is one of the hardest things I’ve ever tried to do. *And* it’s one of the most rewarding. But just when I thought I was on top of it, working with people on grief and family conflicts and parenting their parents and things like that, I had a care receiver who all of a sudden

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brought up big questions about God and suffering and heaven, and—well, his pain scared me so bad I wanted to take it all away right then, by using just the right words to express just the right answers so that we'd end up praising the Lord together and thinking everything was totally, completely, wonderfully all right.

When I asked Patrick what he did about his scare other than what he wanted to do, he smiled and said:

I started thinking to myself that I needed to ask questions and not spout off the first pious thing that came into my head, but for what seemed like hours I didn't know what to ask. And then it came to me. I checked out with him whether I was understanding his questions right, encouraged him to pick the one that was most bothering him at the moment, and lo and behold he was off and running and I wasn't scared anymore.

I especially appreciated the next question that Patrick asked his care receiver: "Any thoughts on why this particular issue has become so important to you right now, rather than at some other time?"

Listening carefully to people as they struggle to express hard questions about their personal faith is essentially no different from listening to people as they struggle to cope with any other life-issue. It is just as hard, but no harder, and it threatens just as readily but not more so to dissolve into doing too much of other people's work for them rather than supporting them in their doing the work themselves. The idea of racing in with quick fixes, whether of unresolved grief or unresolved doubt and everything in between, is a very seductive idea, particularly in its hinting that there is wisdom to impart and accolades to garner by the imparters. By contrast, the idea of keeping in the background and congratulating people for solving their problems on their own seems, well, un-rewarding. As one pastor with a good sense of humor put it, "it's my responsibility to keep my people's faith intact, isn't it? And I want to get all the credit that's due me for it!" Quickly, he eased my mind by saying, "Just kidding!" And then his good friend chimed in, "Yeah, sure."

A little later on in this same conversation, another pastor jumped in with a question that raises a crucial issue for the dynamics of faith-care that I have just been describing:

But *isn't* it the responsibility of a caregiver, whether it's us or our laypeople, to help somebody with a faith-question to answer it the way the gospel answers it? To me, this listening approach looks like a *just* listening approach and that whatever the care receiver says, no matter how theologically off base it is, is okay. "Kill the infidels," for instance. *That's* ok?

No, killing infidels is not ok, anymore than denying medical treatment to poor people, or worshipping nature goddesses, or accepting only men as church leaders, or deeming the universe to be the creation of an evil deity are ok. None of these is ok, and they are not ok because the gospel, properly understood, makes it impossible to say otherwise. This pastor is very wise and very right—up to a point. Where he is not right is in his assumption that this very same gospel is to be understood in its every detail at all times and everywhere the same way, and that because this is so, there is only one thing that the gospel has to say to people in every kind of situation and to every kind of question about its meaning and its truth.

Even so, however, the pastor is right in his assumption that though we can question and disagree about what the gospel means for different times, places, and circumstances, we are still raising questions and disagreeing about how to interpret the *gospel*. That is, our questions and disagreements are about what is and is not God's own "good news" for us, and not about mere opinions floating in the air, alighting on people willy-nilly, no one of which demonstrably better than any other. Our listening to people who may indeed be feeling "whirled around by every fresh gust of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14) is a listening for what the God of the Christian gospel is in fact doing in their lives while storms of questioning and doubting rage. We bear the storms with them encouragingly, in the sense of lending a little of our own courage for the struggle to live a life worthy

of just that God's incomprehensible mercy toward and faith in us.

Saying the Right Things at the Wrong Times

Phyllis was sitting on the living room floor, crying and rocking gently from side to side. It took her a long time to get the words out. "Why . . . why?" Her jaw tightened as she went on. "He was such a loving person . . . always giving . . . never complained . . . to endure so many things going so wrong, and nobody could stop it . . ." Warren, Phyllis' husband, seemed momentarily at a loss for any words, overwhelmed by the intensity of his wife's reactions. Painfully silent minutes passed. Then, Warren slowly turned to the couple's pastor, Steve, and blurted out the question for which there is never a satisfactory answer: "How can we go on believing that God is always in charge when he lets something happen like this? Tell me! Where's there any good in how Matt had to die? Where? Can't God do anything about things like this?"

