

Believing, Doing, Being: What's the Most Important Thing About Being Christian?

James 1:22, 27 and 2:26 NRSV But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves..... 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world..... (For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

2 Cor 6:11-14 NRSV We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. 12 There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. 13 In return--I speak as to children--open wide your hearts also. 14 Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?

1 Cor 13:1-7, 13 NRSV If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things..... 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

So with power and passion, exuberance and enthusiasm , the church got born on the Day of Pentecost. Do you remember scripture's account of that day? With tongues of fire, with speaking in many languages yet all understood by all, with the Holy Spirit having come, with the newly birthed church having been given a commission to take the gospel to the very ends of the earth, with three thousand persons being added to their numbers on that very first day – what could possibly go wrong? And here is how the story of that day concludes; listen carefully: *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone.... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47 NRSV). It is an incredible story. Awe. Generosity. Praise.

Everyone’s needs met. Glad and generous hearts. All together in one place and all of one mind and heart and spirit. Utter and complete unity.

Aren’t you glad that the church continued onward for the rest of its life to be exactly like it was on that first day?

Oh, wait. That didn’t happen, did it? In fact, scripture tells us that it only took a few weeks for the newly birthed Church to have its first conflict, its first complaints. Now, fast forward this story twenty centuries. The church has indeed spread to the ends of the earth. But the Church today is hardly the portrait of the church described there on the day of Pentecost. Now partly, of course, that’s just the wonderful price of success – no longer, thanks be to God, can the believers be “gathered in one place. But it is more than this: as the church spread, as it absorbed and was itself changed by the indigenous practices and peoples to where it spread, as the interpretations of the words of Jesus and the apostles began to vary, it is no wonder that the church is no longer that idyllic portrait described by Luke. But, you know what? You can see this very “pluralism” of thought and interpretation even in the New Testament itself over the approximately 70 years in which it was written, for even in New Testament times there came to be very different understandings of what it meant to be “church,” and what it was that was most important about being Christian.

We heard three scriptures today that show very well just how different, in fact, these interpretations of the Christian faith can be – even as early as in New Testament times. One way to summarize those differences has to do with belief, action, and being. That is, first of all, there have been those who have insisted that having the right **beliefs**

is the most important thing about being Christian. But, second, there are others who would say that the most important thing about being Christian is not so much your beliefs but what you **do**. And, third, there are those who instead focus on Christianity being most clearly evidenced by **the kind of person you are**, your **being**, if you will. Now, when you think about it a little, this in fact pretty much mirrors how, for example, you might describe a friend or acquaintance if someone were to ask you about him: your answer you could focus on what your friend *thinks*, or you could focus on what he *does*, or you could focus on the *kind* of person he is. We've all known people whom we believe think exactly the right things on, say, certain political issues – but we really don't much like them! Or, there may well be folks we do like because of the kind of persons they are, but we just don't "get" how they think about certain things.

So, **thinking, doing, being**. Three ways of trying to think about and assess what it is that is most important about being a Christian. Let's go deeper, and start with James. His point of view is rather clear, isn't it? Did you hear his short and succinct words: to be a Christian means "to care for orphans and widows in their distress." IN other words, **Doing**. He in fact has some harsh things to say for those who would hold the "right" beliefs but whose beliefs don't seem to lead to any actions. It was, after all, James who later in his letter pointedly said: "Faith without works is... dead." Now, you can find this attitude from folks on either the "conservative" or "liberal" ends of the theological spectrum. While in general I think that these labels are not nearly as helpful as nuanced and thoughtful conversation, we nonetheless all use them as shorthand, and you know what I mean: those who would call themselves (or get called) "liberals" sometimes have certain litmus tests for action about what it means to be "truly" or "really" Christian; but the same is true for "conservatives" too. Any of these folks might say, a la James, that faith without a certain kind of action is dead. For these folks, it is **doing** that is what is most important about being Christian.

But what about **believing**? The passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church is rather sharp, isn't it: "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers.... Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?" That's pretty clear and pretty absolute. And we have certainly all known people who would say that if you don't have the right beliefs, you are not "really" a Christian. And we have known those who refuse to associate with others who do not have, in their estimation, the "right" kind of beliefs. When I was the pastor of a church in a little 300 person town in Indiana, there were four churches in the town. Three of those churches usually did a joint Easter Sunrise service together. But the other church made it clear that not only were they not going to participate, but that any of their members who attended would be "dis-fellowshipped" because we in those three other churches were wrong, unrighteous, and merely associating with us would be "impure" and make their members liable to be sent to hell. Really. Now, I am the very last person who would say that what you believe doesn't matter. The attitude of the oft-quoted Peanuts cartoon that says "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere" has licensed a lot of damage. We have all known folks whose lives were poorer, sadder, or more hurt-filled than they needed to be because they had certain kinds of beliefs about God. And yet, nevertheless, I think that Jesus probably weeps when we tacitly make holding "the right" belief grounds for who we count, or treat, as a "real" Christian.

