

## CHAPTER 8: BEING RIGHT vs. BEING CHRISTIAN or THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN DOCTRINE AND FAITH

“Master, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not forbid him.” (Luke 9:48–49)

I have by now dismissed as wrong the beliefs of a vast number of Christians. But please note: I have *not* said that these beliefs are unchristian. All too often, lacking the charity and wisdom of him whom we call the Christ, we have labeled as unchristian those who do not believe as we do. We call into question the faith of those who do not follow with us, those who do not echo our particular doctrinal line. But it is very evident in the lives of those around us that there is no necessary connection between believing correct doctrine and living a life of faith. You know as well as I do that the two cannot be equated.

In this chapter I will try to do two things: first, examine the difference between faith and doctrine; and second, show why saying a belief is a valid Christian belief is not the same as saying it is “right” in the sense of being consistent with truth. This will show why the wrong beliefs do not necessarily make a person unchristian, and why believing all the right things does not necessarily make someone faithful.

### I. Doctrine vs. Faith

#### A. Faith

In an important way our faith can be said to be parallel to our common sense. This common sense is made up of the presuppositions which we use as we try to understand the world, the assumptions we make as

we explain the workings of the universe. So, too, does faith consist of certain basic assumptions: assumptions about meaning and value, certain attitudes about the proper way to relate to people and to the world, and certain presuppositions about what is most important and most valuable in life.

Thus it is our faith that informs us that the most important goals in life are to love God and to love other people as ourselves. It is our faith that tells us that right relationship with others is more important than personal gain, and that honesty, integrity and kindness are more important than comfort, pleasure and wealth. These and similar presuppositions are obviously of crucial importance in determining our actions and our other beliefs.

Our faith generally also includes some assumptions (or "primary beliefs") about the metaphysical nature of the universe. These are assumptions about ultimate reality that support our presuppositions of meaning and value. We might, for instance, believe that there is a God who holds the same basic values as we do. Beliefs such as this give coherence to our value system and reinforce our faith-attitudes towards others and towards life. As such, these beliefs are "primary beliefs". They are included in the basic presuppositions that constitute our faith.

However, while faith can include certain basic beliefs and can express itself in beliefs, faith can never be *equated* with any particular set of beliefs. Faith is *not* just intellectual assent to a set of propositions. Faith is deeper than this, providing the underlying direction to one's life.

Faith also includes trust. Like faith, trust includes certain beliefs. It implies certain statements about whatever or whomever you trust. But trust, too, is more than this. Again, it is an attitude, a way of relating to people and to the world, a basic orientation that cannot be adequately captured in any group of statements.

Christian faith is the complex of attitudes and approaches that leads one into right relationship. It is the understanding of the heart that leads one to forgive instead of seeking vengeance, to love instead of hate, to be open to others instead of closed, to seek the good of all instead of just one's own well-being, to give of one's self and one's property for the good of others, and to feel that a God of love is pulling for all of these.

You have *Christian* faith when these basic attitudes are consciously and pre-eminently drawn from, based on, or focused by the teachings and example of Jesus whom we call the Christ or the body of the faithful that we call the Church, and when there is a deep commitment to living out these basic attitudes in your life.

Finally, we must note that even though our faith is primary—underlying our beliefs and actions—it is still subject to change. Just as with common sense, when our faith turns out to be inconsistent with our experience of reality, when the beliefs implicit in our faith just don't fit, then our faith must undergo some adjustments. These may be minor

or they may be major, but they must be made. The only alternative is to sacrifice the honesty and integrity of our intellect.

### B. Beliefs

The distinction I make is between "faith" and "doctrine". The former can include beliefs, the latter consists of them. But those which are a part of our faith I call "primary beliefs". These are not derived from other beliefs or values. They are generally not debatable; one either accepts or rejects them as the presuppositions for other beliefs. Examples of this would be our presupposition that it is better to do right than to do wrong, or a general assumption on how to distinguish one from the other.

Suppose one person believes that the right course of action to take is that which increases their own power or wealth, and another believes that the right course is that which helps others and advances the common good. When they disagree as to what it is right to do, any discussion they have about this would probably be very frustrating. There is no common ground to which to appeal—at least, none that is easily found. What we have here is a difference of faith, a clash of presuppositions or primary beliefs.

The beliefs that make up doctrine are not these primary beliefs. Instead, they either derive from these primary beliefs or else are constructed to explain them. It is this category of beliefs that we are contrasting to faith.

### C. Doctrine

Whenever we try to explain our faith and put it into general concepts, whenever we put into words our other beliefs about religion, we have doctrine. And this is also where we run into common sense again. For when we use language and logic to state our beliefs and talk about our faith, we are applying our reason to our religion. We must be consistent with the common sense that underlies our reason just as we must be consistent with the faith that underlies our beliefs. Only then can our doctrine make sense and our reasoning be faithful. And the faith and common sense must be consistent with each other if we are to have continuity and integrity of self.

Thus, for instance, the central importance in our lives of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth is a matter of faith. This importance is not an award we bestowed after a lengthy reasoning process nor a conclusion we reached by deduction. It is not subject to debate. As a result of upbringing, experience, relationships, learning, etc., it is a primary part of our system of value and meaning, of the way we orient our lives. The importance of Jesus of Nazareth in our lives is not subject to the rules of logic. It just is, as a matter of value.

On the other hand, the way we choose to *explain* this centrality of Jesus, the way we conceptualize it and put it into words—this is a matter of doctrine. This explanation—whether it refers to the nature of Jesus, or his role, or something else—is subject to all the requirements of logic, consistency, and factuality that apply to any statement. Its implications and assumptions must be examined and are open to challenge and debate. And, not least in importance, we look for any such statement of doctrine to make sense, to fit with our common sense.

