

Core beliefs?

When I was attending that ‘Bible study group’ that had effectively become a sect, my life was controlled by fear. Meetings eventually became very ad hoc, and the leader would phone and say, “We’re having a study in an hour’s time”. I used to dread my mobile phone ringing (he was the only person who rang my mobile). If I said I was too busy, I knew I’d be disapproved of for not really being serious about wanting to be saved.

It was stupid of me, I know, but his very real healing and prophetic gifts gave him credibility in my eyes. But the result was that I thought that we, in that tiny group, were the only ones who had the true truth – all based, of course, on (this chap’s interpretation of) the Bible. Indeed, latterly he had begun to do his own translation of the Bible.

So what were my core beliefs? What was I believing in? I was basing my faith on the views of a 21st century person – on his interpretation of (his translation of) the Bible.

Compare that with my faith as a whatever-kind-of-Evangelical-Christian I’ve been for the past 50 years. I was Bible-centred, I maintained a truly biblical faith. That faith was based on years of study – my study? Well, sort of. But if I’m honest, my study and my faith were based on what I was taught by ‘the elders’ (in the broadest sense) of the church. But we Evangelicals were right, we held to ‘the truth of the Bible’, and we held it strongly – we belonged to a ‘Bible-believing church’. As a student in Cambridge in the late 1960s it was made very clear to me how the CICCUC held the line against the liberals (SPCK) as they ‘watered down the truth of the Bible’.

And my faith was based, of course, only on proper translations of the Bible – those translations that an Evangelical could approve of.

So I guess I’m saying that my faith was based on my group’s interpretation (refined over many years) of my group’s translations of the Bible.

“Just like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, you mean?” Well, yes, but they are in error, whereas we’re not, of course; we’re right and they are wrong.

“You mean like you were in your sect?” Oh, well, yes, sort of.

I’m not trying to rubbish anyone’s beliefs, but there is an irresistible logic in comparing these three situations – different in degree maybe, different in the numbers of people in each group, but logically similar. We all rely, for our core beliefs, on what ‘our group’ believes and teaches.

And our translations, like it or not, are based on our beliefs. Every time I read John’s Gospel, I wonder how on earth JWs manage to translate it in such a way that they miss Jesus’ divinity: “Then those who were in the boat worshipped him” or “We are not stoning you for any of these but ... because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” But JWs are not dishonest people and they take the Bible seriously, very seriously.

So, what happens if there are things we are not sure of, maybe bits of the Bible that we're unhappy about? Are we allowed to question our group's teachings? Certainly, in my sect and in the JWs, fear is the motivator – no-one dares to question the leader(s) for fear of being disapproved of, and maybe even of being totally rejected by the group.

But what about 'our group'? Are Evangelicals allowed to challenge the 'accepted' beliefs? Is it OK to question some of what 'the Bible clearly teaches'?

As I've said before, what I've been struggling to achieve just recently is 'faithful questioning' as opposed to 'unquestioning obedience'. These terms aren't my articulation, but come from some of the books I've been reading – books that I know some of my fellow Christians would say go against what 'the Bible clearly teaches'.

In my next essay, I shall try to argue that faithful questioning is very much what Jesus stood for and therefore what we should be doing... and faithful questioning was what sealed Jesus fate, humanly speaking!

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