

## All Truth

From time to time, I wonder about why so many people younger than ourselves don't bother to attend church any more. Several reasons come to mind, but the three that jump out at me are (1) the numerous well-publicized scandals involving church leaders – mainly televangelists and Catholic priests – (2) so many other forms of entertainment, and (3) our shrinking world.

As you know, it used to be that the only religion we heard much about was our own (or at least the Christian religion if not our own denomination). Then, the world started to shrink. As you *may* know, Toronto is the most religiously diverse city in the world. For the most part, that is due to immigration.

A quick internet search yielded the following approximate numbers for some of the world's major religions (in millions of adherents):

Christianity	2000
Islam	1250
Hinduism	800
Buddhism	370
Vodun (Voodoo)	60
Sikhism	24
Judaism	12
Baha'i	7.5
Jainism	4
Taoism	3
The Community of Christ	0.25
No religious affiliation	784

...and it is estimated that, in another 15 years, the majority of Canadians will no longer be listing Christianity as their religion.

In this changing religious climate, we want to maintain some continuity in our beliefs. At the same time, we have to recognize that a person's religious beliefs and the certainty with which one holds them is an unreliable measure of their truth, because they are largely determined by that person's culture and the faith of his or her parents -- both largely accidents of birth. Furthermore, assumptions prevalent in a person's culture also influence their religious views to a degree that is not often recognized. (A good example of this is found in the policies and beliefs of homosexuality within various provinces of the

Anglican Communion. Although all of the provinces share the Anglican tradition, cardinal beliefs, the Bible, etc., they are heavily influenced by their local culture, and their cultures lead them to positions on homosexual rights that are totally at variance with each other.)

Other belief-defining factors include:

Specific biblical references, particularly in statements attributed to Jesus, Paul, or other early Jewish and Christian leaders. Of course, these are often in conflict, and people tend to focus on those passages that support their prior beliefs. For example, Paul wrote in many passages about women who were his co-workers. Yet, he made a number of statements in 1 Corinthians which restricted women's allowable behaviors and appearance in religious meetings. These were further developed in other New Testament books which are purported to have been written by Paul, but which many theologians consider to be written by anonymous authors (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Ephesians).

General biblical statements and themes: For example, faith groups usually take into account the Bible's fundamental teachings about God, humanity and the rest of the universe, evaluated to determine if they remain valid today, or were applicable only for other eras, other cultures, and other situations.

Actions of biblical leaders: In gender-related issues, for example, the way in which Jesus and Paul treated men and women is usually considered to be important.

Church traditions: Church tradition is contained in writings of Christian leaders, church councils, and meetings from the time of Christ down to the present time. Foremost among those Christian denominations that base their policies on both the content of the Bible and church tradition is the Roman Catholic Church. The writings of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and other great theologians of the Christian Church are considered important sources of information for today's church policy. Papal bulls, encyclicals, and letters are also valuable resources.

When I was a child, I was taught that our Church's motto was "all truth." *Of course*, one person's perception of truth is not the same as another person's perception of truth – which is why we have some 35-50 thousand or so Christian groups, for example, and even some 150+ groups that have been derived from the church that Joseph Smith

founded. But we do have a tradition of continuing to *search* for truth, even when it makes us question our other traditions, which brings us to...

Continual revelation: Some denominations, such as ourselves, believe that no scriptures can give the final word on all matters. God is seen as revealing new truths over time. In 1890, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons, believe that they received a revelation from God to abandon polygyny (plural marriages). In 1978, they received a second revelation to eliminate racism in the denomination.

Personal experience: Everyone brings their lifetime of experiences to their religious faith: things they have learned in their family of origin, at school, with friends, at work, etc., and these experiences often influences their religious beliefs.

You might also consider under this heading personal preferences for religious practices. For example, I love the ritual to be found in Roman Catholicism, the bigotry of the evangelicals, the meditative quiet of Buddhism, the praise worship of our own Contemporary Christian Ministries, and so on; and I think this personal preference for religious practices at least supports people in the belief systems that they buy into.

