

## FAITH OF OUR FATHERS?

Did Jesus think the Bible (Old Testament) was inerrant? *“It was said to you by the men of old [and Jesus quotes Torah teaching], but I say unto you ...”* (Matthew 5:21) Indeed, throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is challenging the Bible of His time and claiming a far higher awareness and truth than it was proclaiming. “Well,” say some, “that’s okay for Him, because He was the Messiah – ‘the sinless Son of God’ – so far above and beyond us that we can’t identify with Him any better than we can with His majestic and ethereal Father.” I do not believe that because I *do* believe in the Incarnation. In any case, you may not and cannot change the inerrant. But Jesus does.

Clearly nobody had yet invented all the doctrines and creeds that forbid people to think – and that changed Christianity from a Living Faith and a WAY of Life into a societal structure: an organization which coerces, controls, judges, and condemns people if they do not conform to all the preset patterns, many of them preset within the last two hundred years.

Do you imagine that I am thinking only of conservative Christianity? In our time, you can be as roundly scorned in the liberal church *for* believing as you can in the conservative church for *not* believing (correctly).

Did the Apostle Paul think the Bible (Old Testament) was inerrant? *“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”* (Genesis 17:14) *“Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.... You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.... [If you cut off the foreskin, you are cut off from Christ.] For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.”* (Galatians 5:2-6)

Quite obviously Paul did not consider even the Torah inerrant, though he had enormous respect for it. At one point Paul had such regard and reverence for Torah that it led him into hatred, persecution, and even murder. Do Christians not remember that? Paul was enormously grateful that Jesus freed him from this kind of bondage to the Law. Now, still in the name of Torah, others were beating, stoning, and trying to murder Paul, but he no longer hated them back, though indeed he had become the enemy of their “WAY” and influence.

Did the early church fathers think the Bible was inerrant? They argued, often with great heat, over which writings should be included in the Bible and which should not. They challenged them openly and often told why they approved or disapproved. They could never claim that the truth of their Bible was self-evident because they could never even agree on which writings should be included in it. (They especially fought over Hebrews and Revelation, but those were far from their only disagreements.) The canon of Scripture has never been by unanimous vote. So which enormously conceited or ignorant spokesman suddenly decided that it was inerrant? The New Testament canon is set by human usage, not by divine decree. When will Christian leaders stop perpetrating and perpetuating these false myths and doctrines onto their people? What kind of fear drives us to abandon integrity in favor of trying to prevent people from having to wrestle through their legitimate doubts to genuine faith? Did somebody forget to tell me, when I was ordained, that if I ever allowed you to think or deal with real information, you would automatically lose your faith? In any case, it is not true. Faith that is honestly tested just grows stronger and stronger.

Did Martin Luther think the Bible (Old or New Testament) was inerrant? How then could he call the Book of James the epistle of straw? Or simply ignore the Book of Revelation? Or contradict any writing that did not keep Christ's Gospel of grace and love central and paramount?

If the Bible is inerrant, how is it that we never knew this until about two hundred years ago? And even then, from biblically ignorant, literalistic, self-appointed leaders who realized that such a doctrine could give them more leverage and control over their people?

When we talk about the faith of our fathers, does it not inevitably raise the question: Which fathers? My father had as strong a faith as any man I have ever known. He was seminary-trained and was a Disciple of Christ minister until about the time I was born, when he left the ministry because of my mother's health. That's another story, but it was a serious choice that troubled him for the rest of his life. In any case, my father never missed church unless he was in a hospital bed. Sometimes he hated what he heard, but he believed that Christians must show loyalty to Christ's church or it would weaken the Kingdom, and then even Jesus wouldn't be able to renew or redeem His church.

As you might imagine, my father never taught me to swallow dogma without thinking. He believed God made our minds and intended us to

use them. He said God was never afraid of our questions, but he thought God did not appreciate human structures that claimed to know all truth, warped the Christian Message, or put fear in the place of love. My father believed that “fundamentalism” would die out of American culture within fifty years or so because it was demonstrably wrong about its approaches and claims. Obviously he was wrong about that! He had too much respect for human intelligence and the power of education, and too little respect for human gullibility and fear and sin. It is the Achilles’ heel of liberalism. But when we talk about the faith of our fathers, the question is: Which fathers?

