

# STATEMENT OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

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It is with humility and trepidation that I set out briefly to express my current understanding of and commitment to the Christian faith. Things about which I was once blithely dogmatic now appear to me as inexhaustible mysteries, regarding which we are only dimly capable of comprehension. However, I remain as anchored to one thing as I have ever been, and that is the absolute centrality of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, as our Prophet, Priest, and King, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith. Walking with Jesus in The Way, in the fellowship of those who also love Him, surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses, and looking forward to our final union with God through Him are, for me, the principle elements of our life of faith.

It is crucial, I think, that we as Christians understand walking with Jesus to be walking in the way of the Cross. We are to be broken for the world for which He was broken. We are to serve rather than be served. There should be no dichotomy between evangelism and social action: those living in bondage and darkness are all around us. We, in fact, continue to experience our own bondage and darkness in the variegated course of life. The more we love Jesus, the more closely we will walk with Him, the more His life and light will transform our lives, making us agents of, instances of, His freedom and light. While catechesis, discipling for the life of faith, has content, it is not a matter of rules and regulations. That content must all revolve around Jesus, I believe. It is especially important to highlight His own walk of faith during His earthly life as crucial for our continued faithfulness. Jesus is not a vitamin pill nor a vaccination. He calls us to relationship with Himself, and through Him, to God. That automatically ought to rule out pat answers and bumper-sticker religion, or any other thing that gets in the way of this relationship.

For me, the only creed with which I feel comfortable is the Apostles' Creed. It is the simplest of the great historic creeds, and was probably written in the Seventh Century C.E. specifically to include those of the Orthodox branch of the faith, those who had been specifically excluded by the Nicene Creed. I will not try to improve upon that. However, there are several emphases to my understanding of being faithful which I would like to highlight. These are especially necessary given my upbringing in a very narrow slice of evangelicalism, and my continuing journey out of that into greater freedom in Christ. While not wanting to repudiate the good work God did in my life through those contexts, it is important to me now to express how I have moved beyond their confines.

It is Jesus by which we judge the Bible, not the other way around. I realize that there is an epistemological problem here, as the Bible is the primary source of our information about Jesus. However, it is not the only source. There is the witness of 2,000 years of Christians' faithful [or not!] walking with Him, as well as the residue of the faithful walking [or not!] with God found in the Old Testament.

Further, there is the universal phenomenon of what many have called the "righteous heathen": those who, while not explicitly professing Christ, still exhibit a Christ-like character in the context of what is obviously a faithful walking with God, insofar as that is understood. This is what I take to be general revelation, what John Wesley called "prevenient grace". That revelation is not without content or character: its content and character are those of the Christ. Every "Christ-figure" in literature has a definite resonance, whether or not the writer and/or reader profess to walk in The Way. This is not, in my opinion, insignificant.

Revelation is ongoing. As Pastor John Robinson told his Pilgrim congregation, "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His holy Word." I take that WORD to be Jesus, following the lead of the prologue to the Gospel of John. Thus, the loose collection of writings which we call "the Bible", washed up, by the grace of God, from the wrack and ruin of history, are witnesses to God's self-revealing. **They are not that WORD Itself!** Sometimes the Bible contains records of what are obviously misapprehensions of Who God Is, if judged in the light of the Christ-event. The Bible, it seems to me, has its principle value as records of God's unfolding revelation to and interaction with limited, fallen humans, folks just like us. This received something **inexplicably** definitive in Jesus of Nazareth. By the agency of the Holy Spirit, we worship God through the Christ. We do not worship the Bible, nor our own theologies of God, the Christ, the Holy Spirit, or the Bible. Whatever else God's final revelation, the *Parousia*, will be, its chief characteristic appears to be that we will be with Jesus, finally knowing even as we are fully known.