Matt, Phyllis' only and much beloved brother, had just died from AIDS, contracted as a teen-ager through unprotected sex. Throughout Matt's long and ultimately unsuccessful course of treatment, Phyllis and Warren had frequently sought Steve's help in order to deal with their mounting grief and anger, the latter compounded by fellow parishioners' depiction of Matt's disease as a punishment from God. Phyllis now expressed her distress in words she drew from a favorite hymn: "My mind just isn't 'gladsome' any more, Steve. God hasn't been 'kind' to Matt or to us, and I'm having a lot of trouble trusting whether his mercies are ever all that sure." Warren intellectualized his own feelings somewhat, but he did not discount them:

I'm not quarreling with anything that's out there, or with why God chose to put it there. I'm only trying to figure out why there isn't a better harmonizing between what's out there than there seems to be. Viruses have as much right to exist as we do, I guess. But why do they have the right to kill us off like they do?

Desperate to comfort his distraught parishioners, Steve made a decision that proved unwise. Avoiding a direct response both to Phyllis' poignant lament and to Warren's searching question, Steve instead launched into sharing a hard-won discovery from his own personal journey of faith:

I've had things happen in my life, too, that made me question God's goodness and power. What I learned, though, was that the Holy Spirit was using my questioning to open up even deeper mysteries of his providence and grace. It will happen to you, too, if you'll let it.

Not surprisingly, Phyllis responded to Steve's testimonial with only barely disguised scorn: "I know you want to help, but what you're saying to us only sounds like just more 'there, there, everything is going to be all right.'" Warren chose his own words with bluntness and belligerence:

Deeper mysteries? That kind of talk makes me even madder. What kind of a God would put Matt through all he suffered, and us with him, to teach us all something that we couldn't have learned some other way? Not the kind of God I want to have anything to do with.

Clearly, Steve's ministry to this grief-stricken couple was off track. Intending to comfort Phyllis and Warren, he only angered them. And by his next statement, he made their pain even worse: "Where is that wonderful faith that I've seen in you these past months? You've been such an inspiring witness to Matt, and if we're going to turn other people's hearts at church, you must keep your own hearts strong." Minutes later, Steve beat a retreat to the door, all the while enjoining his beloved parishioners to trust the Lord in all things and promising to check in with them after they have prayed some more about their commitment to God.

Early the next morning, Steve called me for help. "I can't remember a time," he stammered over the telephone, "when I ran so roughshod over people's feelings. I wanted so much to make them feel better. And when they didn't react the way I hoped they would, I just wanted to get away from them. What's wrong with me?" When Steve and I met face to

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face later that day, I asked him to go over the previous evening's conversation again, and to focus especially on what he was feeling while listening to Phyllis and Warren rail against God. He immediately acknowledged feeling angry that two of his most admired parishioners were repudiating once rock-solid convictions about God's compassion and understanding. Our talk proceeded as follows:

Leroy: As you described yourself in the conversation with your parishioners, Steve, you sounded to me more scared than angry.

Steve: I did get out of there pretty fast, didn't I?

Leroy: Any thoughts about what you might have been running from?

Steve: I think I was scared that Phyllis and Warren would find out just how much Matt's suffering had shaken my own faith.

Leroy: So there isn't that much difference between how you are looking at Matt's illness and death and how Phyllis and Warren are.

Steve: And that's making me feel as much guilt as I feel fear. I'm supposed to be helping Phyllis and Warren with wise spiritual guidance, but I don't have any, and for a few minutes I got angry with them instead of with myself.

Leroy: I'm betting that you started straightening that out on the way home.

Steve: I called you just as soon as I got in the door.

Leroy: Ok, I think you're tracking pretty well the anger and guilt you're feeling. But I'm wondering if there isn't more about the fear part. Part of it seems clear enough. You were scared that Phyllis and Warren would find out something about you that you didn't want them to know.

Steve: I guess I have to own up to being scared about what's really going on in me, whether anybody else ever finds out about it or not.

Leroy: About the shakiness of your faith?

Steve: (Pause) About the hell to pay for losing trust in God.

Leroy: Down the road, you mean?

Steve: That, too, but hell here and now also. The hell of not feeling God's presence and love in my life.

Learning From Our Mistakes

Leroy: As tough as it is to feel guilty about blaming your parishioners, maybe it's even tougher to live with being scared—either that there's no God at all or that he doesn't care one way or the other anyway.

Steve: That's where I think Phyllis and Warren are right now, driving away their scare by getting angry and feeling guilty.

Leroy: You, too?

Steve: Me, too.

Leroy: What do you think might happen if you shared more openly with Phyllis and Warren some of your own struggle to accept Matt's death?

