

## **Wisdom or Certainty**

### **Progressives and evangelicals**

For some of us, faith is an assent to a concrete fact. Faith has an answer to every problem. Some people want certainty so badly they are willing to find things the Bible doesn't say. They want to know answers so badly they will manipulate verses to make a doctrine the Biblical writers never intended to proclaim. It is a control issue. People want to be in control. Mystery doesn't satisfy. There ought to be a knowable right answer for every problem, a formula for every blessing. They want to live in a land of black and white, right and wrong. If there is not an absolute for this situation, there are no absolutes. They see this as mature, strong faith. The other kind is wishy-washy. Michael Martyn Murphy has a song "Cowboy Logic". He says the cowboy "has a simple solution for just about everything."

Other people are more interested in wisdom than certainty. Church and faith is not for definite answers but community. A place to ask life's important questions is more important than finding answers to those questions. There are absolutes, but don't expect one for every situation. They can handle gray areas. Truth can be found in paradox. Mystery can add to faith. Confident faith has room for doubt and the possibility I might be wrong. They see this as mature, humble faith. The other kind is elementary religion.

Either kind can be liberating, either kind can be confining. The negative of the first is putting God in a box, and refusing to learn from or cooperate with a mysterious God. The negative of the second is hiding from certainty behind respect for diversity, and an excuse for intellectual cowardice.

## **Culture**

I see this in a blue collar/white collar dynamic. Blue collars who work with things want the certainty; white collars who work with ideas want the wisdom.

## **Politics**

Just as there are red states and blue states, there are red Christians and blue Christians. Based on faith, some of us vote for the republican plan and some vote for the democrat one. Some Christians want simple answers to complicated questions and will vote for whomever gives them. Other Christians expect their leaders to wrestle with complex issues without giving pat answers.

## **Theology**

Progressives are fond of saying that evangelicals are more interested in certainty than truth. They'd rather have simple answers than correct answers. Progressives characterize themselves as finding more truth in paradox and mystery than in simplistic dogma. Progressives say they take the Bible seriously rather than literally. Evangelicals feel true holiness lies in taking the Bible literally. However, both sides find both certainty and mystery, they just disagree about which areas. Progressives take some parts of the Bible metaphorically and some parts literally, evangelicals take different parts of the Bible metaphorically and different parts literally. Selective literalism happens on both sides.

For example, evangelicals take the virgin birth, end times imagery and hell literally. Progressives take these metaphorically. Progressives take care for the poor and the natural world, and non-violence, literally. Evangelicals take these figuratively.

Each side has its favorite parts of the Bible that they feel are crucial. Progressives cite Matthew 25, Micah 6:8 and Jesus' quote from Isaiah in Luke 4. Evangelicals cite the "saved by grace" in Eph. 2:8, and "If my people repent" from Deuteronomy 7.

Each side claims proper use of the Bible and perceives the others as unbelievers. "We believe the Bible".

### **Why the difference?**

Each side says the other is taking the easy way. Progressives claim that evangelicals dodge responsibility for God's call to care for the poor by claiming poverty, or by claiming the futility of caring for physical needs in the end times. "I'm saved. Why does it matter how I live?" Evangelicals claim that progressives dodge responsibility for God's call to win souls by diverting to side issues. "God loves everyone, so why should we convert them?" So is sloth the reason they choose different parts of the gospel? It can be, but probably is not for most. Other excuses would be easier.

It has to do more with the ability to conceptualize. Some of us can handle more complex concepts than others. Because of innate physiology, the way we were raised, the part of the brain we used when we were young, positive or negative learning experiences back in school, job, and other reasons, some of us think more concretely, some of us think more abstractly. For some of us, if it is not easy to understand, if it is not visceral and sensory, if we can't "see" it close, if it is not concrete, it doesn't exist. For others of us, abstraction reveals truth. The concrete is illusory, or at best, suspect. It can fool us if we trust it for truth.

For simple believers, it is hard to understand an article like this with complex sentence structures. Some will then conclude that it isn't true. For abstract believers, if an article uses short statements only, it must be hiding something. Some will then conclude it isn't true. Both are errors of logic.

But neither the abstract nor the concrete is more valuable than the other in doing theology. Either can be a tool for finding God's truth, or an excuse to hide from it. As with most things, it's the use that matters.

So what do we do? Associating with only those who think as we do has limited us. Separation sometimes has a necessary purpose, but not to grow. To grow in faith we must learn from each other. To spread the gospel to both simple and complicated seekers, we must cooperate. To honor God and work for his program in society, we must appreciate and learn from each other, and work together. Conservatives and liberals, evangelicals and progressives, are not enough alone.

We don't have to merge. There are still areas where we are convinced the others are mistaken and doing harm. But we cooperate where we agree. We learn how God has helped others in a way we have not received help. We listen to God's voice from the other group.

The love of God is such a powerful, wonderful event, we don't want to miss any of it.