Thus it is that we can question whether doctrine is right or wrong, true or false, in a way that is quite different from the way we might question somebody's faith. We might challenge a doctrine if we didn't think that it represented the truth. But if we wondered about someone's faith, it would be because of the way they acted. We would approach the two in quite dissimilar ways.

With this in mind, let us now make another distinction by examining how the question of whether a doctrine is right or wrong is different from the question of whether it is a valid Christian belief.

## II. Being Right vs. Being Christian

We said earlier that the purpose of religion is to orient us toward right relationship with God and with our neighbors. Consequently, we cannot judge the validity of religious beliefs by asking whether they are true or whether they are consistent with some other beliefs or principles. Instead, we must judge the validity of religious beliefs by asking whether they help fulfill this purpose. If a belief helps lead to right relationship with God and neighbor then it can be considered a valid religious belief.

What is this? Am I saying that we cannot judge the validity of a religious belief by its truth or falseness? Did we not just say that doctrine is subject to the requirements of logic and truth and common sense?

Indeed we did, for indeed it is. But by examining a doctrine's consistency with reason and truth we can only judge whether it is right in the sense of being factual or truthful. What I am saying now is that the question of its validity as a religious belief is an altogether separate question.

Do I, the champion of reason and common sense, maintain that reason, believability and even truth cannot judge the validity of religious tenets? Exactly so. Beliefs that appropriately fill the proper function of religious beliefs, that promote right relationship, must be considered to be valid religious beliefs regardless of their truth.

For an example, let us look at the Book of Mormon. If one examines it objectively there is no way to escape the conclusion that it is a pious fraud. It consists of cheap imitation King James verbiage about events that never happened in places that never existed, all supposedly trans-

lated from a mysterious book of gold that conveniently disappeared. Nevertheless—now that I've alienated several million Latter Day Saints—I must admit that I am impressed by the number of Mormons who have a faith that leads to right relationship. Since for many this faith is accompanied by a set of doctrines that includes belief in the literal truth of the Book of Mormon, we have to say that this can be a valid religious belief. Even though a belief in the Book of Mormon is mistaken, it is a valid religious belief so long as it is an integral part of a set of beliefs that promotes the right relationship which is the purpose of religion.

Similarly, the belief in the literal truth of the whole Bible is just plain wrong. But if this particular belief helps someone to take seriously the words of Jesus of Nazareth, and so helps orient them toward a life of love and service for others, toward right relationship, then I have to say that for this person this is a valid Christian belief. Remember Christian Belief Rule #1: a belief is appropriate for Christians if it is consistent with the message of Jesus the Christ and with the centrality of this message. It can be appropriate in this way without necessarily being true.

### The Question of Truth

Does the truth or falseness of a religious belief have no bearing at all on its validity? Once all the disclaimers have been made—that many religious beliefs are supremely difficult to test for truth because they refer to the supernatural or to that which it is beyond our mental powers to discern, or because (in the case of faith) they are values and not truth-claims—once all this has been said, we still have to admit that yes, of course the question of truth enters in here. But it does so in a restricted, very personal way. A religious belief can only be valid for you, can only serve to orient you to right relationship to God and neighbor, if this belief has the ring of truth for *you*.

This has an equally important corollary. What does not seem true to one person may indeed seem true to another. Therefore a belief which we are convinced is false can be a valid religious belief for someone else, if indeed it helps to lead them into right relationship. Thus the question of truth is limited to this function here: a religious belief can only be valid for someone who perceives this belief to be true.

### One Faith, Many Doctrines

Each of us, of course, considers our own opinions and beliefs to be right. Otherwise they wouldn't be our beliefs. Naturally, then, we have to maintain that anyone who believes differently than we do is wrong. Nevertheless, I am quite convinced that many of these "wrong" and mistaken people, past and present, were and are dedicated Christians. It does not matter that we and they disagree on minor or even major aspects of Christian doctrine. Nor does it matter if you and I disagree in

this way. What matters is whether a person lives a life directed towards right relationship with God and neighbor, with attitudes and understandings drawn from Jesus the Christ. This is what it means to have Christian faith.

If we were to say of someone that they are not Christian, we would mean specifically that their lives are not ordered in this way. This need not mean that they are better than anyone else or worse than anyone else. It means only that they do not have the values and attitudes of Jesus the Christ self-consciously at the center of their lives. To say that someone is Christian or not Christian is descriptive, not pejorative. The exception to this, of course, is the person who professes to be a Christian. If we say they are not, they will feel judged. Whether or not you profess to be Christian is up to you. But if you profess this without living accordingly, then you will be judged—not by anyone else, but by your own life—to be a hypocrite.

Since it is the faith that marks us as Christians, the life self-consciously lived in love of God and neighbor according to Jesus' precepts, then we can disagree on doctrines and still share this faith. What matters most is the centrality of the Christ in our lives, not the doctrine with which we explain this centrality.

So let us disagree and argue about doctrine. We can do this and still admit that the other person's mistaken doctrines are valid religious beliefs. And certainly doctrine is important enough to deserve our study and debate, for it is the way we try to understand and explain our faith. But at the same time we need to recognize that doctrine is *not* faith, and that the faith which unites us is more important than the doctrine which divides us.

After considering some of the traditional answers to the question of "Who is Jesus?" we will now move on to my conception of the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth. This is my explanation, my doctrine, of this distinguishing mark of our faith.