

Faith in a Box

by: Ronald L. Dart

At long last, I think I'm finally beginning to understand something that puzzles a lot of people. The challenge is how to explain it. How is it possible to hate a man who could make the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear? A man who could take some poor guy who is totally stark raving mad and restore him to his right mind? What on earth could motivate religious people to want to kill him? The healer, of course, is Jesus and the men who wanted to kill him were the religious establishment of the day.

Having said that, let's consider this: the Jews had been through a lot to get where they were. They'd endured 70 years of exile in Babylon and, even after they came home and began to rebuild and restore the wall of the temple, they went through terrible times. There was opposition from neighbors—from people who were trying to keep them from rebuilding the walls at all. They were an embattled people through much of their history, including the time between that return from Babylon and the time when Jesus finally came on the scene. They had been oppressed by Assyrian power, then they had been occupied by the Romans and, through it all, they continually beat off challenges to the orthodox faith. Think about it for a moment. Observing the Christian world in 21st century with all the different varieties, ideas, splits, and divisions, you shouldn't be surprised that this same thing was going on in 1st century Judaism. They had to fight off all these people with different ideas. The Essenes (another small Jewish sect) had been marginalized. The Qumran Community, which were, candidly, somewhat off the wall – they had been isolated down by the Dead Sea—and the minority problems in Judaism, keep in mind, were all believers. They just read the law differently from the majority and applied it differently in their lives. And by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the majority had firmly established themselves as the religious leaders of the Jews. The political structure of Judaism was relatively stable—a two party system: Pharisees and Sadducees—and everybody knew where everybody was. Then a man named Jesus walked down from Galilee to the Jerusalem area and began to pose the most serious threat to their power that they had ever encountered. Jesus was a problem.

If you take your time reading the New Testament, it becomes plain that they didn't hate him because he healed sick people. It wasn't his miracles, or him feeding the five thousand, it wasn't all those amazing things that he did, because Jesus was a great, kind man. But when he began to teach he was, to borrow a modern expression, “out of the box” and they hated him because he was not orthodox. I use the word “orthodox,” not in the sense of identifying

a sect like the Orthodox Church or the Orthodox Jews, but in the broader sense of the word. It's defined as conforming to established doctrine, especially in religion. You might want to underline in your mind the word "conforming," because it is the nonconformists who give us such headaches from time to time.

Jesus' miracles of healing were undeniable and they conveyed a certain cachet upon his teaching. But his first major message—the Sermon on the Mount—is an affirmation of the Written Law and a serious challenge to tradition. The expression "Oral Law," which is very important to Judaism, is not found in the New Testament. What is found is the expression, "the tradition of the elders." The New Testament writers didn't believe that the tradition of the elders was handed down to Moses by God orally on Mount Sinai and passed down through the generations. In other words, the Oral Law did not come from God: it was the tradition of the elders. Then here comes Jesus who says, "You have heard it said by them of old time, you shall do this, but I say unto you 'no way.'" I'm paraphrasing, of course. But the fact of the matter is, Jesus was beginning to attack the traditions that the Jews followed at that time.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees didn't feel that Jesus was a very kind man when he began to take exception to their traditions. Jesus was in clear defiance of the established religion of the day. He refused to conform. And it was this that led the leadership to the place to where they were willing to kill him if they could bring it off. Pontius Pilate, hardheaded Roman that he was, saw straight through this. We don't know what he thought about Jesus personally. We don't know whether he believed anything he had heard about Jesus. It was the custom of the time that he would release one prisoner at the Passover season and, so, he decides to see if he could get them to release Jesus. So, he says, "Who will you want me to release to you: Barabbas, this thief, this murderer, or Jesus who is called the Christ?" Matthew put in this parenthetical expression: "for he knew that for envy they had delivered him." Pilate knew; he could see it clearly. And, if you will take your time and read through the New Testament, you will see it just as clearly as Pilate did.

The thing about Jesus was, the common people loved him. People often like it when someone comes along and tweaks the establishment. When the religious establishment gets smug and satisfied with themselves, are authoritarian, and start pushing people around, the people can get really resentful of that. So, when someone comes along who kind of tweaks their noses, the people really like it. Jesus himself had no establishment to protect or advance. He had a gaggle of disciples who had a way of coming and going, depending on what he had to say and what he did. After over three years of preaching, teaching up and down the country, healing sick people, restoring insane people to their right mind, on the day of Pentecost there were 120 disciples left. So, Jesus had created no establishment at this

point. He did say that he would build his church, but not much of that happened prior to Pentecost.

