

“The Fine Art of Heresy”
Colossians 2:20-23 & Titus 1:10-12
Reflections on How, Why, and Who Defines Heresy and Right Belief
23rd of January 2010

Have we ever really thought about this institution called, “The Church?” Consider these robes, candles, and processions, oh my! Or our edifice complexes, taxes, and pews, oh whew! Did God one day hand down a manual saying this is what “the Church” is?

Would you like to know where the tradition of preachers wearing robes originated? Simple, back in the day, leaders and aristocrats in the Roman Empire wore togas – or robes – as a ceremonial dress uniform of sorts; when the Empire collapsed and all semblance of civilization and culture went the way of the ‘dodo’ the church stepped in to fill the vacuum adopting many of the traditions of the Empire, and hence the ‘clergy,’ the new leadership and aristocracy of this “Medieval-Mad-Max-post-apocalyptic-world, adopted the ceremonial dress of leadership (oh sure, the robe has come to have certain purely religious symbolism, but to be historically honest, if the Roman Aristocrats had worn tie-dyed miniskirts as a symbol of leadership then more than likely that’s what I might be wearing today).

Oh, and those candles we light during the opening of worship? They go directly back to the days when the Emperor would hold court: the grand potentate would be led in by a processional of candle lighters who would light candles on either side of the Emperor’s chair, or ‘cathedra,’ as those crazy Latins call chairs, which is where we derive “Cathedral” from – the place of the “chair.” Early church leaders, while filling that whole vacuum thing from Rome’s collapse,, also kept all the court rituals that surrounded his pomp and circumstance, including his chair – laugh not, but many of our churches still retain those high-backed chairs behind the altar (next time you see one, just imagine this is what it would have been like to be in the presence of the Emperor). Even the title, “Bishop,” was simply an imperial term for what amounted to a mayor or justice-of-the-peace. The Church just simply decided when the Empire went caput that everyone could simply call the town’s senior religious leader a bishop, since the head religious guy was also going to have to run not only the church but the whole town. Oh, and I do mean “guy,” since the Church also adopted Roman Imperial attitudes towards women; Rome didn’t like women all that much, and despite the early church having men and women in leadership roles (many of Paul’s churches were run by women, and Jesus’ own ministry was supported by the wealthy Mary Magdalene), well, let’s just say, “when-in-Rome” we were not very smart when it came to discerning practices we should have ignored.

Oh, and, oh, I am putting in too many “ohs” here, for the first 300 years of the church, there was no “church,” as you and I have come to think of “Church.” People met in their homes, in groups of ten or twenty, occasionally meeting in public venues for big celebrations like Easter or Christmas. It is only when the “Church” becomes bona-fide – declared the official religion of the Empire by the Emperor Constantine – that we develop our ‘edifice complexes.’ We copied our design straight from imperial city-halls; the design and layout of our worship places is nearly an exact replica of what a Roman City hall would have looked like! The little raised platform and chancel rail separated the Roman officials from the hoi-polloi. We copied all this because, well, the Empire was

gone, and we hate change, so we kept it and made it “Church.” And thanks to Constantine, the tradition of churches not paying taxes came into being – there was also a tradition of clergy not paying taxes but notice we didn’t keep that! So unfair -- personally I think that might need to be revisited in this day and age when there’s a church on every block collecting tons of money and very little is going to charity and many of these same churches seem to think “charity” is now the sole domain of the government...if we think government is now responsible for charity then the “Church” needs to start “ponying-up.”

Pews have nothing to do with the Empire; we added pews a thousand years later after growing tired of standing – until then just about everyone stood. Once pews were installed though, people went crazy-insane with them, to the point of erecting walls around their family pew and decorating them with fire places, cushions, and paintings – which is why in many old churches the preacher has to climb a ladder to get into the pulpit; the pulpit was built so high so that he could see into everyone’s boxed-pews (oh yes, you just cant make this stuff up!) People paid good money for their boxed-pews, whose modern day equivalent is the sport’s “sky-box.”

So who does make this stuff up? We have a lot of crazy traditions that have little or nothing to do with God; does that mean many of our beliefs might be crazy and godless? Makes one wonder. Watching the History Channel, National Geographic Specials, and reading Dan’s Brown’s latest novel one might get the impression that “Church” is some shady, secretive, mafia-cabal lurking in the darkness making all this stuff up.

