

Beloving

“Whoever believes in him”

Reflection 31 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

I have a friend who really, really likes this church but he can't commit because he's not sure he really believes. When you try to tie him down, or rather when you try to get him to clarify his thinking, it's not clear what he's not sure he believes. That is a double negative. But I think it's the only way to put it. It's not clear what he's not sure he believes. It's just that this belief thing confounds him. He's not alone. Many people are not sure what they believe anymore.

For centuries now almost every church has told its members what to believe on pretty much everything. This has been the definition of faith. Faith means to memorize and recite doctrine and facts about the Bible. And then layers of beliefs stack up over layers of beliefs. We've talked about this before in this series – how the more beliefs that pile up, the more the skepticism. And now having slipped from believing to feeling that they do not believe many find it hard to regain their footing, maybe, Diana Butler Bass says in her book, *Christianity After Religion*, because they're trying to climb back onto the same rock they fell off of (p.107).

In any case, a great shift has taken place in how people think, a great shift away from emphasis on creeds, beliefs and catechisms, away from answers that the mind cannot even grasp, away from the doctrines that have divided us into rival churches, away from the things we have long quarreled over because there was no way any of us could know the complete truth of the matter, away from all that. It's a shift away from knowing about God to knowing God, away from dogma to directly encountering the presence of God.

Diana Butler Bass – again in her book, *Christianity After Religion* (113ff.), which is a primary source for much I'm saying here – notes that people are moving away from “what” questions (what do I, what do we, believe?) to “how” questions. How does this make sense? How would believing this make my life different? How would this change the world? How can I connect with something larger than my own ego? How can I experience the presence of God? And it turns out this takes us back to the way things were from the time of Jesus for the next three or four hundred years, back to Jesus as a way of life, back to the notion that God had entered our world and shown us the way, back to a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, back to full, flourishing life in God.

And then it takes us back to the original definition of believing – what it meant in the beginning to believe (and again I am following Diana Butler Bass here who is citing the research of Wilfred Cantwell Smith). It takes us back to the old Latin word *credo*, “I set my heart upon.” “I give my loyalty to.” It takes us back to the medieval German word *belieben*, “to prize,” “to treasure,” “to hold dear,” which comes from the root word *Liebe*, “love.” It takes us back to the early English when “to believe” was “to belove.” It was a statement of trust, of loyalty. It was to trust the beloved, as in, “I hereby pledge to God my heart and soul,” a pledge of faithfulness, of loving service. I believe. I belove. I cherish God. I love God. I trust God. I devote myself to God. It's personal. It's relational. It's lived truth. It's love. This is the rock to climb back up on.

So in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,” it best reads, going back to its most ancient readings and understandings, “whoever directs his or her heart toward Jesus will not perish.” And so it is in so many of the verses that call us to believe. The questions now become very different. It’s not, “What do I believe about the resurrection?” It’s something simpler and more profound, “Do I trust in the resurrection?” Do you prize it? Do you cherish it? Do you entrust your heart and soul to it? And now creedal statements shift from, “We believe in one God, creator of heaven and earth,” to “We trust from the heart this one God, creator of heaven and earth,” and so creeds, dry and doctrinal, become prayer, living prayer.

I trust, I cherish, I love God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And I trust, I cherish, I love Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

And I trust, I cherish, I love the Holy Spirit.

Believing becomes believing. And with this the action in me moves from my brain to my heart. I change even a single word, “believe,” to its more ancient sense of “trust,” and the text transforms from a statement of dogma to an experience of God. And now we come full circle. Remember the doctrine we maybe wanted a little less of. Even the word “doctrine” has fallen on hard times. It too had an ancient meaning. It meant “healing teaching, teaching that heals and nourishes and by which life flourishes.” Doctrine, all true doctrine, is life-giving. That’s how you can tell if it’s true. If it’s true, it gives life. It draws people into deeper engagement with the sacred. Its draws people into deeper engagement with one another. It enlarges the circle of life. When it’s used to mark off the borders of faith, it loses its spiritual energy, but when it’s taught in love, from the heart, when it’s believing, it becomes a healing experience of God. And so I find healing in God the Creator. I find healing in Jesus’ teaching – in forgiveness, in love, in service. I find healing in the life-giving Spirit. I find healing in the church. And a whole new world opens up.

Here’s what I wish for each of you – this kind of believing faith. To this God may you pledge your heart and soul. May you believe. May you believe. May you cherish, love and trust God. May you devote yourself to God. It’s personal. It’s relational. It’s lived truth. It’s love. This is the rock to climb back up on.

– Dale Pauls