Then there are scientific findings by geologists, biologists, astronomers, cosmologists, social scientists, researchers into human sexuality, etc. One example of this is the theory of evolution. Triggered by the appearance of Charles Darwin's book "Origin of Species," the theory of evolution has contributed greatly to many of the physical sciences, from astronomy to zoology. Some liberal and a few mainline denominations have accepted evolution and have relegated the creation stories in Genesis to the level of religious myth. Roman Catholic schools have been teaching evolution as reality for many years. The Pope recently acknowledged its accuracy on all matters up to but not including the development of the human soul.

Another important example of ever-changing religious beliefs is a result of human sexuality research. During the second half of the 20th century, human sexuality researchers and mental health professionals changed their concepts of human sexuality as a result of their research. Most now regard homosexuality as a natural, normal, and unchangeable sexual

orientation. Most liberal and some mainline denominations have altered their beliefs about homosexuality and have changed at least some of their policies concerning sexual orientation.

In early 2007, The Rev'd Elizabeth Kaeton of the Episcopal Church of St. Paul's in Chatham, NJ, motivated by the gradually unfolding schism within the worldwide Anglican Communion over whether to include or exclude persons with a homosexual orientation as members with full privileges, wrote an open letter to her fellow Anglicans. Part of her letter notes the progress that the Christian church has made in the past in many areas. She chose three examples:

"For centuries, the church's teaching about the shape of the world was that it was flat, in accordance with what was written in scripture, despite scientific evidence that it was not. People were excommunicated – not to mention tortured and tried and sent to jail and murdered for disagreeing with the official church 'standard' of teaching."

"For centuries, the church's teaching about seizure disorder was that it was demon possession, in accordance with what was written in scripture, despite scientific evidence that it was not. People were excommunicated – not to mention tortured and locked in asylums because the outward manifestation of their lives were contrary to the official church 'standard' of teaching."

"For centuries, the church's teaching about left handedness was that it was a sign of evil, in accordance with what was written in scripture, despite scientific evidence that it was not. People were excommunicated – not to mention tortured and shunned and exiled because the outward manifestation of their lives were contrary to the official church 'standard' of teaching."

We can look at these three conflicts and be somewhat amused at how church leaders were so out of touch from reality in the distant past; we might not choose to look at just how harmful this gap between reality and church teaching was to the churches' victims at the time; and it is even more difficult for us to see where present-day gaps are creating and injuring victims today.

Our own task, as members of a church that believes in seeking "All Truth," is to continue to try to discern just what that truth is, even though it may force us to discard some of the beliefs that have sustained us over the years.

## **The Three Main Controversies within the Church During the Past One Hundred Years**

The three main controversies that have engaged the Christian churches during the past couple of centuries are related to human slavery, the status of women, and the rights of homosexuals and bisexuals. The first is largely settled (although the negative effects of slavery will be with us for generations); the second is partly settled; and the third is in full swing.

Regarding slavery:

- At the close of the 20th century, only Christian Reconstructionists and some of the more radical of the Christian Identity groups still favor the legalization of human slavery. All other Christian groups have taken a solid abolitionist position. In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a sincere apology for its past policies on race, slavery, and segregation. They vowed to eliminate any current residual racism in the denomination. Unfortunately, Sunday morning – and in some denominations, Saturday morning – continues to be the most highly segregated time in America, due to the country's large number of nearly all-white and nearly all-black congregations.

Regarding the status of women:

- Starting in the late 19th century, the major ethical topics of the day were related to the status of women:
  - Do they actually have souls?
  - Should they be able to vote?
  - Should they be allowed to receive anesthesia during childbirth?
  - Are they really "persons"?
  - Should they be allowed to join various professions?
  - Eventually, should they be considered for positions of power within churches, including being eligible for ordination as clergy and consecration as bishops (in those denominations that have bishops.)?

Until 1930, few denominations were willing to ordain women. Fifty years later, female clergy were allowed in all liberal and most mainline churches, including the United Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, and a minority of conservative denominations. By the late 1990's women had risen to the highest levels in some denominations,

and even some conservative churches began to address the question of sexual bias and rigid sexual roles in their denomination. Others, like the Southern Baptist Convention have reinforced the submissive role for women and the leadership role for men in church and at home.

I find it interesting that, when our own church admitted women to the priesthood, we came close to losing half of our membership; and it is my impression that, among those who chose to cling to the old ways, women were as adamant as men that we had gone into apostasy.

