

Continued from last month . . .

Faith, Tradition or Culture?

B. The Answers (Part 1)

In the previous issue a questionnaire was provided of nine commonly held beliefs. And it asked us to choose whether the beliefs were: basic to the Christian Faith, part of Christian Tradition, or part of our Inherited Culture.

As a consequence, in this (and the next) issue, we will explore the basics of such beliefs.

1. Monogamy

Issue: Monogamy (the marriage of one man and one woman) as the basis of the family unit

Answer: Inherited Culture

In the Old Testament it was not unheard of for polygamy—a man being married to more than one woman—to be practiced. Sarah, for example, gave Abraham her servant Hagar as a means for them to have children (Genesis 16:1-2a)—and in one passage Hagar is actually called Abraham’s wife. Furthermore, Jacob married two sisters, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:14b-30). Although it must be said he only intended to marry Rachel. Etc. etc.

So while it may have been more normal for poorer people to have only one wife, King David had eight wives of whom we know their names—plus several other wives and concubines. And King Solomon had at least 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3).

By New Testament times it was more normal for monogamy to be practiced. However, even then, polygamy was not unheard of or forbidden. For example, Paul, himself, alludes to polygamy in his comments to Timothy about Christian leadership. Indeed, Paul had a personal preference for all leaders in the church to be single. However in his first letter to Timothy, he suggested a compromise: that, at the very most, leaders must be the husband of but one wife. (1 Tim 3:12a).

Today, monogamy may have become the generally accepted norm, but there are places where Christians practice polygamy, in terms of one husband with several wives—or one wife with several husbands.

2. Democracy

Issue: Democracy (government by the mass of people or by their duly elected representatives) as a system of government

Answer: Inherited Culture (i.e. Western and, increasingly, other cultures)

In the bible the standard is not democracy, but rather theocracy: government by God or by his representatives. This was the standard that God set from the beginning. It was the way that God governed his people throughout the time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, in the time of Moses and the Exodus, through the conquering of the Promised Land, and at the time that the people were settling into the Promised Land.

However the people became dissatisfied with the Judges. They wanted more consistent and continuous leadership. So they looked around at the surrounding nations, and demanded a king. Hence the adoption of a monarchy (1 Samuel 8:1-21). Then, as time progressed, the idea of a future ideal Davidic king blossomed. So come New Testament times, what the people were looking for in the Messiah was a king to lead them forward.

As a consequence, over the centuries the church has often been favourable to some form of constitutional aristocracy (or monarchy). Indeed, it is often seen as a better alternative to some of the authoritarian regimes with which some churches have had to learn to live. Nevertheless the ideal remains that theocracy—the rule by God—is the system that all Christians should be seeking.

3. Discipleship

Issue: Discipleship as the basis of the Christian faith

Answer: Christian Faith

Discipleship has always been the basic response to the Christian faith. In the Old and New Testaments the emphasis is on being believers—not just having some intellectual acquaintance.

For example, in the Old Testament Covenant, the contract was that if people obeyed God's laws, they would be blessed by him. And the covenant was a typical covenant of the period. If you do this, then expect blessings. But if you don't do this, then expect disaster (Deuteronomy 28:1-68). However, the point is that the response to God was not just an intellectual exercise, but the need to be active in the faith.

As a consequence, when we get to the New Testament, one of the first things we see is Jesus going around the countryside calling people not just to believe, but to follow him. In addition, after his resurrection, Jesus instructed his disciples to make more disciples, and to baptise them. Then whoever responded in a positive manner would be saved, and whoever did not would be condemned (Matthew 16:16-20)

Now the term 'disciple' normally means a 'pupil' or 'learner'. However in terms of Jesus's expectations, the commitment to being a disciple also includes the need to be willing to abandon one's home, business ties and possessions, and the willingness to go to extreme lengths to fulfil his claims on one's life.

As a consequence, it is discipleship which is the basis of the Christian faith.

4. Holy Communion

Issue: The practice of having Holy Communion as part of a church service

Answer: Christian Tradition

For this one we need to go back to where Communion started, on the night before Jesus was put to death. Because Jesus was in an upper room with at least his twelve disciples (although there may have been others with him too) (Matthew 26:17-29).

