

Connections



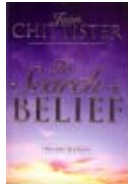
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Belief and faith

“When I was growing up,” writes Joan Chittister in her book *In Search of Belief* (Liguori Publications, 1999/2006), “belief was not so much a sign of profound philosophical conviction as it was a badge of membership. If you were Catholic, you simply believed what they told you was Catholic. It wasn’t an intellectual struggle to which people came after a lifetime of reflection, it was a conviction that all the truth of life lay only in the Catholic worldview. Soon, we felt, given enough time and enough missionaries, the rest of the world would come to see the error of its ways. ... They would become what we were, because our beliefs were obviously true.



Theirs were obviously false.”

In many ways the impression I got from my Methodist church about belief, when I was growing up, was like what Chittister got from her church. I heard that Christian beliefs were obviously true and all others were obviously false. “But as time went by,” Joan Chittister tells us, “nothing seemed totally obvious any more.” That’s been my experience, too, and the experience of many other Christians.

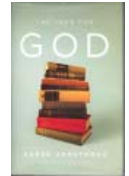


A misunderstanding of faith

Besides hearing that our beliefs were true and everyone else’s were false, many of us have been given the misleading impression that having faith meant forcing ourselves to believe things that we felt couldn’t possibly be true. We got the impression that having faith meant believing that Jesus physically came back to life after being dead for three days. It meant believing that his mother, unlike all other known mothers, was still physically a virgin when he was born. And having faith, we thought, also meant believing that many impossible-sounding events described in the Bible actually hap-

The climax of a transformative process

In the early church, Karen Armstrong and other scholars have found, baptism was the climax of a carefully devised, transformative, six-week-long process. Much like the initiation rituals of Greek “mystery religions” of the day, Armstrong explains in *The Case for God*, baptism and the Eucharist were initiations during which congregation members “were taught to look beneath the symbolic gestures to find the sacred kernel within and thus experience a ‘change of mind.’”



Here’s how Armstrong reports a fourth-century Christian bishop’s account. “During the six weeks of Lent, converts had undergone an intensive period of preparation. They had to fast, attend vigils, pray, and receive instruction about the basic factual message of the gospel. They were not required to believe anything in advance. They would be instructed in the deeper truths of Christianity only after the initiation of baptism, because these dogmas would make sense only after the transformative experience of the ritual.”

Stepping out of accustomed ways

The preparation evoked a “stepping out” of the converts’ accustomed ways of thinking. This was symbolized by their shedding their clothes as they processed into the church to be baptized, usually in the early hours of Easter morning. They stood naked and then were plunged into the baptismal pool. Their cry upon emerging and being clothed in white garments symbolizing their new identity was a Greek or Latin word that meant “I give him my heart, my loyalty, my commitment” or “I engage myself.” The words came into English as “I believe,” but, Armstrong finds that they expressed something more like our saying “I do” or “I will” in marriage services today.



A proclamation of commitment

“It was only after they had been through the transformative process,” Karen Armstrong explains, “that new Christians were asked to recite the ‘creed,’ a proclamation not of ‘belief’ but of commitment to the God that had become a reality in their lives as a result of this rite of passage.”

pened—that Adam and Eve were the first two humans, that Jonah was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it, and all sorts of other unbelievable things.



A lot that churches haven't told us

This confusion about belief and faith seems to have happened mainly because in the church so few of us have been told much about the human circumstances in which the various parts of the Bible were written and later changed. We've been left to assume that everything in the Bible somehow



was delivered by God in its present form, and that the Bible is true in a way that no other religious documents are.

Also, we've heard little about what else was happening in the places where the parts were of the Bible written. We haven't been informed in church, for example, that in the ancient Mediterranean world, calling someone "son of God" was a common way of expressing the belief that a person had been given a special leadership role by whoever his culture saw as the supreme divinity. Saying that someone had been born of the union of a human virgin and a god was common, too, and had similar meaning.

Scholars have found that insistence on the literal truth of such statements arose only in the nineteenth century. Before then, these statements were ways of expressing the high regard and obedience that such a leader was believed to deserve. They were ways of acknowledging what were seen as his unique qualities. And in ancient times, such statements were routinely made not only about religious figures but also about Roman emperors, Alexander the Great, and other rulers. If churches had made this usage known when scholars first discovered it, we'd have gotten a different and more accurate understanding of belief, faith, and the meaning of Christianity.



Staying in the dark can be comforting

Besides not letting members know what these statements about Jesus meant in the setting in which he lived, many churches have kept their members mostly in the dark about what faith apparently meant to the authors of the New Testament. Seminaries have informed pastors about this for decades, but

few have passed the information on to churchgoers. Why? Probably because a lot haven't wanted to hear it.



To a great degree, understanding what New Testament authors meant requires becoming aware of meanings that got lost when biblical documents were translated from Greek and Latin into English. Still more confusion has apparently come from the changes that English words have undergone over time. But many churchgoers haven't wanted to bother with such details about ancient languages and precise word meanings.

Jesus answered them, "If you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."
—Matthew 21:21-22

... "Do not fear, only believe."
—Mark 5:36



"... Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe in him are condemned already ..."
—John 3:18

Besides, many long-time churchgoers have become comfortable with what they assume their favorite Bible verses mean, and they don't want to experience the discomfort of learning that their assumption is wrong. They may fear that if they turned loose of their present belief, they'll be left with nothing to rely on.