Regarding the status of gays and lesbians:

- The movement to accept celibate and non-celibate gays and lesbians as church members, and as clergy, started only in the 1970s, after the Stonewall riots,<sup>1</sup> the emergence of the Gay Liberation movement, and the decision by the American Psychiatric Association that homosexuality is not a mental illness. A few very progressive religious groups have married same-sex couples where legal, have authorized "services of union" for gay and lesbian couples, have ordained sexually active gay clergy, and have gone on record as supporting same-sex marriages. A number of other liberal and some mainline denominations have begun to change in this area – notably the Episcopal Church, Presbyterian and United Methodists – at great threat to their church harmony. Conservative faith groups have generally retained their traditional rejection of non-celibate gays and lesbians.

A couple of years ago, I attended the annual GALA reunion – GALA stands for Gay and Lesbian Acceptance, the church-affiliated association for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender members of the Community of Christ and their friends, supporters, and relatives – because it just happened to be held just outside of Paris, Ontario that year.

from the GALA website (<http://galaweb.org>):

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<sup>1</sup> The Stonewall riots were a series of violent conflicts between New York City police officers and groups of gay and transgender people that began during the early morning of June 28, 1969, and lasted several days. Also called the Stonewall Rebellion or simply Stonewall, the clash was a watershed for the worldwide gay rights movement, as gay and transgendered people had never before acted together in such large numbers to forcibly resist police harassment directed towards their community.

“GALA envisions communities which witness that persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities have sacred worth; and are fully included, celebrated, and affirmed with [within?] their chosen faith traditions.

The purpose of GALA is to affirm the dignity and worth of all persons without regard to gender, race, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation. We support and encourage self actualization in an atmosphere of love, understanding, and confidentiality. We are dedicated to the celebration of diversity. We are committed to exploring the issues of spirituality and justice through dialogue, education, and action.”

While at that reunion, I was introduced to the concept of the Welcoming Community. The Welcoming Community Network “is a program of ministry for congregations wanting to become fully inclusive....” Although originally sponsored by GALA, but is now a separate organization of its own.

from the WCN website (<http://welcomingcommunitynetwork.org>):

“Welcoming Community Network (WCN) is an international grassroots organization that exists to enable full participation of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life and ministry of Community of Christ both in policy and practice - WCN Mission Statement

WCN offers to the church the untapped creativity and energy of diverse people who have been marginalized, disenfranchised, or even rejected. As we share in a prophetic church, we join with our brothers and sisters to move toward full participation of everyone in the Body of Christ.”

When I was first exposed to the WCN, it was concerned with promoting the welcoming of GLBT church members into congregations – remember that it was originally an off-shoot of GALA:

“What Does It Mean to Be a Welcoming Congregation?”

Congregations who publicly and successfully welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have the following qualities:

- Include and address the needs of LGBT persons at every level of congregational life-in worship, in programs, in social occasions, and in

leadership-welcoming not only their presence, but their gifts and the hopes of their lives as well.

- Assume the presence of LGBT people and celebrate this diversity by having inclusive language and content in their worship.
- Fully incorporate the experiences of LGBT persons throughout all programs, including religious education.
- Support LGBT affirmitive groups such as GALA.
- Offer congregational and ministerial support for union and memorial services for LBGT persons.
- Celebrate the lives of all people and welcome same-sex couples, recognizing their committed relationships, and equally affirms expressions of caring and affection without regard to sexual orientation.
- Seek to nurture ongoing dialogue between bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender and heterosexual persons and to create deeper trust and sharing.
- Affirm and celebrate LGBT issues and history during the church year.
- Attend to legislative developments and works to promote justice, freedom, and equality in the larger society.
- Speak out when the rights of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people are at stake.
- As persons of faith, confess their own imperfections in attitude and action and accepts the responsibility to resist fear and hate in all forms and to strive continuously to eliminate expressions of prejudice and discrimination.
- Declare their belief that, 'all are called according to the gifts of God to them.' Therefore acknowledging and affirming human diversity by creating a spirit of openness and peace within their congregation.
- Celebrate the rich diversity of human life we have in the Community of Christ."