For example, Dan Brown’s premise (which is often repeated on documentaries) that our belief in the doctrine of the “Trinity,” came about after the opposing side lost by one vote at the Council of Nicea; or that the Emperor Constantine made it up out of thin air and forced those hapless Bishops – church officials – to accept the belief in the “Trinity.” It’s popular today for scholars, writers and believers (oh my!) to look back at all the beliefs and ideas the “Church” declared to be heresies and try and redeem them.

Today being a “Heretic” is cool! Subscribing to heretical beliefs makes us “avant-garde,” or intellectually sophisticated. We love anything that thumbs its nose at authority and is rebellious, so being a “Heretic” is great.

Of course I always thought being “avant-garde” was a bit dubious anyway: so-called “intellectuals” love to shun those who do not conform to their non-conformity and in our culture where authority is out, and heresy is “in,” we too might be a bit dubious when it comes to “Heresy’s” new found popularity.

As much as I dislike them, there is still the tragic necessity of that species called, “The Referee.” Yes, they are annoying and blow their whistles too much at times and sometimes they grotesquely miscall a game (reference Florida versus Arkansas 2009), but we still need them, and we need rules and boundaries to help define our beliefs. There is nothing worse than trying to play football and someone shows up wanting to play soccer. If Christianity is going to be “Christian” then it must have some boundaries of play or else we end up being Buddhists or something.

We might think that to be quite easy, “Read and memorize your bible,” but you see, our wisdom, truth, and beliefs may come directly from the bible, but our understanding of these truths need at times to be clarified. Modern Democracy – that all people are created equal -- springs from Paul’s insistence that “in Christ” there is no more

distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Sounds great, but for two thousand years the Church struggled with the idea of slavery trying to hash out what it means to be a Christian and live in a society that promoted slavery. We finally clarified what the Bible taught and insisted on its truth, eliminating slavery and marching forward with Civil Rights. We finally said that “racism” in all its ugly forms is outside the boundaries of Christian belief, and if you insist on playing the racist game then you are no longer a Christian. We finally established the equality of women, although in most of our churches we still struggle with that concept; so you see, the Bible may teach us wisdom but that doesn’t mean we always “get it.”

And in those times when we don’t “get it” or when our understanding is, well, ‘a-few-pots-shy-of-a-potluck” we need “referees” to step in and blow their whistles and call foul. Those referees may be clergy, laity, church councils, or mass movements of believers protesting. When the church struggled with the belief that we believe in God, yet we also believe in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, many Christians claimed that we worshipped three different gods. This was a problem and it needed clarifying and boundaries and rules drawn up. The great Council of Nicea met to hash this out and contrary to what Dan Brown and National Geographic Specials teach, the folks at that council overwhelmingly decided (only two votes cast against) that our belief in God would be clarified to mean a belief in the “Trinity,” we believe in one God, but experience the one God as “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit.” Constantine was no “Dark Lord of the Sith,” but he did realize that certain theological disputes could continue ripping the church apart.

In our day and age we are just leaving a season of our church history where the long silent belief that “all are children of God” is still being clarified. Preachers and laity once taught that blacks were sub-human, and they used scripture to back it up. We now insist such belief is heresy. We once taught this about women, and yet we still struggle to allow women to play their full roles in the church. There is the great debate over homosexuality that is ripping our churches apart; both sides claim scripture for their mandate just as Christians have always done in the great debates that have forced us to clarify our beliefs. How will this debate end? I imagine in the same way many of the other issues were decided; Christians will weigh Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading. It may take a generation, but in the coming decades this issue will be decided and people will look back and wonder how we could have believed any differently. Just ask the younger generation what they think of the homosexuality debate – gay marriage, gay clergy – they have already decided, and they will soon be in charge.

The Church is always defining the boundaries of belief, and the church is always utilizing referees to ensure that Christianity retains its uniqueness. Sometimes we blow the whistle too much, and sometimes we tolerate rules and beliefs that take away from what it means to be a Christian. Defining what “is” and “is not” Christian is very important, and often “heresies” do need to be called out and shown the door. On a certain level our beliefs and understanding of God’s wisdom does change over time, and we need to be open and accepting of this when it occurs – the abolition of slavery and Civil Rights were once considered “heresy” by the powers-that-be within the church, and we should tread carefully when preaching, “Well this is what the bible says,” because sometimes we can be wrong.