

Chapter 1.03 Continuation of Basic Beliefs

Historical Development.

The original teaching of Jesus is the basis for traditional Christianity and for modern understanding of Jesus but it is not the same as official Christianity, what the average church-going Christian understands, or what non-church followers of Jesus understand. Ideas about Jesus changed between Jesus and now. Even his first followers did not do exactly as he wished and did not understand him as he understood himself. Some developments deteriorated from what he taught, such as by turning him into a magical god-hero. Some developments improved on what he taught, primarily by increasing the scope of his program to include all people. Some changes were part of building an institution, the Church, and were not necessarily related to what he taught. No church is based only on the original teachings of Jesus or on his original view of himself.

Modern ideas of Jesus as prophet and moral teacher are as much in the direct line of what Jesus taught as standard Church dogma, and they preserve the spirit of what he taught even if sometimes they are not the letter. For example, the modern idea of “the Christmas spirit” is not what Jesus taught but it is a true, wonderful, and good development, and it preserves the spirit of his teaching. Modern followers of Jesus could not live by what Jesus originally taught because our world is different than his world and because many of us are not Jews; but we can live by the spirit and by its modern development. The world could not live by the letter of what Jesus taught but it can live by the spirit. I like modern non-church ideas of Jesus.

In later parts, this book explains both what Jesus taught and developments from what he taught. You can decide whether modern understandings preserve the spirit of what he taught, if you can rely on some church version of Jesus, or you have to develop your own version.

Some More Specific Comments.

Because it is hard to love anybody as we love ourselves, another way to think about it is to love our neighbor as if he/she were your close brother or sister.

Jesus' message is universal to all people but Jesus was a Jewish prophet. Judaism generated Jesus. When we can afford the effort, we need to understand Jesus in the context of his place, time, and religion.

People can act on Jesus' message if they come to understand it by themselves or come to understand it through the teachings of religions other than Christianity. A person need not be a Christian in a traditional church to follow God and Jesus. Gandhi is an example of following Jesus while not being a standard Christian. Some people follow Jesus who never heard of him, or never learned his words. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, and Hindus can be followers of Jesus because of what they do. It is necessary to understand the full message. I do not know how much you have to understand. It doesn't hurt to keep reading, doing, and trying.

It is not enough just to be a nice person, a good citizen, confess God, submit to Allah, confess Jesus, follow Mosaic Law, go to church, know correct dogma, perform proper rituals, follow the Silver Rule, give alms, be decent, be righteous, be strict in sexual morality, support "family values", be a rebel, flirt with moral ambiguity, be true to your existential stance, vote the right way, pay taxes for social programs, pay taxes for defense, feel general sympathy toward people, be cool, be hip, be aware of the most current artistic movements, succeed, or buy the right stuff. You have to actively help people and you have to actively try to make a better world.

I do not know what all is required. That is a matter between each person and God. It is not useful to try to spell it out.

It might be possible to act according to Jesus' teaching but still believe in dogma that is not in accord with his teachings. If so, any point of wrong belief should not interfere much with right action. A Hindu might believe in a god other than the Jewish-Christian-Muslim God but still act according to Jesus' teaching as long as the Hindu does not, for example, persecute Muslims. I do not know where a person in that situation would stand in his-her relation with God but I think he-she would do well. Nobody is perfect in dogma and so God does not judge us according to dogma. I do not know much about God, so I probably have some wrong ideas; but my ignorance does not stop me from acting well, having good intentions, and thinking along basically correct lines. The core message is simple enough so that dogma cannot screw it up, and simple enough to be consistent across religions.

Mohammad was also a prophet. He said many good things. I can think of nothing that Mohammad said that necessarily negates Jesus' message. I can think of ways that people have used Mohammad, Jesus, the Jewish prophets, and the Buddha that are not compatible with Jesus' original message. No specifics given here.