Steve: My first thought is they would give up on me.

Leroy: What's your second thought?

Steve: That they might risk our trying to figure things out together.

When Steve returned to his couple's home that evening, things went better. He said no more about the triumph of faith over doubt that he had earlier extolled. And instead of exhorting Phyllis and Warren to maintain—somehow—a "proper" Christian attitude toward the tragedy afflicting them, he began by expressing some of his own painful feelings and questions:

Steve: I've been thinking a lot about our last visit, and I want you to know how very sorry I am for the way I let it end.

Phyllis: We thought you were pretty put out with us.

Warren: But we realized that we couldn't blame you. We're hard to be around these days. More than a few of our friends have as much as said so.

Phyllis: But it was still hard to face that even our own pastor was about to give up on us.

Steve: It sure must have seemed so, from the way I acted—fussing at you for not being stronger in your faith and then getting up and walking out on you.

Phyllis: I just wish I could be as strong in my faith as you are in yours.

Steve: Well, before you continue on with that comparison, let me share a little more of where I am right now as I struggle to come to terms with Matt's death. No, Phyl, it certainly doesn't seem like God's done right by Matt, and that's tearing me apart, too. And Warren, you put such a profound question

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about those dreadful viruses so respectfully, and I admire you for that. I'm really desperate for an answer to it, just like I think you are.

For most of their time together that evening, Phyllis, Warren, and their pastor openly and together sought strength in their grief and for their faltering faith. As Steve would express it some weeks later, it was just that spirit of openness and honesty that enabled all three to find their way back to trusting in God, together.

Repairing the Damage

Just as there is much to be learned from Steve's ministry with Phyllis and Warren about how to make a crisis of faith even worse, there is also much to be learned from it about how to repair unintended damage before it gets out of hand. Steve's difficulties with his couple began with a failure to heed an overarching principle of both good conversation and effective caregiving: listen, and then be ready to listen some more. In his fervor to talk Phyllis and Warren out of their negative feelings and thoughts as quickly as possible, Steve did the one thing that he almost never does in his role as a pastoral guide. He kept on talking, from a perspective and about an experience beyond the capacity of his troubled parishioners to appreciate at the time.

In spite of his blunders with Phyllis and Warren, however, Steve almost immediately began to prove himself an effective caregiver by the way that he accepted full responsibility for the session's downturn. Almost by the time he reached his car that evening, he had assessed how unhelpfully the visit ended, identified his own behavior as the main cause, and committed himself to find out why he was undermining his own best intentions for the couple. In a similar situation, another pastor I know reacted quite differently: "They just won't listen to the very people who most want to help them, myself included, so they have only themselves to blame for how bad they are feeling." For this pastor, there must always be blame assigned when things go wrong, and if it is pastoral care that is not going well, the

care receiver and not the caregiver is the one at fault. By contrast, Steve not only refused to let himself off the hook for his mistakes; he refused to play the blame game entirely. Quickly regaining perspective on the situation, he blamed neither himself nor his care receivers. Instead, he made himself accountable for his own contributions to an unhappy situation, and sought help in order better to comfort Phyllis and Warren on their terms rather than on his.

There are many reasons why, in spite of their best efforts to the contrary, even the most conscientious caregivers sometimes fail to listen long enough and well to others in need. Some people simply do not know how, usually because respectful listening to others played little if any role in their upbringing, and hold little or no value for their approach to life in the here and now. One lay shepherd expressed her own struggle to become a better listener this way:

Sometimes it seems like I'm working on tuning in to other people harder than anybody I know, and getting fewer results. You can't imagine how hard it was growing up around people who only shouted at each other. (Smiling as she shouts) But I'm working on it! And I've got friends telling me I'm getting better at it. It's just that I have so far to go.

Steve, too, knows about the difficulties of unlearning the bad habit of substituting talking, even if not shouting, for listening. In this respect, his family of origin is not much different from this lay shepherd's. Both she and Steve, however, are "working on it," and though they have occasional lapses, they usually pick up on them right away, readjust their behaviors, and begin listening better again.

Another reason why otherwise very caring people fall into the unhelpful pattern of talking more than they listen is that they become too eager to "fix" things for others that others should "fix" for themselves. This pattern, too, is sometimes the result simply of following the wrong role models. By way of illustration, a good friend once told me with considerable frustration how hard it is to live up to his father's omnicompetence:

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The guy can do anything, and is ready at the drop of a hat to jump in and take over for everybody in every conceivable situation. No surprise that he is a hugely successful businessman and that he takes such good care of his family, me included. Sometimes I really feel like a failure that I'm not the problem-solver he is, but at least I keep on trying.

