

Jeffrey J. Tibbs

My wife and I are relatively new members of Messiah Moravian Church. We have enjoyed the fellowship and dialogue with Truman Dunn and the congregation there for three years. My wife's religious background is in the Baptist tradition here in North Carolina and I was raised in the Lutheran tradition in a small fishing village on the southern shore of Lake Erie. Once out of school and living away from home our young adult lives would have been aptly described by Truman's definition of "un-churched."

Approximately ten years ago (around age thirty) I was re-acquainted with a concept one of my mentors had used as an illustration to help achieve a sense of fulfillment and balance in one's life. It is called the cross of life and I am not sure of its origin or I would give proper credit to that person. Simply stated the four areas of our life that should receive equal attention are work-recreation-family-spirituality. As I examined my life I felt my spirituality was disconnected. I believed myself to be a spiritual person, a Christian. But what did that mean to me and how was it an active part of my life? The quest for answers has led me through an intense and honest evaluation of my religious roots. Why did I feel that when I attended church my heart entered but my mind had to be checked at the door?

The origin of these feelings came from the church itself where my faith seemed to be predicated on my belief in doctrinal statements and creeds, the Bible as the word of God and Jesus as the only way to salvation. The first reconciliation of heart and

mind had to deal with my view of the Bible. As a young man I spent countless hours on the waters of Lake Erie and had experienced tornadoes and tremendous flooding. Could any flood actually cover Mount Everest as in the story of Noah's Ark? The depth of water covering the earth in such a flood would approach five miles! Moreover, the gospels and writings of Paul offer dramatically different descriptions of the same events and more than a few contradictions. It is not my intent to suggest we throw out the Bible. There are volumes written by biblical scholars for those wishing to pursue that debate. Rather, I humbly suggest we keep the Bible in perspective for what it is and isn't.

I think the Bible is an ancient culture's attempt within the social prejudices and limited language of their time to capture and put into words their understanding of their Jesus experience. I do not think the Bible was meant to be a factual historical account but rather a mix of metaphor and history, the human and the divine. As Marcus Borg observed in his book Meeting Jesus for the First Time, we humans have a tendency when interpreting the Bible to metaphorize our history and historicize our metaphors.

I do not think that rejecting historical authenticity negates the spirit behind the words. Peter Gomes captured this idea when he said that we read not as first century Christians but as men and women of today. We hear the same text that our ancestors heard but we hear them not necessarily as they heard them, but as only we can. As our understanding of what it means evolves, so do we. This transformation does not always repudiate what was before

but it does always transcend it. Can we still accept the language of our creeds and liturgies as having living meaning today or are they frozen in time?

I feel the message of many mainstream churches is exclusionary, their belief statements are narrow and restrictive, and their main function is self preservation and maintaining the status quo. Considering the ill-fated crusades, slavery, women's rights, the holocaust, and homosexuality, I think it is clear that we as Christians don't have all the correct answers. Narrow interpretations used as divine justification to oppress humanity have been our legacy. Can we learn from the past and grow beyond the restraints of our social prejudices?

In our adult Sunday school class at Messiah, our John Huss class, we have explored the origins of our faith. In addition to the Ground of the Unity, we have discussed the writings of Marcus Borg, N. T. Wright, John Spong and Dan Cupitt. The most memorable event in our class was our credo assignment. Our task was to reflect on where we are today on our spiritual journey and to put into words a personal confession of faith or credo. What I learned was that the more I tried to define accurately, concisely and completely my concept of God the more obvious it was how incomplete and inadequate mere words became. Could those men of the early Christian Church have felt similar inadequacy in their effort to capture the divine in their creedal statements of the fourth century? The old Unitas Fratrum did not assert the immutability of dogmatic expression as evidenced by no fewer than eleven separate

confessions of faith between 1468 and 1573.

God is larger than the confines of doctrine and can not be boxed into a neat definition. A definition can point us toward God but can never fully capture the essence. God's grace is not dependent on the existence of any one certain religious tradition. For me, God is bigger than the religion in which God is manifested.

I stated earlier that I felt disconnected spiritually because the exclusive truth claims of salvation only in Christianity and the Bible as the word of God did not ring true to me. As I talk with people who are "unchurched," this is a recurring theme. To ask younger generations to accept such tenants of faith buttressed only with the admonition "but you must believe in order to be saved" is like asking us to believe Bill Clinton never inhaled. It is the story of the Emperor's New Clothes. It seems everyone knows what no one dares say aloud. It was not that I didn't want to believe; it was more that I could no longer ignore the feeling of contradiction that came from participating in a religious tradition for the sake of tradition alone.

This feeling was given a voice that spoke to both my heart and my mind when I discovered the text of a lecture given in 1963 by Paul Tillich entitled: "The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message." He speaks of tradition being saved as a living reality only when we question the living meaning of the elements of the tradition and not simply take them for granted. Tradition that is being transformed again and again is a living reality. When the questions are

stifled with a “you must believe in order to be saved” rebuttal, the tradition loses its living reality.

The Bible and the church itself are two immediately recognizable Christian symbols. Both of them seem to me to point us toward God, just as my credo points toward my understanding of God. It is a symbol of my spiritual journey. When the Bible and the church become the object of worship themselves, they cease to be symbols and become idols. This idolatry is one explanation for the decline of the church Truman alludes to in his article.

Matthew Fox, in his book One River Many Wells, introduced a metaphorical definition of the divine which is known as God to Christians and by other names in other religions. It helped me see my Christian tradition in the context of humanity as part of a larger family of religious traditions. Fox defines divinity as “an underground river with many wells into that river, an African well, a Taoist well, a Buddhist well, a Jewish well, a Muslim well, a Christian well. Many wells, one river. To go down a well is to practice a tradition, but we would make a grave mis-

Peter Vogt

Current pronouncements about the state of the Moravian Church are confusing. While Truman Dunn bids us face the impending death of our church with vision and courage, David Wickman, in a recent issue of The Moravian, assures us that the Moravian Church “has a solid future” (Sept. 2001, p. 24). How can this be? Are we

take (an idolatrous one) if we confuse the well itself with the flowing waters of the underground river. Many wells, one river.

If the exclusive truth claims can be allowed to die perhaps we can begin to learn from all religions, rather than fighting over superiority. Seeking the wisdom within other traditions helps us know God as an experience not just as doctrine. As I tell my patients when discussing their dental health, we are wise when we learn from the past, look to the future and live in the present. I feel more alive in a spiritual sense than at any other time in my life. Church services and Sunday school are enjoyed with an optimistic enthusiasm looking for an active meaning in today's world. As the Buddha said, “Seek not to follow in the footsteps of the old men, rather seek what they sought.”

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talking about the same church? If yes, it is obviously a church that is so confused about its own destiny and identity that different writers can arbitrarily chose whatever rhetorical trick will best suit their needs. Perhaps this confusion, this lack of a clear sense of purpose and calling, is the root of the problem with which we are dealing.

Before responding to the argument of Truman Dunn's article, I would like to express my respect to Brother Dunn for the