

Sermon Series

Skepticism: Where Faith Engages Doubt

²²Be merciful to those who doubt; Jude 22; *NIV*

January 24, 2010

Text: John 14:5-14

One True Faith?

If unbelief is *the sin* that so easily hinders following Christ, as implied in Hebrews 12:1, then what is the greatest obstacle to belief?

There is no single answer to that question because all of us stumble in many ways. Individually, we are unique. What causes one person to stumble persuades another. And every generation seems to have its own particular struggle.

Some find success and affluence the largest hurdles standing between them and God. Others find the Biblical story to be filled with faith-claims that they find simply not credible. Human intellect becomes a wall rather than a window. Forgiveness blocks the path of others. And it is not just about the struggle to see one's need, sometimes the bigger problem is worshipping the God who would forgive "them"!

Perhaps greater numbers would be forced to admit that they are simply distracted by life's numerous responsibilities. When Charles Hummel wrote his classic essay, *The Tyranny of the Urgent* in 1967, he identified the telephone as the primary offending culprit. One can only imagine what he would say a generation later about a people that carry the blame instrument with them 24/7. And now we can talk, text, even "tweet" ourselves around the globe in an instant. Tools that promised to comfort and connect us are increasingly burying us under mountains of distraction. Urgency reigns over importance. Knowledge and wisdom are lost in a tsunami of information.

The trouble is not new. The story is set in a far simpler time—*Oh, Brother Where Art Thou—the great depression*. Delmar declares, “Well that's it, boys. I've been redeemed. The preacher's done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting's my reward.” To which Everett responds, “Delmar, what are you talking about? We've got bigger fish to fry.”

Life can obscure what is really important.

Seeds of doubt are plentiful. But personally, I think the most prevalent and challenging source of contemporary skepticism is the reigning assumption that there must be more than one faith or one way to find life that will survive the grave. Or stated negatively, “there can't be just one true religion.”

In his book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, Timothy Keller identifies seven major doubts concerning Christianity that he has encountered in his ministry in New York City. It's not a coincidence that the first chapter deals with this common assumption that there just can't be one true faith.

Keller took an e-mail survey of New Yorkers in their mid-twenties and asked them to articulate their main doubts and objections to Christianity. Here are two responses,

“How could there be just one true faith?” asked Blair, a twenty-four-year-old woman living in Manhattan. “It's arrogant to say your religion is superior and try to convert everyone else to it. Surely all religions are equally good and valid for meeting the needs of their particular followers.”

“Religious exclusivity is not just narrow—it's dangerous,” added Geoff, a twentysomething British man also living in New York City. “Religion has led to untold strife, division, and conflict. It may be the greatest enemy of peace in the world. If Christians continue to insist that they have ‘the truth’—and if other religions do this as well—the world will never know peace.”

How are we to answer? Have we had our own doubts here?

As with all doubts we bring them to God. We pray. We listen.

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

⁸ Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. John 14:5-14; *TNIV*

Jesus Christ makes the Christian faith unique.

In the eyes of some, this makes Christianity the most arrogant and dangerous faith of all.

This conclusion is based upon two main assumptions. What some have called *a leap of doubt*.

→ Religion is *outdated* and *unenlightened*. Humanity has evolved to the point that we no longer need religion to survive. This assumption, while still popular, is in decline (modernism = the belief that modern man can solve all of his/her problems and life will get better and better vs postmodernism = which recognizes the need for a spiritual dimension to life, but unfortunately does not accept a spirituality defined by Biblical boundaries).

→ Religion is *divisive* and *dangerous* causing all kinds of *strife*, *war*, and *oppression*.

- Inclusive religions should be tolerated, even celebrated, in our "whatever works for you" society. To be in good standing, *these "faiths" must not believe they have the only truth, and they must not try to convert others to their religion.*
- Exclusive religions, especially Christianity, should be diminished and/or

destroyed.

In light of these assumptions, skepticism has taken one of three roads:

1. Outlaw religion - one way to deal with the divisiveness of religion is to use government's heavy hand to forbid or tightly control the practice of faith. During the 20th century there were four massive efforts to do exactly that - Soviet Russia, Communist China, the Khmer Rouge, and in a different way, Nazi, Germany. But the result was not more peace, but more oppression. The tragic irony and one of the greatest paradoxes of human history: *the greatest intolerance and violence of that century were practiced by those who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence*. The sociologists had predicted that the growing forms of religion would be secularized and belief-thin. Instead, the Christianity that is exploding in some areas and being renewed in others is a faith based on Scriptural authority, belief in miracles, and personal conversion. Religion is not going away. Its power cannot be diminished by government control. Religion is not a temporary thing that helped us adapt to our environment. Faith is here to stay, in particular the Christian faith. Could it be that there is one true faith? And that the efforts to destroy faith are actually arguments for faith!
2. A more effective road that skepticism has taken is to condemn religion. Through education and argument, the post-modern skeptic has tried to *socially discourage* religions that claim to have the truth. The idea is to create an environment where prevailing culture will consider exclusive faith to be unenlightened and outrageous, even in personal conversations and

private expressions. Again there is irony for the skeptic is using the very tools he has accused and condemned the Christian faith for using - indoctrination, shame, and prejudice - all done in the appearance of humility. The present effort to shame Christian faith by portraying believers as unenlightened and arrogant says far more about the weakness of the arguments for doubt than it does the validity of biblical revealed faith.

3. A third approach, which appears more tolerant and humble, and is therefore more dangerous to true faith, is the assumption that religion/faith should be kept completely private. Some influential thinkers have argued that in public political discussions we may not argue for a moral position unless it has a secular, nonreligious grounding. Really? Why? How? Can we even talk about "grounding" if we eliminate any discussion of God and his Word? This idea that faith should be kept completely private is what really "frosted" the religious left and unbelievers alike when Brett Hume had the audacity to speak about faith in Christ publically!

For those of you who tend to have a skeptical perspective on the faith-claims of the Bible, I humbly offer this advice:

- a. You are not alone. We all have our doubts. You need not and should not close your mind to becoming a believer in Jesus Christ.
- b. Allow God to speak. Doesn't an open mind require you to listen to what he has to say?
- c. Be as skeptical toward the skeptics as you are toward the teachings of Christ.

So where does that leave us? Perhaps we can find help at the feet of a Christ-follower who overcame his doubts and his sins. Perhaps at the close of his life of faith, his reflections may assist us.

Jesus knows and reveals the Father (14:7,9).

John 14:7,9; TNIV

⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Those statements can be made of no one, but Jesus! No other philosophy, religion, or ideology. No other teacher, or wise man, or leader. Jesus, Jesus alone knows and reveals the Father!

John makes that quite clear earlier in his gospel story . . .

John 1:18; TNIV

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only [Son], who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. *ESV*

No one has ever seen God,
not so much as a glimpse.
This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
who exists at the very heart of the Father,
has made him plain as day. *The Message*

This testimony is consistent with Matthew's record.

Matthew 1:27; TNIV

²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

In Jesus God's glory is on display. And he is a beautiful site to see!

If you want to see God, look to Jesus and nowhere else.

Jesus provides access to the Father (14:6,10a).

John 14:6, 10a; TNIV

⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?

He is the road on which we travel. He has paved the way. And it is a beautiful journey!

But in a fallen world, the signs can be confusing.

One way? Which way do you turn when both options seem impossible? Who wrote the sign? And on what authority? No matter which way we turn there is at least one absolute truth to which all must agree, death awaits. What waits for us beyond death?

No one else provides access to God the Father . . . creation, redemption, rule. And there is no one else to whom we must finally give an account.

Jesus has done for us what we could not do—nor anyone else.

Read Revelation 5!

Jesus does the work of the Father (14:10b-14).

The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. John 14:5-14; TNIV

Jesus is the only one who came for me! . . . for you! . . . for us . . . for people!

Mohammed did not die for you. Neither did Buddha. The essence of God's work is seen in the salvation of the human race. That very necessary work can be done by no one else.

That work continues in Jesus as he lives within his people. There is no other avenue or resource for this work.

While I am encouraged to see the vast effort from around the world for the people suffering in Haiti, I also conflicted. Many of the leading organizers of "Hope for Haiti Now" are people whose belief systems and behaviors are at odds with the one true faith. I'm not trying or wanting to judge their motives. But right now our world is filled with a Christless compassion that I believe is a devilish deception . . . a Satanic deception.

It is not our place to condemn. It is our place to be discerning and to offer help in the name of Jesus Christ! It's not about what human organization of political philosophy gets the credit. And yet it is about who gets the credit. God works through his Son. And the Son brings glory to the Father!

Christianity is the *One True Faith!*

Come to Jesus . . .

Everyone takes a leap of faith with regard to the meaning and purpose of life. Everyone takes a leap of faith with regard to Jesus Christ. The question is this, upon what foundation are you basing your faith (a rock or the shifting sand of prevailing human opinion - which never prevails long!)? And further, will your faith lead you to accept Jesus Christ or reject him?

Front Cover:

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only [Son], who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known (John 1:18; *TNIV*)