

79 Death by dogmatism

Throughout my Christian life I've been dogged by (my own) dogmatism. As I explained in [0], coming from a dysfunctional family, I discovered loving Christian relationships at Scargill House in the summer before starting college in 1968, and I embraced it wholeheartedly.

I went to the Cambridge CU freshers' sermon, where someone preached the gospel, and I gave my life to Christ. I had a superb Christian upbringing there – a good Bible base, weekly college CU Bible studies, brilliant Bible readings on Saturday nights from the likes of John Stott, good discipleship training, learning verses, daily quiet times, keeping my prayer diary, helping on Christian holidays and houseparties. An excellent start to my Christian life, which I have benefitted from over the years.

The downside? We were taught the supreme importance of correct theology. They explained how CICCUC 'held the line', at the end of the 19th century, as the SCM started bringing in liberal theology; the various bits of wrong theology of the Catholic church were explained; and we were taught that the gifts of the Spirit were only provided by God for the early church.

I maintained a strongly conservative faith, but in 1983 (i.e. 15 years on), through a course ('How to love and be loved') written by Colin Urquhart, I re-found relationship, and was happier than I had ever been. Alongside that, I discovered experientially that the gifts had *not* died out with the early church, and so I became a strong advocate. With hindsight I see that, by concentrating on the gifts, the relationship side of things began to atrophy.

After 15 years of trying to persuade my conservative friends to embrace the gifts, I finally realised that I shouldn't be wasting my time persuading other Christians, and I built up a ministry of what I called 'internet evangelism' – chatting to people via email and trying to persuade them of the truth of the Christian faith. Thankfully, God graciously used my efforts, and some people did come to faith, although I'm not sure how many others I put off by my attitude.

The next stage started with a feeling that my own church was becoming more conservative and was not taking the gifts seriously enough. I started attending a Bible study with a chap who exercised powerful healing and prophetic gifts. I foolishly thought that this validated his teaching – he must be right if God was using him so powerfully. But the group got narrower by the year until we thought we were about the only Christian group in the UK that knew the true truth. Stupid of me, I know, but God allowed me to reach that ridiculous level of dogmatism to show me in no uncertain terms where dogmatism leads.

When I pulled out, I was virtually faith-less – does God exist, even? I then spent about five years trying to rebuild my faith, but it was still about 'knowing what was right'. Then, in three days flat, we made the decision to leave the church we'd been part of for 37 years, although thankfully the decision was not based on dogmatism but on pragmatism: we were exhausted, being in the middle of an interregnum and living seven bad-traffic-miles from the church. Our leaving was sparked by neither theological nor personal disagreements.

It was only *after* we had left that I 'discovered' the Trinity (= relationship) and immediately got very excited – this love really was what I'd been searching for all my life. Once again I thought that I had 'found the answer'.

But so much of ‘what I had always believed’ was being challenged that, last August, I started writing about my faith, as a way of processing my thinking. This stimulated many conversations (a big thank-you to those involved!), but I’ve had a constant battle with myself, trying to be enthusiastic but not dogmatic. Most recently I realised, in discussion with two friends of a more conservative persuasion, that I was slipping again [77]. I had to go back and moderate some earlier writings, especially [60], titled ‘Bloody hell’(!) and my summary article [70].

I still feel very passionate about God, but in one sense I feel *less* sure about what I believe. It’s that I feel more strongly than ever about the core of my faith – the creeds, as set up by the early centuries of the church – but I’m more willing to accept that different Christians have different views about various faith issues, and that’s fine. After all, this is God we’re taking about, so we can’t **know** everything about God. Instead, we love and trust God, and are confident (faith-ful) enough in that relationship to question things and to admit sometimes that ‘I don’t know’.

Finally, a couple thoughts that have occurred to me recently:

– Could it be that the sin of Adam and Eve was dogmatism? That is, rather than simply trusting God, they wanted to really know! ‘For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ Although God had said, ‘If you eat ... you will surely die’, they weren’t prepared to trust what God was saying; they wanted to *know*.

– Could dogmatism actually be a form of idolatry? Worship is partly about deciding what is the most important thing. While I may have always *said* that God is the most important, in practice what I got most excited about was my latest theological views. (Indeed, is that what I’m doing now? Obviously, I don’t think so; I think rather that I’m trying to challenge those theological views that seem to me to be standing in the way of people’s relationship with God.)

What do you think?

Blessings!

Paul Bev. 2.7.19