As did my friend, Steve also grew up with a strong drive to make things better for people. In Steve's case, it was his mother who was the model. And so, he admitted, when Phyllis and Warren were falling into a spiritual abyss, he did "what came naturally" to him. He threw them a rope and started pulling—before either of his parishioners showed any inclination to grab on. Steve had a catchy name for this part of himself: "If I didn't watch myself constantly, I would end up being a kind of spiritual handyman—no job too small, and all that." What he said next shows that there is a good bit more to this Fix-It pattern, in himself and many others like him, than the mere emulation of another's outward example: "I know that working so hard to make other people more spiritual keeps me from being so anxious all the time, and from having to look inside myself to find out why." Steve then went on to describe his mother's scurrying around on others' behalf as a running away from having to pay too much attention to her own inner self: "I really think," he mused, "that Mom was pretty scared about what she might find if she started getting in touch with herself more. When I was in seminary she warned me not to pay much heed to 'all that psychology I was learning,' that it would only mess me up." Trying to take charge of someone else's life, Steve is discovering, is often a way of quashing anxiety about one's own.

A therapist to whom I have made a number of referrals once told me very candidly about how hard she has to fight within herself against rushing in to "cure" her clients of their distresses:

It's ludicrous on the face of it, of course, for me to think I can cure anybody of anything. But sometimes I'm ready to go for it anyway. Especially when I'm feeling on the verge of being

out of control in my own life and scared to death about it. Then it's the "let's whip this family into shape" business, because I'm the one who's feeling so far out of shape.

Having to get people in crisis to look at their situation the "right" way is a major impediment to effective caregiving—whether offered by therapists, pastors, spiritual guides, or friends—because it puts the caregiver in the position of expending more energy on his or her largely unconscious issues than on the care receiver's quite conscious ones. It serves neither party in the relationship well. Caregivers will continue to feel anxious about how far off the mark they may be in their own lives, and care receivers will continue to feel anger and guilt about their inability to measure up to their caregivers' expectations of them. When Steve acknowledged having the same kind of uncertainties that Phyllis and Warren were experiencing in their own loss, his frantic desire to restore their confidence in God eased. He began to wait patiently, as he put it, "for God's succor on God's own terms and in God's good time", in the midst of rather than detached from his cherished parishioners' anguish.

There is nothing inherently wrong with sharing one's personal journey of faith in caregiving situations. In fact, in some situations it could be wrong *not* to. To a newly widowed parishioner, a still grieving pastor may decide to acknowledge quietly how hard it is to be strong for her own children's sake while sometimes feeling so spiritually depleted herself. To a care receiver whose self-esteem is near collapse in the wake of a bankruptcy, a lay caregiver may decide to confess a past business mistake of his own and to describe some of the difficulties of overcoming its consequences. To a young woman doubting her ability to fulfill the obligations she would have to uphold were she to become a member of a religious order, a nun may decide to recount something of her own struggle with her vocation and how she found it possible to give up what she had to give up in order to fulfill it. It can be especially helpful to people suffering a crisis of faith to know that at least some of their fellow believers understand what they are going

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through, on the basis of personal experience rather than in the abstract.

What makes the simple, quiet sharing of mutual understanding helpful is (a) its timing, and (b) its focus on the recipient's need rather than on one's own. What Steve initially offered Phyllis and Warren might have been received more warmly and gratefully had it been offered later in their conversations together, once the couple became ready to hear it. That Steve's own earlier experience would not be wholly irrelevant to his parishioners' present need was confirmed toward the end of his next visit with them. After sitting silently for a time, while Steve and Phyllis were talking together, Warren re-entered the conversation pensively: "Steve, I'd like to ask a little more about what you said earlier that set me off so much. I'm sorry I got so angry with you about it. You didn't deserve that. Would you be willing to give it to me again? Maybe this time it'll get through to me."