Once upon a time God chose the Hebrews as the way to bring his teaching to the world. I do not know if the Hebrews (later Jews) were the only "Chosen People of God" but they were at least one Chosen People and probably the most important Chosen People in their time. The special exclusive mandate for the Jews ended with Jesus. No nation, people, or religious group took the place of the Jews. Now there is no particular nation or ethnic group that has the special relation with God that the Jews once had. "Chosen people" now are any people that act on the teachings of Jesus (the teachings of the Hebrew prophetic line), for as long as they act, and only as long as they act, without regard to church, ethnicity, country, gender, life style, or religious dogma. Not even political beliefs matter as long as the political beliefs do not contradict the teachings of Jesus. Christians are not the chosen people of God simply by being Christians. Not even self-declared followers of Jesus are chosen people except inasmuch as they really do follow Jesus. The United States is not the modern chosen nation. Fundamentalist Christians are not the modern chosen people. Muslims are not the modern chosen people. Politically Correct people are not the chosen people. No particular Christian Church, such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Greek Orthodox Church, is the only body of chosen people on Earth. You do not have to believe Jesus was God in order to feel that the exclusive relation of Jews with God ended and that the possibility for the relation is now open to all peoples.

I hope Jews continue to remember the traditional Covenant in their ethnic identity; but what they do, and

how they do it, is up to them. I hope Jews continue as examples of a good relation with God, examples of what a modern chosen people should be, and of the highest morality; but what they do, and how they do it, is up to them. Christians cannot tell them. I mean all this in a good way.

The Jews thought that God interferes in history to guide people, guide groups, and turn the direction of human affairs in ways that he wants. We all wish this were true, but I do not know if God really does this. Perhaps God did it for a while with them. If God really does this, he does it only very rarely, and so subtly that I can find little evidence of it that a scientist would accept. So, even if God does intervene in history, we need to work on our own to build a better world.

There is good, bad, and evil. Evil is qualitatively worse than bad. Bad is an adult getting the flu while evil is a child being sold into prostitution. Evil cannot be undone.

There is no devil. Religion is not about fighting the devil.

Religion sometimes is about fighting evil.

Evil did not come into the world only from rebellion of the devil. Evil is part of the world. People are able to do good, bad, and evil as an intrinsic part of being people. This does not mean that good needs evil or that good and evil are intrinsically woven together.

God must have foreseen and allowed evil. I do not know why.

There is more good than evil in the world in general.

In the life of any one particular person, there might be more evil than good, or more bad than good. I do not know why, and I cannot advise. It does not help those people to try to explain away the evil or to point out that good outweighs evil in general.

Jesus Was Wrong About Some Things.

Jesus was wrong about divorce and Satan. Jesus was wrong about limiting the Kingdom of God to the Jews and wrong about the Kingdom of God coming right away. Just because he was wrong about some things does not mean we can discard his message as a whole. It also does not mean we can cherry pick what we want and not take all of it seriously. We have to seriously look at each point, the way he meant it, to see the value of each point. We should take the Kingdom of God seriously as long as we do not think it is right around the corner. In that way, we can understand modern citizenship.

Because of my religiosity as a child, I had a very hard time with the idea that Jesus might be wrong about anything. I have grown to tolerate the idea. Other leaders in other religions were wrong about some things too. The idea that Jesus was wrong about some things is anathema to standard Christians who think that Jesus was God. It makes Jesus merely human, and it means we have to think about particular points of his message and about his relation to God. I do not think the fact that Jesus was wrong about some things is very important. If it helps you to see Jesus' message without any theological claptrap, then use the idea that Jesus was not perfect. If his mistakes lead you to question

his whole message, or lead you to get satisfaction from disrespecting standard Christians, then stop gloating, get over the idea that he was only human, and get on with better things.

It is not only me and Liberals who do not go along with the letter of the New Testament. Everybody who lives in the real world, especially Conservatives, selects from the New Testament and interprets what they select to support their way of life and to control other people. You very likely disagree with Jesus if: you believe in using force to defend yourself, your family, or your possession; you believe we need armed forces and the police; you support the death penalty; you have ever filed a lawsuit; you do not support government policies to help the poor, widows, orphans, and the handicapped; you believe capitalism is inherently Christian; or you insist on harsh penalties against people who do not follow strict "family values" such as people who commit adultery, have abortions, or have babies out of wedlock. You might be right in the sense that the real practical world requires some of these measures. But you still contradict Jesus, and you should be honest about it and what it implies.

God Used Jesus and Deceived Us.