Now at the time, Jesus was having a meal with his disciples. In fact a very special meal—a meal to remember the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt. Now at this special meal dishes of food would have been provided, there would have been the breaking of bread, and there would have been four cups of wine at different points in the meal. And the Last Supper was probably instituted at the breaking of bread and the third cup.

However, whatever the details, the important thing to remember is that the Last Supper was a meal. And Jesus's instructions to the disciples were 'to do this in remembrance of me'.

Now the earliest recording of the Last Supper being practiced by the church is recorded in the writings of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). And it relates to the abuse of the Lord's Supper in which some people drank too much and over ate. Paul's experience of Communion, then, was within the context of a shared meal, not just using the symbols in some kind of worship service.

Indeed, it was not until the second century that the practice of using the symbols in the context of worship became well known.

Despite that, the importance of sharing a meal together cannot be over stated. In biblical times, meal times was the one time of the day that people got together and shared what was going on in their lives. And that is an aspect of communion that can be so easily lost, when the fellowship meal is reduced to symbols.

5. Regular Worship

Issue: Regular weekly worship and attendance at all major festivals

Answer: Christian Faith

The fourth Commandment reads: 'Remember to keep the Sabbath Day holy. For six days you are to labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is to be set apart as a Sabbath to YHWH your God . . .' (Exodus 20:8-11). If the Ten Commandments were an essential part of the Old Testament covenant, then this one would have to be the one that is the most repeated.

Indeed, not only is it repeated again and again throughout the pages of the Old Testament, but other tags are added to it as well, including: 'Anyone who works on the Sabbath is to be cut off from among his people,' and 'Anyone who defies the Sabbath is to be put to death.'

In addition, attending three (later five) specific major festivals a year was compulsory (Exodus 23:14-17).

Come New Testament times, then, what we see is Jesus on the Sabbath in a synagogue or in the Temple. Paul also was either in a synagogue, engaging with devout Jews somewhere, or was participating in worship in one of the newly formed house churches. In addition, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews provided a stern warning to those who were not meeting together as they should (Hebrews 10:25).

Now, it may no longer be the habit of the church to disassociate itself from those who are not as regular as they should be. But we do need to heed the warning behind the Old Testament instruction. That is, a casual response to worship undermines not just the person's faith, but it can also be instrumental in destroying other people's faith, and all that the church stands for. Hence the need for all believers to take seriously the fourth commandment.

6. *Weddings and Funerals*

Issue: The Conducting of Weddings and Funerals by the Church

Answer: Christian Tradition

Now there are no recorded weddings or funerals conducted in the Temple, in a synagogue, or a in church in either the Old or New Testaments.

Perhaps the first recorded wedding *reception* is that of Jacob who believed he was marrying Rachel (Genesis 29:23). However any ceremony (if indeed they had one) was not recorded. And in this case, the reception preceded the marriage, and was probably intended to get Jacob so drunk that he couldn't see which daughter he was marrying.

Similarly, in the New Testament, the wedding at Cana does not deal with any marriage ceremony, but only with the reception (John 2:1-11). And indeed the story is more concerned with the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine, rather than the details of the reception itself. Furthermore, Jesus's parable of the ten virgins gives us a view of what had developed in regard to a wedding reception. But still no evidence that it was conducted by a minister of religion of any kind (Matthew 25:1-13).

What we do know is that in some places during the latter part of the first century AD, betrothals needed a bishop's approval. Furthermore, the first record of the church being involved in any wedding ceremony only dates back to the third century AD. Indeed, even in England in the Middle Ages the common people did not get married in church. Yes, they may have had to knock on the vestry door and ask the church for permission to marry, but marriage itself involved nothing more than the two people concerned beginning to live together.

The history of funerals is similar. There are two burials recorded in the book of Acts: of Ananias and Saphira. However again there is no evidence of any ceremony—simply a comment about a few young men, wrapping the bodies up, carry them out, and disposing of the bodies—which was common practice in the Middle East at the time.

Weddings and funerals by the church has more to do with the acceptance of the church's place in society, than it has about the purpose and function of the church. As a consequence, the reason that the continues to be involved has very little to do with the Christian faith, but rather with the traditions that have been handed down.

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