Actually, I have heard many speeches and sermons in my life which spoke about the “faith of our fathers” and never even hinted that there might be less than unanimity among them. In fact, the phrase is often used to gather some kind of weight and authority to the opinions of the speaker, and on more than one occasion I could think of no father in our history who would have proclaimed, or even approved of, the sentiments being claimed by the speaker.

I hold great regard and appreciation for much of our tradition and our history. But you have to remember, I think this is a broken world and I do not expect “the fathers” (or the mothers, for that matter) to be perfect. Do you know anybody who has more veneration or appreciation than I do for Abraham or Joseph, for Moses or Elijah, for Jeremiah or Peter or Paul, for Augustine or Luther or Jonathan Edwards, for Washington or Hamilton or Lincoln (you can skip Jefferson)? I name only a few. I leave Jesus out for the moment because He is the great “wild card” of history, and we must each come to our own conclusion about who He really is or we only play-act at religion.

I simply remind you that I venerate “the fathers” of our history and tradition at least as much as any of you do – and more than most of you, which is sad. But I think of them as a light from the past and as a springboard for the present and the future. More and more they are being used as an iron cage – a dead end. “Beyond them, no one dares sail.” How they would have hated this brand of veneration. Even Jesus said, *“Truly I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father.”* (John 14:12) Does not a true father want his children to be better than he is and to achieve more than he has achieved? Of course, in what area and in what manner depends upon which father.

If we do not find and live by a greater faith than our fathers did, we are doomed. *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 5:20) (The scribes and Pharisees were, of course, the “Evangelicals” of Jesus’ day.) And I do not mean doomed to some future Hell, whatever others may teach. I believe that most of “the fathers” are doing just fine in a better realm, despite their many errors and foibles, *because of* the love of the true FATHER. But if we do not find and live by a better faith than our fathers had, we are doomed to a life here as limited, cut-back, and watered-down as they had. How I wish my own father could have had the benefits that he bestowed on me. I often suspect he would have done far more with them than I have.

Well, you say, we could do worse than a lot of the fathers of our tradition and history. Yes, and for the most part I think we *are* doing worse. At least worse than the best of them. But would you be content, for instance, with the faith of the founding fathers of our country? We are hearing from many places that we need to get back to their very wonderful religious faith. Frankly, I am not willing to take my own faith down and back that far.

I do know that many of the founding fathers had a lot of faith. I do know that in some ways they were very religious. I do know that generalizing is not very accurate. But in general, our founding fathers had a deep and abiding faith in God but not much understanding of or loyalty toward Jesus or His Holy Spirit – and certainly not much personal regard for His church or its life or its worship. They believed that this fledgling country was dependent upon the Providence of God and that it had a very godly destiny. They believed/knew that religion was a necessary foundation for the survival and progress of this country, and they could not imagine that our society would prosper unless the vast majority of its citizens were sincerely religious.

But most of them were not good churchmen. They believed in this country and worked and lived for it. But they did *not* comprehend the church as “the body of Christ” or lend deep loyalty or support to it as the representative of Christ’s Kingdom on earth. That is, of course, the reverse of my own convictions. I have far more faith in Christ’s church than I do in our country. But then, our country has long since departed from most of the goals and convictions which the founders held.

They were Deists more than Christians. Thomas Jefferson rewrote the Bible to take out all he disagreed with (which was considerable). He called himself a Christian but rejected the divinity of Christ. Words are tricky and I never had a chance to talk with him about what he really meant, but on the surface that is a contradiction in terms.

The founding fathers thought of religion as nearly synonymous with morality. And while some of them were not very moral in some circumstances, nevertheless they believed that they should be, and they realized the country would fall unless most of its citizens were essentially moral. While I know with certainty that genuine faith has a huge, almost inestimable, impact on our behavior, I am completely convinced that behavior comes from faith and never the other way around. Morality, in short, is a side effect of the Gospel; it is never its focus or purpose. Relationship with God, as he reveals himself in our Resurrected Lord – obedience, gratitude, and the delight of knowing his presence with us in constant and daily prayer – *that* is the focus of the Christian Life. Yet I catch little hint of any of this from our founding fathers.

