

GREAT

THAT'S A ~~TOUGH~~ QUESTION

1. Is Christianity Irrational?

Acts 17:17-18 — September 13, 2020

Introduction

People sometimes assume being a person of faith means you must not value reason, or science or the life of the mind. More and more, those who follow Jesus are troubled with the feeling that their faith is somehow inadequate to address the pressing questions of the day:

- What does faith say in the face of rampant, violent discrimination? If black lives matter to God, how do we account for what's happening in Ferguson, Minneapolis, Kenosha, in Regent Park?
- What about gender equality? LGBTQ rights?
- How do we account for the history violence initiated by the church, even enshrined in its own scriptures?
- What about the seemingly, arrogant claims of spiritual and moral exclusivity in a world of religious pluralism?
- What of the suspicion, even repudiation of science when it comes into conflict with a thousands-year-old manuscript that we claim as sacred?
- What of the inability to reconcile the appalling suffering of the world with the claim that a loving, all-powerful God is at work behind the scenes?

These are big questions. And they're not going away. So, we're launching this series called That's a Great Question. We want to be a church where every person is respected and every question can be raised and dealt with in a real, open, and honest fashion.

Our model for this actually is Jesus. That might surprise you, but in the Gospels, people often came to him with their doubts (ref. Mark 9:24, John 20:24-29, Matthew 28:17). Jesus never says to anybody, *"Well, you doubted, so I'm done with you. You're useless to me."*

Today, we want to lay a foundation for this series by asking a really basic question: Isn't faith irrational? Is it possible to believe deeply in reason and logic and learning and embrace faith in an unseen, miraculous, supernatural God? We're going to start by looking at four misconceptions about faith.

1. Faith means believing good things for no reason

- This misconception is widespread. A Harvard professor, Steven Pinker, put it like this:
“Universities are about reason, pure and simple. Faith— believing something without good reasons to do so—has no place in anything but a religious institution.”
- The idea behind this notion is:
“Faith means believing what authorities tell you to believe regardless of the evidence.”
whereas...
“Reason means believing what the evidence tells you regardless of what authorities say.”
- Let’s start by acknowledging that for the first three centuries of its existence, the Christian faith spread and grew remarkably in spite of the fact that it had no authority at all. Christianity did not grow because authority was behind it.
- We get a little glimpse into its growth in the book of Acts. We’re told in Acts 17:17-18
“So [Paul] reasoned...”
That word is chosen quite deliberately. Not just preached, but
“...reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace...”
Now, he’s stepping out into the marketplace of ideas.
“...day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler trying to say?’”
- Paul had this conversation in the marketplace of ideas. Many others, thousands of others, have followed in his footsteps.
- The Christian understanding of how things are did not grow by avoiding rational conversation on the basis of authority; it actually grew by inviting rational conversation, often when opposed by authority.
- It’s worth noting that universities themselves, beginning with the first ones in Paris and Oxford and Cambridge, were a Christian idea. In fact, 92 percent of the first 138 colleges and universities in North America came into existence by followers of Jesus who believed all human beings ought to be trained in logic and reason so that people would be able to reflect and love the Lord their God with all their mind.

2. You can't believe in science and believe in God

- The idea behind this misconception is that, back in the old days, people just didn't know how to explain stuff. They didn't know where thunder came from, so they said, "It's Zeus, the god of thunder." They didn't know why the sun appears to go across the sky, so they said, "It's the god Helios and his chariot." Now, we have explanations for those things, and eventually, we'll have scientific explanations for everything.
- According to a common way of thinking, science is the only really solid ground for claims of knowledge. A great problem with that is there are a lot of really critical questions human beings need to live that science cannot answer.
- The claim that science is the only arbiter of knowledge is, in fact, not a scientific claim. There is no branch of science that has established that idea. It's a claim of faith.

Faith, from a Christian perspective, is not belief without evidence; it is commitment without half-heartedness.

- Restricting knowledge to the scientific method is a mistake. A philosopher named Ed Feser, writes that it would be a little like saying because a metal detector has greater success at detecting metal objects, coins and so, we ought to say, therefore, a metal detector can detect absolutely anything that is there under the sand to be revealed.
- Francis Collins, who is the head of the Human Genome Project and now heads up the National Institute of Health, one of the most recognized and awarded scientists of our day and also a follower of Jesus, put it like this:

"Science is the only reliable way to understand the natural world but is powerless to answer questions such as, "What is the meaning of human existence?" We need to bring all the power of both scientific and spiritual perspectives to bear an understanding on what is both seen and unseen."

3. No one can really know moral truth or spiritual truth

- No one can really know moral truth or spiritual truth, so agnosticism or skepticism is the best response or the best posture. Often in our day, faith is just relegated to tradition or preference or opinion but not knowledge. You can know stuff about chemistry or math but not when it comes to God and not when it comes to morality.
- One of the most important and frequently used words in the Bible is the word knowledge, and it is at the core of Jesus' mission. Jesus said this:

"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

- We live in a day when people are often asked to consider life's most important issues— What is a good person? How do I become a good person? What is the purpose of my existence?—as matters of opinion or preference or tradition, but not things an educated person could ever claim to know.
- In other words, we can have knowledge about math or physics or geology, but morality is a matter of opinions. I have mine. You have yours. It's relative to somebody's culture or preferences or upbringing.
- In our day, where knowledge is most desperately needed it has become often apparently unavailable, and the result is that people (often really bright and educated people) are plagued by skepticism and cynicism and uncertainty and doubt and eventually despair.
- We simply cannot live or choose or raise children or have a civil society or navigate life without moral knowledge. Knowing right from wrong is essential to our humanity.

4. Christianity is about being right

- Being right is a good thing. It helps you deal with reality, but it's not the best thing. It can actually be kind of dangerous. It can lead to arrogance, superiority and abuse.
- One of the amazing things about Jesus is he was always right but he never hurt anybody with it. His words sometimes caused pain, but they were never the words of a puffed-up, smart-guy ego who belittled people with lower IQs.

"One of the reasons I believe Christianity to be true is that it understands the relationship between knowledge and love so profoundly."

- Paul wrote these words

"We know that 'We all possess knowledge.'"

That was kind of a saying in Corinth where they loved knowledge.

"But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know."

There's a world of knowledge in that sentence right there.

"But whoever loves God is known by God." (1 Corinthians 8:1-3)

- In the end, God will not ask me how much I knew; he will ask me how much I loved.
- We were made to love. We know this. We know better. This is why we have churches. We need these little outposts of love, of knowledge about what matters most, so that people can find truth and know they are loved.