What is faith?

For whatever reason, most of us seem to have simply taken familiar Bible verses about faith and belief, such as those from which I quote here, at face value. However, doing this has often made us mistakenly assume that having faith meant forcing ourselves

to believe claims that contradicted everything we learned in other ways.



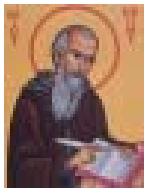
Many newer Christians are studying the Bible now, however, and have a hunger to learn. Some are even learning Greek. So it's important to give them the historical and cultural information necessary for getting an accurate impression of what true Christian faith is.

Like many other scholars, Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God* points out that in early documents that became part of the New Testament, the Greek word that is translated as “faith” in English versions meant trust, loyalty, engagement, commitment. When we read about Jesus asking people to have faith, Armstrong explains, we tend to assume he is asking them to “believe” in his divinity, but what has now been learned about the gospels tells us it’s very unlikely that he actually claimed to be divine.



Instead, Jesus was apparently asking for commitment. “He wanted disciples who would engage with his mission, give all they had to the poor, feed the hungry, refuse to be hampered by family ties, abandon their pride, lay aside their self-importance and sense of entitlement, ... and trust in God who was their father. They must spread the good news ... and live compassionate lives, not confining their benevolence to the respectable and conventionally virtuous.” This kind of living—this “faith,” Karen Armstrong finds—was what could move mountains and unleash unsuspected human potential.

Translation brought changes



When Saint Jerome translated New Testament books from their original Greek into Latin, however, the Latin word that best described this kind of living was “credo.” It was derived from Latin words meaning “I give my heart.” But in the King James Version of 1611, it became “I believe” in English.

In addition, in the years since 1611, Armstrong goes on to explain, the connotation of the English phrase “I believe” has changed. In 1611, “to believe” meant “to prize; to value; to hold dear.” It referred to loyalty to a person to whom one is bound in prom-

ise or duty. During the late seventeenth century, however, says Armstrong, our concept of knowledge became more theoretical. Thus “the word ‘belief’ started to be used to describe an intellectual assent to a hypothetical—and often dubious—proposition.” Many of us therefore assume that having faith, which we assume is a requirement for being Christian, means believing claims that we essentially find unbelievable.



The truest type of faith?

Because so many Christians now seem to have this misleading view of what faith means, many say that questioning official church doctrines and beliefs shows a lack of faith. But along with many other Christians, I find that asking questions actually promotes faith instead. “To question,” Joan Chittister writes in *In Search of Belief*, “may be the truest type of faith a person can muster.”

Thinking that having faith means having a certain approved set of beliefs leads many of today’s Christians to be inappropriately hostile to those they consider atheists. When Christians call someone an atheist because they think he or she doesn’t “believe in God,” it often means merely that the so-called atheist doesn’t understand “God” to mean exactly what the accusing Christian understands. But “believing in God” doesn’t have to mean seeing God as a being with the characteristics that many—even most—Christians attribute to God. If we scorn everyone who doesn’t happen to share our understanding of God, we’re failing to show the kind of compassion that apparently is essential for the Christian faith that the New Testament describes.



Along with many other students of Christian history, Karen Armstrong points out that in the past,

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. For paper copies of any of the 17 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

people were often called atheists when society was in transition from one religious perspective to another. Even the first Christians, because they were moving away from the beliefs and practices of other religions prevalent in their culture, were persecuted as “atheists” by their contemporaries.

Commitment and practical living

In the first few centuries of Christian history, Karen Armstrong finds, “faith was purely a matter of commitment and practical living. In the early fourth century, however, Christianity ... developed a

preoccupation with doctrinal correctness that would become its Achilles’ heel.”



When we demand correct belief as evidence of Christian faith today, we give that weak spot even more influence. We make Christianity look weak instead of helping its true strength to become apparent. Much more faithful than demanding a particular set of beliefs would be to expect the kind of commitment that Jesus apparently asked for—commitment demonstrated in the form of acting compassionately and justly in the course of practical living.

Barbara



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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May 2010

Please, if you e-mail me . . .

• If you don't e-mail me often and thus I'm not likely to recognize your e-mail address, please put your name in the message you send me. My e-mail software shows only the sender's e-mail address, not his or her name. And especially if your first name is a common one, please give me your full name, not just your first name. If you just sign “Bob” and your e-mail address isn't one I see often, I won't know which of the many Bobs on my mailing list I'm hearing from.

Bob Smith?
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• If your e-mail address won't be familiar to me, please put something I'll recognize in the subject line. “Connections” is enough, but if you leave the subject line blank or put only something like “Hi,” and I don't recognize your address, I'm likely to assume the message is spam and therefore delete it without opening it.

• I know I'm stuck in the dark ages in this regard, but so far, I don't use the “social media” sites. So when Facebook or Twitter sends me a message asking me to become someone's “friend” or “follower” or whatever, I don't answer. I love conversing personally by e-mail, but I don't feel I can also spend time communicating through these media.

I'll appreciate your helping in these ways.



THANKS!