Why is it that orthodox establishments tend to be antagonistic toward unorthodox teachers? It's historic; it goes back as far as you want to look in every society known to man. The answer is simple: They are afraid. Questions are asked to which they have no satisfactory answers. What they do then is try to intimidate their followers into not listening to this or that unorthodox teacher and/or shut him up if they can find a way to do it. They tried with Jesus and they tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, with the Apostle Paul. He was a hard man to shut up.

Actually, there is a part of me that understands that. It's a bit frightening to face up to the fact that you have been wrong about some very important things in your life. If it's your career, your livelihood, how you pay the mortgage on your house, and someone comes along and begins to eat away at the foundation of that like termites, I can understand why you would call Terminex. I know this because I've been there. And having been there, I learned something very important. It's emblazoned on my mind: "You have nothing to fear from the truth." In a moment of revelation I realized that if what I'm hearing is true, I need to know it; I don't need to be afraid of it. Easier to say than it is to actually do it.

I also learned something else, it's okay not to have all the answers. A funny phenomenon develops in orthodox—I say orthodox, let's say in organizations and churches which develop their own orthodoxy and, in a way, put their faith in a box—they start thinking they have all the answers. I've been there. I know what that feels like and I learned that one of the sweetest phrases in the English language is, "I don't know." In that simple confession the door is opened so you can come to know.

When you look at the history of Judaism before Jesus and the history of the church after Jesus, a fundamental truth begins to emerge. Judaism in the second temple period around the 1st century, and then Christianity in the late 2nd century, were both plagued with heresies that sprouted like weeds in their otherwise neat, green lawns. The early church, for example, had to deal with a man named Arius who came up with the idea that there was no way that Jesus could be God because there is only one God. It was a heresy. Arius was dead wrong. And the church kept fighting it off. The end result of all this fighting off of heresies, gradually, inexorably turns organizations into nice, neat boxes. Orthodox boxes where everything is under control and the lawn is just plain green with no weeds.

If you plan to have any cohesiveness to your faith at all, heresies have to be answered. In both these cases, the leadership was unable to resolve the issues being raised and, finally, just slammed the door on the argument with a creed. They said, "This is it. If you don't

believe this, you're not a Christian." They put their dogma in a nice box, tied it with a ribbon, and considered it settled. Excommunications often followed. Sometimes even murder followed. There was a problem with that little box of dogma with a ribbon tied around it. It may have been the best approximation of the truth that could be established at the time, but in closing the box and declaring it to be the truth, the establishment put an end to growth. The only thing you can do at that point is to make a complete break with the establishment, as Martin Luther finally did and triggered the Protestant Reformation.

What does all this mean to you? If you're a Christian, you may be a member of a church, which in turn, may be a member of a larger denomination, which is also a member of what is sometimes called "mainstream Christianity." What is mainstream and what is not depends on who you're talking to. Chances are, your church, your denomination, lives in its own orthodoxy. It's important that your church knows what it believes and that it makes the distinction between orthodox and unorthodox teaching. It's important to maintain a cohesiveness in the face of forces that might very well fracture the church. It was a major factor in the early church and, in fighting off the heretics, some of the great orthodox doctrines were codified. Think of it this way, it's good to think outside the box, but you need to remember where the box is.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians and, in the process of developing this idea, he not only laid the groundwork for what the church ought to look like, but he inadvertently gave people the ammunition to create the kind of orthodoxy which would prohibit growth at the same time it was trying to go forward. "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:1-2 NIV).

The problem lies here, because arrogance, impatience, and shutting people out are things that tend to happen with orthodox organizations. He goes on to say, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Isn't that wonderful? Keep the unity of the spirit. One way of approaching this unity is to exclude everybody who disagrees. It's like the old joke: How do you carve an elephant out of a bar of soap? Well you take a bar of soap and a knife and you cut away everything that doesn't look like an elephant! That's what some people do with their churches and their religions. They get rid of everybody that doesn't really agree. Paul is challenging the Ephesians to look for a unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. In other words, an inclusive unity, not exclusive. He said, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." I think it's this marvelous exhortation of Paul's which created for the church the imperative to orthodoxy. However, this is followed in Paul's letter by the word "but": "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on

high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men. (What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

He's talking about process theology. The key word is "until." The prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers were to do all these things *until* they reached unity in the faith. When do we get there? Well. . . I don't know if anybody ever has. It's a process, and we're not really there yet. We're not in the unity of the faith; we haven't really come to the full knowledge of the Son of God. We haven't come to the perfect man; we're not in the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Then what business do we have putting everything in a box, putting a ribbon around it, putting it away, and saying this is all there is? We aren't there yet. The unity of the faith is a goal; not a new establishment. In the years that followed, the winds of doctrine Paul spoke about continued to blow people all over the place. However, this was followed by a caution: "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."