I questioned whether that might not be too exclusive a mission statement, i.e., not inclusive enough for my liking: "Wouldn't it be better," I asked, "to be promoting the inclusion of everyone, without exception?" However, at that time, GALA was mainly concerned about the inclusion of its own members. In the intervening couple of years, however, the Welcoming Community Network does seem to have expanded its mandate, as reflected in the statements issued by the various congregations that have opted to become Welcoming Communities, e.g.:

Statement by the Clearwater Community of Christ Congregation



[The congregations and ministries listed below have publicly declared themselves welcoming & affirming of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons and families, and that they are committed to including persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities into their whole life and leadership.]

1740 North Highland Avenue  
Clearwater, Florida  
(727) 446-9320  
Contact: Mark Dixon  
Webpage: Clearwater Community of Christ

“Who is welcome here ?

If you are Asian, Hispanic, Black or White...  
If you are male, female or transgender...  
If you are three days old, 30 years old or 103 years old...  
If you've never stepped foot in a church; or attend church regularly...  
If you are single, married, divorced, separated or partnered...  
If you are straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual...  
If you are affiliated with a political party [or] not registered to vote...  
If you have, or had, addictions, phobias, abortions or a criminal record...  
If you own your home, rent or are homeless...  
If you are fully-abled, disabled or a person of differing abilities...

You are welcome here!

You are welcome here because you are a child of God. You are worthy of God's love and grace. By the grace of God, made known in Christ Jesus, NO THING that you have done, feel, are, believe or will do, can change that. We are committed to being a thoroughly loving and welcoming community of faith, centered in the Good News of Jesus Christ. We support the full participation of all persons in every phase of church life. Through education and informal discussion, we will strive to better understand those who are different from us, and to fulfill our mission of fostering peace and reconciliation for all people.

Therefore, in faithfulness to the Gospel and our Community of Christ heritage, and to the best of our ability, we promise to provide programs, ministries and pastoral care to all who seek God in this place.”

Affirmations such as this are in keeping with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first two articles of which are:

#### Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

#### Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

As a general rule, people resist change; change is stressful, and one of the reasons people seek out faith groups is for the constancy that they provide for one's life – a fixed anchor that they can count on. Change often involves great agony, internal conflict, and (within churches) even schism and violence.

In contrast to faith – “the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen” – all *scientific* beliefs are open to falsification. Scientists know that their beliefs only approximate reality. Their beliefs are grounded in observations. New data is continually becoming available. Scientists expect change, and fame (and research grants) comes to those scientists who are on the cutting edge of new discoveries. Even here, however, change does not always come rapidly. Nevertheless, even in churches, change does come, as people continue to search for the truth about what to believe.

In the January 2008 issue of the Herald, in an article entitled “The Case for

Continuance,” i.e., steadfastness, Harry Dennis lists some of the many changes that have occurred within the church during his more than seven decades of church membership. He writes:

During my years of college teaching I was influenced by scholars who raised basic questions about the “Old Jerusalem” type gospel that seemed deeply entrenched among many in the church. In addition, a number of scholars and theologians in our church during the last half of the twentieth century challenged aspects of our history and beliefs. Also, we decided to become a world church, and this added to a theological unrest in the church leadership that trickled down to many of the rest of us. As several church leaders and academicians attended seminaries they began to more critically examine their faith. As a result, their thinking crept into church literature, which began the metamorphosis that affected many of us, including me. ...

In the final analysis of why I stay with the church, I must admit that being ‘born in the church’ is a factor, even though its not the same church of my childhood in several respects. I still find the fellowship in the church of great importance.

But what really keeps me in the faith is that I believe the church has escaped from a kind of parochialism and backward looking mentality. A church that adopted a principle stated by Winston Churchill that “change is the price of survival” is a church that will live on. A church that is pluralistic in nature, that has invited others to its table, that overcame the second-class treatment of women, that respects other faiths and even changed its name to better reflect its mission is a church that still captures my allegiance.

In David Schaal’s introduction to that same issue, he suggests that we pray for one another. In the meantime – until we learn to do that – I personally find it enheartening that this Community of Christ does seem to be striving to create a climate in which some difference of belief (as well as diversity of cultures) is not only tolerated but prized.

Reg Reynolds  
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