Warren's request made it easy for Steve to express again his trust that God is with people in all their genuine questioning. This time, though, he shared his personal experience of belief triumphing over doubt slowly and even-handedly, in a way that encouraged rather than discouraged Warren's questions and that respected Warren's doubt. When Warren finally said, "I really would like to believe that, Steve, but I'm just not there yet," he was paying eloquent tribute to the freedom that Steve had acknowledged in him, to draw his own conclusions about other people's ways of dealing with the kind of crisis he and his wife were suffering. Toward the end of their further discussions, Warren looked back at that particular moment in their work and said to Steve, "You'll never know how much I appreciated having the room to breathe that you gave me right then." Phyllis, musician that she was and is, added a comment that Steve especially treasured: "I was breathing better again too, from not having to be a better Christian than I was. And you know what? I think right then I must have been breathing in some of the very breath of God." Edwin Hatch's hymn from which

Phyllis drew her words, “Breathe On Me, Breath of God,” is one of the great hymns of the church. It celebrates especially movingly the biblical notion that God’s breath (Spirit) brings new life with it. When it is hard for us to breathe on our own spiritually, God does some of the breathing for us.

A Theologian in Every Pew

When I was considering titles for this book, this is the one that kept coming to mind. It expresses what has been a favorite idea of mine for a long time. Realistically, though, the word “theologian” is off-putting to a lot of people, and I even get a little nervous myself when I am called one more than once in the same introduction. Nevertheless, we do not hesitate to invoke the word “theology” in all kinds of discussions when the pressing question is what we should believe and do as Christians. Searching for answers to just this question is what theology does, and anyone who has ever engaged in the process is, perhaps without knowing it, a theologian too. As one parishioner put it, “I guess I’ve gotta start sorting out my theology; the old one isn’t working so well.” When I asked him to say a little more, he made two comments that go to the very heart of what theology is all about: “Well, for one thing, I’m not as sure as I used to be about what’s Christian and what’s not. And for another, I’m not sure that what some people are saying is Christian makes a whole lot of sense anymore.” After a perfectly timed pause, he added: “No offense, preacher.”

The classical definition of theology in the church is well expressed by the phrase *fides quarens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding. One important implication of this phrase is that raising questions and thinking hard about the Christian faith is an essential and ongoing part of what it means to be a Christian. Faith is not something that we either have or do not have; it is something that, with the help of a loving and merciful God and of people who love and serve Him with gladness, we are in the process of acquiring, all of our lives. In the process, what lies before us is often something more like “puzzling reflections in a mirror” than

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something we can see “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12), and because this is so, our understanding of the God in whom we trust and the beliefs we hold about Him must remain incomplete, even as our seeking must remain without ceasing.

In a previous chapter of this book, the *fides* of the classical formula was interpreted to mean trust and belief. Here, I want to add two other traditional differentiations, between *what* we believe as Christians (e.g., as defined by creeds and doctrines), and *how* we come to believe what we believe (e.g., in the balancing of scripture and tradition with experience and reason). Or: between faith as the content of our beliefs and faith as the process of acquiring beliefs and making them our own. It is important to honor both aspects of believing. In putting the emphasis on listening to and encouraging people in times of questioning and doubting, though, I have focused more on the process of helping people to decide for themselves what they can and cannot believe than it does on conveying explicit beliefs and asking for assent to them as conveyed. In words which should be more than familiar by now, I have emphasized listening to people’s questions as much as I have providing answers to them.

Most educators and evangelists do well at answering people’s questions about the content of the Christian faith. As do practitioners of that particular branch of theology known as apologetics, whose concern is to defend the truth of Christian beliefs against those who doubt or deny it. That is one reason why they occupy the special places they do in the life of the church. And many laypeople are hesitant about putting themselves in the position of dealing with questions about faith that they assume only those more knowledgeable than they should be dealing. There is something to be said for their hesitation. The hard questions about Christian belief and action that have been discussed in this book are being asked forcefully today not only by the unaffiliated and the disaffected, but by many of the most thoughtful and conscientious members of our churches as well, not to

mention the very teachers, evangelists, and apologists who minister to them. Because they are very difficult questions to answer, it is understandable that lay caregivers might want to refer them to people they believe have better answers to them.

But people who ask hard questions about faith do not need definitive, close-out answers nearly as much as they need being listened to, respected, and encouraged to seek answers for themselves, with the help of someone who has a good feel for their struggles and a willingness to search with them for answers that make not only good sense, but Christian sense besides. Because this is so, talking about faith remains just as much a ministry of the laity as all pastoral care in the church does. It is my fondest hope that in every congregation people in every pew will be able to find alongside them a fellow Christian who, as their theologian for a time, will be just as committed as they are to seek a deeper understanding of the faith by which God has called all of us to live gracefully and joyfully, in this world and in the life to come.

About the Author

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