Jesus was a good person, and his death did not automatically save everyone, yet God still let Jesus die horribly. Jesus was not God and Jesus was not resurrected, but God let people think he was. If Jesus was not God and was not resurrected, then God should not have allowed people to believe that. If Jesus was God, was resurrected, and did somehow automatically save everybody, then Jesus and God should have made those points crystal clear rather than leave us in dogmatic muddle and leave us open to conflict based on silly theologies. If someone other than God had set up this situation, we would say he-she lied. That God allowed Jesus to be horribly murdered is bad enough, but that God then allowed us to believe lies about it is worse. Of course, because people believed Jesus was God and was resurrected, they also kept alive his message. Knowing human nature, there is probably no other way in which humans would have kept alive such an exalted message. God allowed people to be deceived about something really important, the identity of Jesus and resurrection of Jesus, so God could get across Jesus' message. God used Jesus and deceived us. He did it in a good cause and he did what he had to do; but, in the end, God still used Jesus and still deceived us. Make up your own mind about God in this light. This situation does not mean we can ignore Jesus' message. We still have to think about the whole thing and have to make up our own minds. I return to these themes several times in the book.

God, Modern Government, and the Planet.

Most of the core ideas given above and in the previous chapter find direct support in the Bible. The ideas in this section do not, but I think they are important and I think they are in line with the Bible.

God wants us to succeed in modern good government. God wants us to succeed in self-government and democracy. We have to be more than just good citizens but we also have to be good citizens. Self-government is God's institution for people now. If we fail at democracy, we will have failed God.

God wants us to succeed with social justice. We cannot have an unjust democracy. We cannot allow some people to live well and other people to continually hurt despite their honest best efforts. Finding the balance between individual responsibility, social justice, taking care of people, and allowing people to

take advantage of society, is not easy but it is something we must do.

God wants us to be good stewards of Earth. We can use the planet without destroying God's creation. If we do destroy biological diversity, harm the environment, and harm the climate, then we will have failed God.

Over population, unemployment, poverty, bad education, and unequal development make it hard to be good citizens of our nation and of the world.

God does not want a theocracy as was the goal of ancient Israel and is the goal of many fundamentalists now. He wants good self-government along lines that are acceptable to people in general of all religions. Within those general guidelines, we can be stricter and more observant depending on our particular beliefs. We do not have the right to impose our beliefs on others. Government usually runs better, and more according to the ideals of God, if we do not impose our beliefs on others – paradoxical but true. If generic self-government goes against an important belief of ours, then we need to think and we need to negotiate with other citizens. For example, if the state permits the rich to exploit the poor or if the state permits abortion, we need to think about the best thing to do short of theocratic revolution.

I do not know if God wanted institutions other than self-government and stewardship in past times, or if God will want other institutions in the future. I do not know if God wanted kings to rule in the past and will want robots to rule in the future. I do not know if the history of the Jews, the West, and the planet pointed us toward self-government and stewardship. I do not know if striving for self-government and stewardship will eventually lead into other things and eventually serve an even greater plan of God. I do not care. I know that God wants this now, and that is enough for now.

The problem of self-government is hard for me because I doubt the ability of people in general for self-government; that is I doubt democracy can work. It seems odd that God would want us to succeed at self-government but would not give us the talent we need to do the job. I comment more on this problem later.

Jewish ideas about social justice and the Kingdom of God, along with Jesus' idea of working hard as a member of the Kingdom of God, prepared us for our roles as citizens in modern democracies. Even so, we should not view the modern democratic state as the only possible embodiment of the Kingdom of God, and view the modern good citizen as the only possible member of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was setting up the Kingdom of God in the middle of the Roman Empire where there was no democracy and when only a few people had Imperial citizenship. The Kingdom of God, and membership in the Kingdom, are wider than any form of government or relation to government. God wants us to be good modern citizens in self-government as part of being members of the Kingdom of God, not as a substitute. Besides working through government to achieve an approximation to the Kingdom of God, there are many other actions a person can take to be a good member of the Kingdom of God, such as directly helping people in need. Even people that are not smart enough, too sick, too despondent, or too ignorant to be good citizens in a modern democracy still can be good members of the Kingdom of God.

