

Continued from last month . . .

## **Faith, Tradition or Culture?**

### **C. The Answers (Part 2)**

In the November 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 the December issue, we explored the basics of the first six beliefs. Now we conclude with finally three . . .

#### *7. Baptism*

Issue: The baptism of children

Answer: Christian Tradition

It must be stated from the outset that the baptism of children (on their own) is quite foreign to the bible. Indeed, the instructions of Jesus are quite clear: the church is to go out and make disciples of all people, and it is those who have become disciples who are to be baptized. Having said that, the tradition in the New Testament was that when the master of the house was baptized, his whole family: wife, servants and children were baptised with him (Acts 16:13-15).

Of course, what happened to babies born after the master of the household was baptized, brings us to the issue of the baptism of infants today. The issue was not raised in the New Testament. As a consequence, different denominations have come up with different responses.

For those churches who do practice infant baptism, it has been on the basis of Jesus's words about letting children come to him, because the kingdom belongs to such as them (Matthew 19:14). And in those churches, it is theologically based on two grounds: firstly, that the parents are disciples of Christ and active members of the church; and secondly, that Jesus commanded that children be brought to him.

Nevertheless, the practice of baptising children of parents who show no allegiance to the faith or the church is practiced. And over the years this has created division in the wider church. It also denies Jesus's basic demand for the need for discipleship.

#### *8. Good Works*

Issue: The belief that doing good deeds is sufficient to earn one's own salvation

Answer: Inherited Culture

Indeed, not just western culture, but many other cultures. Despite that, the bible is quite clear: 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23).

In other words, it doesn't matter what we do, none of us are good enough to be in God's presence. We cannot undo the mistakes we've made, and there is a price we have to pay for our mistakes. And no matter what we do, no matter how good we are from now on, we will continue to make mistakes, and we are required to pay the penalty for them.

Except for the fact that those who believe—who have accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as their saviour—are freely justified through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:24).

So the first part of the answer is that no matter what we do, on our own, we will never be good enough. We will never be able to earn salvation on our own. The other aspect to this issue, however, is that as a result of having faith, we are expected to do good works. James, the brother of Jesus quite clearly illustrates that by saying 'As the body without a spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.' (James 2: 26).

In other words, faith comes first, and deeds follow as a result of faith. But it doesn't work the other way around.

### *9. The Beginning of Life*

Issue: The belief that human life begins at (or before) conception

Answer: Christian Faith

Throughout the bible there are scattered images of the creation of individual human beings. In the book of Psalms we read: 'Yes, you indeed created my kidneys and my inwards parts; you wove them together in my mother's womb.' (Psalm 139:13). And that is a concept that is repeated time after time in the pages of the Old Testament.

Indeed, the Old Testament also talks about God knowing individuals before they were born. And regarding the Messiah, there are many things detailed about him before his birth; like the circumstances of his birth; where he was to be born; what kind of death he would face etc etc. Furthermore, the words of God to Jeremiah were: 'I knew you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you came out of the womb; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' (Jeremiah 1:5).

These days many people want to redefine the commencement of human life to be so many days or weeks after conception. And the reason for doing so, is that it then allows a time frame in which an embryo can be claimed not to be a human being, and can, therefore, be legitimately experimented on. But the bible puts no such limitations on human life. Indeed, it makes no distinction between the undeveloped life in the womb, and the more developed life after birth. And so from a Christian point of view, the sixth commandment: 'You shall not kill' still applies.

### *D. SUMMARY*

So, how did you go? How many questions did you get right? Nine out of nine? And what do your answers tell you about where you are in the Christian faith?

Now, the point of the exercise is to demonstrate that there are often things we take for granted, believing them to be part of our faith and, as a consequence, we pass them on openly or inadvertently to others by either words or example, when they have nothing to do with the faith whatsoever.

### *1. Faith*

In all the questions for which there were three alternative answers, only three of them related to the Christian faith: Question 3 about Discipleship; Question 5 about Regular Worship; and Question 9 about The Beginning of Life.

Only those three I've raised are issues on which Christians should base their faith.

### *2. Culture*

So the three questions which relate to our inherited culture, we should simply accept as cultural issues: Question 1 about Monogamy; Question 2 about Democracy; and Question 8 about Good Works.

As a consequence, we should not be accepting them as part of the Christian faith, and we should not be trying to impose them on anyone else.

### *3. Christian Tradition*

But in regard to Christian Tradition, we have to be careful. That is: Question 4 about Communion; Question 6 about Weddings and Funerals; and Question 7 about The Baptism of Children.

Because whilst some of these practices may reflect good intentions—at least when the practices began—we need to be aware of the traps that are inherent in each. We also need to be aware of their use and misuse over the centuries.

## *E. CONCLUSION*

Faith, tradition or inherited culture? How did you go? Well if you got nine out of nine, well done. But regardless of your score, an exercise like this demonstrates how easy it is to confuse Christian Tradition and Inherited Culture, with the Christian Faith. And after all, isn't that a major reason the church is in the mess that's in?

The reality is that we all need to keep on our toes, and we all need to use every opportunity to steep ourselves in the beliefs of our faith.

Because if we don't, then the lines between faith, tradition and culture will get increasingly blurred. And when that happens not only will we find it hard to know what the difference is, but the people we mix with will have difficulty in being able to distinguish between them too.

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