Which brings us to the third one: **being**. As I said earlier, if you want to describe somebody, you could focus on what they believe or think, or you could focus on what they do, or you could focus on the kind of person they are – their **being**, if you will. There is no better expression of the point of view that what's most important about being a Christian is the kind of person that you are than Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13, what is called "the love chapter." This is most often read at weddings, but it deserves to be read on many other occasions as well. Notice the structure of what Paul is saying. He

first says that even if you **do** speak in tongues or even if you **do** give away your possessions to the poor, if you aren't loving sort of person, it's not worth very much. And even if you have the "right" **beliefs**, or as Paul puts it even if you have "all knowledge," and you don't have a loving spirit and try to express that love, then Paul goes so far as saying you "are nothing." As he builds to that final line about love being the most important of the trio of faith, hope, and love, he tells us what it means to be the kind of person who is a loving person: it means that you are marked by kindness, and patience and humility and civility. In his letter to the Galatians, he said it this way: the kind of person that you are as a Christian ought to be marked by the following traits: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Now what do we do with all this reflection about the difference between believing, doing, and being, and what can we learn from it? Well, first of all, notice something: two of our scriptures are from the very same person, the apostle Paul. And yet they seem to be emphasizing very different things. That ought to be a reminder to us that the Bible always needs to be read with an understanding of the context of the individual letters, the situation at that point in time of the individual churches or audience that's originally being written to, and with the reminder that when reading Paul, particularly, that we are, as one preacher wryly put, "reading someone else's mail." And so in the passage from Second Corinthians (the one where he emphasized correct belief), the apparent threat, scholars think, to the congregation's life was the fact that they had been so successful in evangelism that there were all kinds of folks coming in who previously had some other sort of religion and who were getting the fundamental claims of the Christian gospel all muddled together with other things. But in the passage from First Corinthians, the "love chapter," scholars think that Paul is addressing a very different situation in the life of that church, one where it wasn't **belief** that was causing problems, but attitudes of

selfishness, particularly when those who were rich and didn't have to work got to the fellowship dinner early and ate all the good stuff and didn't leave much for the working folks who couldn't come until later. You see, to not dig into the context a little bit when doing Bible study or to treat every verse as a sort of line from a cookbook is to miss the nuance and detail and the message!

But even more importantly, particularly in our day and age when we are surrounded by a culture that wants to insist that people must be characterized narrowly and that you can be labeled and fit into ideological boxes, when the talk radio shows and certain television commentators seem proud of slinging slogans and urge you to do the same and want to insist that it is always and totally an "us or them" world – we need to be reminded that having the "right" beliefs according to this or that person or organization is not the only way to be a Christian. Now, are there deep issues of belief that seriously divide Christians? Of course there are; issues of sexuality and social justice come to mind, and we can't ignore those and shouldn't. But what we are invited to do by the grace of God and the love of Christ are two things: to keep talking about those differences with respect and civility, and to be very, very slow to ever cut off the conversation. After all, there are those who believe some very different things than I do, or you do, but if we all love Jesus then we are united by something that we can continue to hope and pray and work would be greater than that which divides us.

For example, both "liberals" and "conservatives" can differ very profoundly on a host of social and theological issues, but think of the things that they **ought** to be able to work together on while they keep talking about those other things. There is no lack of issues we can agree on and work together on in the name of the God who loves all His children and grieves when any are hurt.. For example, I have been struck and surprised in the last week at how religious folks as totally different as Southern Baptists, Episcopalians, and Jews are banding together to respond with care and compassion to

those thousands of children who are fleeing their homes and who know that the United States has long sought to be a haven from tyranny and the home of hope.¹ The beliefs and the actions of such oh-so-disparate and often disagreeing groups are often so far apart that it seems that dialogue cannot ever happen. But, again, these groups and many, many more have responded together with a loving spirit to horror stories like nine-year old girls orphaned by violence in their home countries and who were told before making the trek north to begin taking birth control because the chance of assault on their precious bodies was almost a certainty. Our own Week of Compassion will use our monies given today to help offer them a place that is safe for perhaps the first time in their young lives. Now, make no mistake, these folks, “liberal” and “conservative and of such very different beliefs,” probably disagree deeply about the economics and politics that have caused the situation. But more and more they are putting such things aside to seek to help defenseless in this situation, to give hope to children who are not so different from our precious children, and who need to know that they are indeed cared about.

It is in ways like these that God’s church is always called to be an alternative to the culture’s claim that if you don’t think alike, you ought to have nothing to do with each other. But we know otherwise: we know that God’s church is to be a living witness that the ties of the gospel that unite are stronger than the things that divide them and together to ever-more be people of gentleness, kindness, patience, and peace. It’s hard work sometimes, but it’s work worth doing. And so, to return to our original question: believing, doing, or being? All are important; all are valuable. But when push comes to shove, and as we think about any situation that we find ourselves in where there are difficult issues or needs, then I opt for **being**: seeking to be a person who expresses the love of God through Christ for each and all. Will you join me in that?

¹Cf., e.g., www.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/us/us-religious-leaders-embrace-cause-of-immigrant-children.html