Unity is a good thing, but with every good thing there is a downside. What would it be? The very nature of orthodox thinking is that it cannot easily change. But growth demands change. You can't grow spiritually without changing. And orthodoxy doesn't change much. The Nicene Creed hasn't changed in. . . what?. . . 1700 years. The Apostles' Creed hasn't changed in longer than that. Orthodoxy doesn't change. You can consult Jesus on this issue. His attempt to change orthodoxy took him straight before Pilate and finally to the cross. To tell you what that might mean to you, I need to tell you a personal story.

Many years ago I was a member of a relatively large church organization. It was an organization that had its own orthodoxy, outside of the mainstream orthodoxy, but, you know, one man's orthodoxy is another man's heresy. That's just the way life is. I was an effective apologist for the organization. I believed we had the big stuff right and it was part of my job to defend that. In the course of time, out of a personal and organizational crisis, I came to feel I had to resign from the organization. So, with regret, I sent in my resignation letter, and a funny thing happened to me. I began to grow in knowledge and understanding in a way that was totally surprising to me. I hadn't expected that. It was only after I left the organization, with good old 20-20 hindsight, that I saw something I could not see from inside the box of my faith. I had all but stopped growing in that organization because all the important issues were decided. All of them were finalized. There was stuff written down about everything and everything was supposed to be taught in accordance with that.

That's true of nearly every orthodox organization, and even of some who think they're not orthodox; it's true everywhere. It's in the nature of churches, organizations, and even denominations to settle into an orthodoxy of their own making which slams the door on spiritual growth. By spiritual growth I mean the growth in the knowledge and the understanding of God, his plan, what he's doing, and what he wants from you. I understand why that happens. Because when you open the door, the wind starts blowing a lot of debris out of the house, and it's an unpleasant thing. The church exists to provide a safe harbor out of the wind. Pardon me for mixing my metaphors here. I'm grappling with a way to make this clear. There is a balance between knowing what you believe and standing up for it, and locking yourself into it so you cannot grow out of it.

Back to my personal story: I joined another church organization and together we merrily grew in grace, knowledge, and understanding. And, in the process, we created a new orthodoxy, a new box to defend against heretics, because heretics, like the poor, are always with us. And, to a lesser extent than my first experience, my personal growth was slowing to a stop. After 17 years, I resigned again. This time I was not so surprised that growth once again resumed. We are dealing with a human imperative to create a secure set of relationships. It afflicted the Jews in the 1st century. They wanted a secure set of relationships and so they tightened the reins on everything around them.

How early did this affect the disciples of Jesus? Early than you might think. You'll find the story in Mark 9. John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in your name and we told him to 'stop it' because he doesn't follow us." Jesus said, "Don't do that. Don't forbid him. No one who works a miracle in my name can speak lightly against us. For he who is not against us is on our side." Here was a fellow who was actually doing miracles in Jesus' name and the insiders knew nothing of the man. Our old friend, the Apostle Paul, went through something like this himself. The Christian church in the earliest years created its own establishment and Christ called Paul to his service outside of that establishment. Not only that, he called an enemy of the church into his service.

I realize that I'm asking you to face a paradox. On the one hand, unity is a good thing and stability is to be desired. On the other hand, the most stable people around are in the cemetery. The truth is that growth is a little bit frightening. But, sometimes, you have to let go of the secure perch you are on and launch yourself to a new and higher plane. In my own life, growth in grace and knowledge has come in stages. Every plateau has been good for a while and then has become confining. But leaving it is always frightening. You know the old saying: "I guess you just can't get there from here"? Consider this: "You can't get there without leaving here." Faith is a journey that requires us to overcome fear, to forsake

safety, and to go with God where he is taking us. A lot of saints have gone down this road ahead of us. Let's try not to make them wait too long while we finally catch up.

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