People need to see their everyday lives as holy, and people interpret their religions so as to make their everyday lives holy. They interpret their religions so as to make crusades out of duties they should do

anyway, such as be a good citizen or help the neighbor with a problem. Being a good citizen does not automatically make you holy. Having a well run democracy does not make a nation holy. Working hard to make government work does not make you a saint. Those tasks need to be done, and God very much wants us to do them; but doing them does not necessarily make us special, holy, justified in the eyes of God, or send us to heaven. Seeing the situation this way takes some glamour out of political crusading, and might make average citizens less vigorous; but it is better to be clear about what God wants and how the world works.

Creeds, Feelings, Experiences, and Acts.

The ideas of the previous chapter and this chapter are a creed, a list of points. Creeds are not as important as experiences and acts. Experiences include rituals such as baptism and feelings such as of the presence of the Lord. Acts can include giving to charity, paying it forward, witnessing, speaking in tongues, casting out demons, going to church, following the sacred calendar, working with prison inmates, writing a book, or a ritual such as eating a Lord's Supper. I might have been more honest to standard Christianity if I had first described its common experiences and acts before listing my own creed.

Here we need to focus on ideas and morality rather than on experiences or acts alone, for three reasons. First, except for some positive acts in accord with the Golden Rule, the experiences and acts of nearly all Christians are not much different than the experiences and acts of most people in other religions. Other religions have baptisms (washings), suppers, and powerful experiences of being with the Lord. The experiences and acts of standard Christians would not be odd to many Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists. Readers of this book want to know what is special about Jesus. That means understanding ideas of positive actions, the Golden Rule, the Kingdom, mercy, forgiveness, and inclusion.

Second, acts include more than the usual stereotypical religious behaviors. Acts include more than rituals, more than behaviors intended to make a person feel better such as the usual going to church, and more than isolated bouts such as speaking in tongues or casting out demons. Those acts might not be bad but they are not enough. The readers of this book want to act so as to build a better world, and they want to feel that their actions are the most appropriate. We need to be able to think about acts. We need ideas about acts to guide us toward good acts.

Third, many non-standard followers of Jesus have some of the same powerful feelings that standard Christians have, such as the presence of Jesus or the feeling that God does help us; but non-standard followers of Jesus do not rest on those feelings alone as the basis for religion. They want to put their feelings in the context of morality, best actions, and reasoned ideas. They need confidence that their understanding is correct and focuses on what is important. Readers of this book might lack confidence in their ability to resist doctrinaire Christians who stress feelings, experiences, rituals, church membership, or isolated acts. Readers might lack confidence in their ability to resist atheists and jaded modern people. They do not know how to square their ideas of Jesus' teaching with the practical needs of real life, personal freedom, and running a democracy.

To connect actions and experiences to building a better world, we need to have good ideas and to be

sure of our ideas. That is why the statements of belief.

Ideals for Tough Situations.

I know sometimes we just can't act to build a better world, and that simply feeling God loves us can be the highest act possible. People feel "stuck" this way when they are sick or when a loved one is sick and they cannot help. People feel this way in a horrible place such as a prison or an internment camp (although even in a camp the prisoners do amazing things to build a better world). People feel this way when they have done something bad and cannot easily make amends. People feel this way when their lives have "gone to shit" and they do not know how to turn it around. People feel this way when they think they have to make something of themselves but can't. Most people know that sometimes they cannot act as they would wish and instead have to just hope. But most of the time this world is not a prison camp, we are not dying badly, and we do not have to save the world single handed. So we do need to think about how to act there. Just because normal religion has failed many modern people does not mean we should treat the real world as a prison camp. Frank Zappa described modern life as, "concentration moon over the camp in the valley" but he was wrong. "The Burbs" are not the apocalyptic world of "Mad Max". "The Office" is not a prison camp or a Kafka story. If ever we are in a hellhole, then having learned first about being a good person in a better world is not bad preparation for making it through and doing what we can.

I understand that many people cannot go much beyond just hoping for God's love, especially in the modern confused world. They do not know what to do. Or they are afraid. I am not much of a pastor, and so I cannot advise these people very well. If all you can do is feel, prey, and hope, then do that. I cannot fault people because they are not Saint Francis or Mother Teresa. But even the hard-up people can appreciate the good acts of other people. Even the hard-up people can encourage others. Even they can trust God and can have a relation with God. Those too are actions. Very likely, for them those are acts enough. The heavy-of-heart sometimes do what little they can better than people that are more capable but do less.