While it is through Jesus that God is most fully known, that in no way compromises God's continued self-revelation in other ways. This is what I take to be "the faith of Abraham". One of the things that has always bothered me about the evangelical subculture is that it does not respect the spiritual pilgrimages of other Christians outside its own parameters. I have found the same churlishness on the other side of the spectrum, with many completely dismissing the life of faith of conservative Christians. I would do neither. With Erasmus, I look to meet Socrates --- and Jimmy Swaggart! --- at the feet of Jesus. The same for agnostic Jewish Gerald Finzi, whose motet, "Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice" must rank as one of the greatest expressions of the mystery of Christian experience since Bach. The same is true of the Gaithers, whose music and sentimentality I dislike. I look to share in the love of God with God-lovers who call themselves Muslim, Congregational, Hindu, Roman Catholic, Baptist, or whatever. Why, I believe in a God so mighty that even Calvinists will be saved! With Dante and many others, I believe that God makes provision in God's house of many mansions for all God-lovers of whatever stripe. Again, that does not in anyway compromise the central, definitive quality of God's revelation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We see through a glass darkly. It is simply least dark through the Christ.

Finally, God calls us through the Christ to wholeness of life in this world. This wholeness is always known through brokenness. Thus, the company of those faithfully seeking to walk with Christ will walk, by necessity, through the valley of the shadow of death, both our own and the deaths of others. "Stuff happens." It is not by lack of sorrows or multiplicity of earthly possessions that God's favour is known. It is precisely in the midst of crying out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" that we are most fully commended, body and soul, into God's hands, though we may not know it as such at the time. Thus the emphasis of much of the Church on God's solidarity with the poor and hurting is, I think, a true intuition of God's own self-identification, in Jesus the Christ, with our common human lot. By Him the health-and-wealth crowd is shown up as having no real Gospel at all. Nor is the "Jesus" who is chaplain to the mighty the One Whom I love and want to follow. The reason why the Good News is good is precisely because it is spoken into the bad news which is all about and within us. We are not called to niceness. We are called to redemption. We are not called to success. We are called to faithfulness. As Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, He calls him to die."

Given all of this, our morality will not be determined by the Holiness Code of Leviticus, nor by details of the apostle Paul's, and his culture's, misunderstanding of homosexuality. We seek, given the best we know from all sources, scientific, historical, and Biblical, to love this sorry, hurting world into newness of life through the covenant fidelity we have ourselves

experienced from our Maker. Thus, for example, I think the Church should be in the vanguard of those offering to bless same-sex marriages, as a first instance of the normalization and acceptance of a legitimate part of the range of God's good creation. I think the Church should be in the vanguard of those offering peace across racial divides, even when it is not welcomed. I think that the Church should be in the vanguard of those seeking the real empowerment of women around the world. I think the Church should be in the vanguard of those seeking to exercise responsible stewardship of the earth, rather than blessing its continued pillaging so that the wealthy and careless can continue to waste. I think that the Church should be in the vanguard of those seeking to deliver the poor from economic and cultural exploitation by corporate and state interests. I think that the Church in North America should understand itself to be part of the great world-wide Church, that we are Christians who happen to live in North America, rather than Americans who happen to have found a church where we like the way things are done.

Only a radical allegiance to Christ as our King will do this in and among us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot work it up on our own steam. The Christian life is not about guilt, it is about God's power for us to live in newness of life. The life of Christian faith is not difficult: it is impossible....without continual new birth in Christ. This new life in Christ is not a one-time thing, as I used to think, but an ever-developing process of finding more to give up to Christ, more to let bloom in Christ. Sanctification, in a word. In this, the work of the Holy Spirit is the *sine qua non*. All of our good works, all of our worship, all of our education and fellowship, all our music, are as naught without the enabling of God's Spirit.

What a gracious mystery that God would choose us as vessels of God's presence in the world! We cannot understand it, though we are given power to do it, in Christ. It is in letting Him live His life through us that we find our true selves, as individuals, as congregations, as denominations, as the Church. In the life of faithfully seeking to love Jesus and to walk with Him in the contexts of our own lives, by the power of the Holy Spirit we discover ourselves to have become agents of God's reconciling action in Christ, drawing all time and space into God's Self through Him. Praise God!