On the other hand, our founders were adamant about religious freedom, and they were determined to keep our country from the kinds of religious coercion, dogmatism, and persecution that had characterized so much of Christian history – even in the early days of the Pilgrims, who persecuted the Baptists, the Quakers, and the Catholics. At enormous sacrifice, the Pilgrims came to this “new land” so they could worship as they believed, but barely had they touched ground here before they began to take religious freedom away from others. This did not escape the notice of our founding fathers, a generation later.

“I almost shudder at the thought of alluding to the most fatal example of the abuses of grief which the history of mankind has preserved – the Cross,” wrote John Adams, the second President of the United States. The only reference to religion in the original Constitution is in Article VI, Section 3: “No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” Then came the Bill of Rights, patterned after Virginia’s Statute for Religious Freedom (written by Thomas Jefferson): “All men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion.” James Madison (our fourth President – and speaking of fathers, often called the Father of the Constitution) expanded this into: “The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship *nor shall any national religion be established*, nor shall the full and equal rights of

conscience be in any manner, or any pretense, infringed.” With some trimming, the First Amendment as we know it.

I do not imagine that our founders knew how clearly this would set our nation on a road leading to total secularism. Clearly they expected that somehow the nation would keep a deep religious faith, even if any clear expression of it was set outside of the nation’s life. They feared the abuses of religion but not the abuses of *no religion*, which probably had never really crossed their minds, since that period was still quite religious. The first practical test of this policy came on June 7, 1797, when *the Senate* of the United States ratified the Treaty of Tripoli, which made peace with the Barbary pirates of North Africa. It declared that we (the United States) had no quarrel with the faith of any Muhammadan nation. It was ratified *unanimously*, stating: “The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” Many Christians were outraged, but the die was cast. The early settlers may have intended otherwise, but the founding fathers had a very different vision. The United States of America is not now and never has been a Christian Nation, though there have always been many Christians living within it. We have not moved from a Christian Nation to an Atheistic Nation. We have moved from Deism to Humanism. Indeed, most of our citizens still claim to believe in God, even if this “belief” is too vague to represent any concept, conviction, or behavior that anybody can define or describe or put their finger on.

If any of this sounds offensive, wake up! If Christianity is to survive, it will not be because of our nation. It will be because of Christian churches, and many of them are not in our nation. If you are a Christian – if you love and believe in Jesus – you can still be grateful for the benefits and freedoms of this country. You can love it for what it is. But you must also face the realities of what it is not and make your choices and your priorities accordingly.

In 1802, a Baptist minister from Connecticut wrote to President Jefferson complaining of the persecution coming from the Congregationalist establishment, and asking for his views on religion and the Constitution. Jefferson replied with a statement that has become famous – infamous – and is still quoted by almost everyone for almost any purpose: “Religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God.” Jefferson was so full of himself that he had never noticed any of the pyramids, ziggurats, mosques, synagogues, churches, temples, cathedrals, religious organizations – anywhere on earth? He went on to say

that the First Amendment had “erected a wall of separation between church and state.” I suspect that Jefferson’s main point was: “Hey, I’m busy with the affairs of state. Leave me alone and stop bothering me with these petty problems.” But of course, that phrase has now become a major creed of the American Way. Like Jesus’ “*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s ...*” It sounds profound, and it stuns many an argument. But on closer scrutiny, it solves and resolves NOTHING. Those of us who live here as Christians cannot help but feel enormous gratitude for this country and the blessings we have received because of it – its freedoms, its heritage, and its history. Is there some way we can entirely separate that from our faith? Scripture says: “*Therefore one must be subject [to the country in which one lives] not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*” (Romans 13:5-7) I think one measure of our patriotism is the way we feel at tax time. It is a privilege to participate in and pay our share of the benefits of this country. Of course, not everybody pays their fair share in this country, like all the Christians do in the churches ...

