

INTRODUCTION

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”
(John 8:32)

I am a heretic. I am stating this right at the start so nobody feels misled.

I am a heretic. In many of our churches this no longer has any meaning, but in centuries past this name would have brought disgrace, banishment, and all too often death.

What do I mean today by applying this word to myself? Two things: (1) that I place myself firmly and staunchly within the Church and the Christian faith; and (2) that I am firmly and staunchly convinced that much of what the Church has taught as doctrine for most of its twenty centuries, and much of what constitutes orthodox belief today, is just plain wrong.

This is a bold statement. But I do not make it boldly. I make this claim in fear and trembling, driven by my love for the Church and by the fact that what is at stake is nothing less than the future generations whom we are in danger of losing. I am driven also by the clear conclusions of reason and a careful reading of the Scriptures. It has been said that the four foundations of our faith are Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This formulation makes sense, but I find myself compelled by Scripture, reason and experience to disagree with much of what constitutes traditional doctrine.

Before I begin my argument, I would ask the reader to keep in mind three points: (1) In many respects, I am simply reclaiming for us today the freedom and diversity found within the New Testament itself. Most of our official Church doctrine was developed in the Greco-Roman world in the several centuries after Jesus of Nazareth, and does not necessarily represent the Biblical position; (2) For me to claim that my position is right and (therefore) that all others are wrong does *not* mean that I claim that the others are not valid Christian beliefs. This is a distinction of utmost importance (see Chapter 8); (3) Theology, as the conceptualization and explanation of our faith, must in any case be recognized as secondary to the living of this faith. (See Chapter 8 on this also.)

With these points in mind, I am going to argue against an archaic belief system which has become a harmful and unnecessary obstruction to many honest seekers for whom Christianity might otherwise be an option. Furthermore, as official doctrine this orthodoxy instills self-doubt in many thinking Christians and serves to keep them out of the mainstream of Church thought and life. It is against these traditional doctrines that I will be arguing, not God. I am arguing *for* God, I am arguing to free our understanding of God from the prison of these doctrines—doctrines from a particular time and place that are too often considered to be our final destination, instead of guideposts along the way; doctrines that are too often used to stop questions instead of to help find answers.

I will also attempt to outline a viable and faithful alternative for modern Christians. I call this alternative “common sense Christianity”.

I do not mean to suggest by this that Christianity should be “reasonable”. I doubt that the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ will ever seem reasonable to a majority of our society. My purpose, rather, is to remove the *unnecessary* obstructions and stumbling blocks in order to enable people to confront the central and ultimate stumbling block: the call to commitment that confronts us in the message of Jesus of Nazareth, in the understanding he gives us of God and of love, of truth and reality. It is vital that people reject or accept Christianity because of this central message and challenge, and not because of a secondary and unnecessary theological framework which many of us find outdated and incomprehensible.

By “common sense” I mean the shared world-view, or basic assumptions, with which we approach and understand our universe. I mean a common sense as to how this universe works.

This common sense does not remain static. It changes from age to age and from culture to culture. And all too often the precepts of our faith are presented in words and concepts that reflect a common sense that is very different from ours today. Yet the insights and validity of Christianity are not confined to any one age or culture. So the challenge for us is to conceptualize our Christian faith in a way that is not dependent on the common sense of a different time, in a way that is understandable to us today.

One final note: my intention has been to present my case in language accessible to lay people. I have avoided numerous footnotes and references, and have tried to avoid technical language and theological jargon. The discussion of basic doctrine is too important to leave to scholarly journals and seminary graduates. It belongs to all the people who are trying to follow Jesus the Christ.

PART ONE

COMMON SENSE, FAITH AND THE GOD WHO GOES “ZAP”

In these first four chapters we lay the groundwork. In Chapter One we demonstrate how our common sense has changed over the years.

In Chapter Two we look at why we cannot simply assert the truth of the Bible over our modern common sense and show that Biblical literalism/inerrancy is an approach to the Scriptures that is acceptable neither to our reason nor to our faith.

In Chapter Three we examine the question of whether we can conceive of God as going “zap”—intervening in the physical processes of the world in particular instances. This forces us to confront the problem of suffering, for this is where this question matters the most. We conclude that neither our reason nor our faith in a loving God can allow us to conceive of God as acting in this way.

In Chapter Four we consider different ways of “explaining” miracles, but point out that miracles are in fact not religiously significant—a point apparently recognized by Jesus himself.

With this preparation, in Part Two we then proceed to address traditional Christian doctrine.