Do I think that Christians in our time should be working to turn the United States into a Christian country? I think it would be a lot better if we concentrated on turning the churches into Christian churches. If the country protects our rights to worship as we please, why do we need more than that? Why is that not enough to be grateful for? We need the government to make us *be* religious? Don’t we know yet where that leads?

Am I incensed about the loss of prayer in public schools? We were still praying in school when I was a kid. It was a shallow, cursory, meaningless affair. How interesting that we miss it so much or that anybody would want to return to such a reduction of prayer for our children. In every congregation I have served over the years, one of the first things I have realized is that prayer is a nervous subject. It would be embarrassing to say anything *against* “prayer”; that would be worse than putting down baseball or apple pie. But nobody wants to *do* it, except for a few saints off in the wings somewhere. And at least in liberal churches, nobody is ever *taught* anything about prayer, despite the fact that it was the core and center of Jesus’ life. Most people think that prayer is about talking out loud with your eyes closed, which is actually *against* what

Jesus taught. And there it ends, if indeed it ever got started. Why worry about taking prayer into the public schools? Maybe we should try to take it into the churches.

Well, this could go on, and already has for too long.

Almost all the fathers I have known have been men – except, of course, for the Heavenly Father. I have great regard for men who become and act like the responsible head of a family. But I believe a man should put his God first, his wife second, and his children third. I think a woman should put her God first, her children second, and her husband third. That hurts a man’s feelings at times, but if he loves his family, he really does not want it any other way.

I banter about it sometimes, but I do *not* think men are superior to women, and I think that anybody who thinks women should be dominated by men is an idiot. But actually, that is not the most frequent problem in our society. In our time, the reverse often is: too many men give up their purpose and their honor to placate or earn the approval of a woman. In any case, I wish we could stop all the wars between male and female. Most of the time we get into games of comparing their best with our worst, or vice versa. And each new generation seems to need to figure it out all over again. Some men become women-haters and some women become men-haters, but it never furthers either men or women – it only furthers hatred.

I do, in fact, rule over my own household – as I hope Christ rules over me. It means that I very rarely get my own way. Rulership is not about me; it is about them. If I wanted to have my own way, I would have stayed single. That way I could concentrate on my own needs and desires all the time. Of course, my family blesses me too, because they each have a rulership of their own, and that often includes concern and caring about me. “My own way” is seldom very good – for me, or for anybody else.

If you are the responsible head of a household, I have great appreciation for you. I hope you had some good father role models. But the point of this sermon is that the faith of our fathers, however much or little that phrase speaks to us, is not enough. It is *our* faith that must light our way, surround our families, and guide our steps. And it is *our* faith that keeps us in peace and hope and courage, no matter what comes, no matter whether we have done things well or poorly. Life is a mixture, is it not? I know few women who think they have been perfect wives or mothers. If you challenge or criticize them, you might run into strong

arguments and affirmations. But in the quiet of honest reflection, with trusted friends, no woman feels she has done it anywhere near as well as she had hoped and intended.

I do not know many men who think they have been perfect husbands and fathers either. The playing field is too big. The very magnitude and importance of family life are what make us realize our inadequacies and shortcomings. It is one of those places where the very beauty and meaning and significance are also more than we can keep up with. So we learn to keep gratitude without denying our mistakes and failures. We trust God to carry things through and beyond what we are able to do. That should be no surprise to Christians.

Only, we must also learn to do it better than our fathers did. The “faith of our fathers” is only looking back to get our bearings. It is the faith of our sons and daughters that we really care about. Why else would we be putting in all this time and energy, all this caring and sacrifice, all this prayer and planning?

For many generations now, male preachers have been outdoing each other to praise women on Mother’s Day. But when it comes to Father’s Day, they have been comparatively silent. After all, they are men and it would not be seemly. Nevertheless, with no intention of putting down women and with no intention of claiming perfection for men: I think that Christian men are wonderful creatures. They do far more than most people realize, and often for very little credit. I like it that way. As Jesus says, *“Great is their reward in Heaven – for the true father who sees in secret, will reward them.”* Yet whatever we say or do this day about our earthly fathers, I hope we will not close this day without true gratitude – praise, appreciation, and love – for the True Father of us all.