

Why Christianity must change or die

Christianity is at a crossroads. There has always been doctrines and creeds of the institutionalized Christian church that don't seem to make a whole lot of sense. We'll talk about those in a minute, but let me first point out a clear pattern that is emerging, at least in the educated, civilized world. I am in the baby boomer generation. The generations preceding me often bought into church theology regardless of whether it made sense. Even most baby boomers seem content to ignore huge incongruities that exist within standard Christian dogma. However, the church now is running into younger generations that don't just question theology, but challenge it, and ultimately, discard it. They discover nonsensical theological constructs and observe hypocritical behavior among church leaders and decide to reject religion outright.

I am currently the chairman of the call committee (search committee) at Gloria Dei church, a vibrant faith community located just outside of Philadelphia. We are in the process of searching for a new lead pastor (senior pastor). Part of this process involves us visiting other churches to hear potential candidates lead worship and preach. What I am seeing in these churches is the continued usage of liturgies developed hundreds of years ago and creeds that were developed more than 1500 years ago. I then look at the congregational trend for these churches and it is apparent that attendance is progressively declining. This seems to be the pattern in mainstream denominational churches throughout the United States and Europe.

If the Christian church is going to survive, it needs to develop alternative ways of viewing heaven and hell and a different way of looking at the atonement of sins through Jesus' death on the cross. The concept of hell and an atonement theory that requires the brutal crucifixion of Jesus before we can reconcile with God are incongruent with the concept of a God of grace. I define grace as unconditional love and forgiveness. The image of this given to us by Jesus is the father in the prodigal son story. When the wayward son returns, there is no need for apology or restitution. The son is immediately reconciled with the father and restored into his position within the family. Even God as seen in the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, does not require a sacrifice to reconcile with humankind. In the story of Jonah, even the Ninevites, Israel's arch enemy, is forgiven by God simply by their desire to turn away from their destructive ways and turn towards God's way of living (in church lingo we call this repentance). The Jewish prophets over and over again emphasized to their kings that rituals and sacrifices mean nothing to God. What matters to God is whether or not the king relates to his people with compassion and generosity.

If all I have to do is believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins, then Jesus becomes little more than a "get out of hell free card" (kind of like in monopoly). I can't believe that was the primary intent of Jesus. In order to see what was important to Jesus, you have to pull theology out of the Gospels, theology that was inserted long after Jesus' death. By doing so, we can assess what was really important to Jesus as he lived and taught. It seems clear that Jesus' plan was to bring into fruition the kingdom of God here on earth. Kingdom is a tough word for us to wrap our head around in today's

world because we don't really have kingdoms, but we can translate the "kingdom of God" as how the world would look if God reigned in the hearts of humankind. Jesus teaches us what this would look like. We would live among each other with radical forms of love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and peace. God's plan, as taught by Jesus ran up against the powerful political and religious leaders of his day. The true sacrifice of Jesus was his willingness to carry God's message to the very end, even though it would cost him his life in a gruesome way. He didn't have to do it. He could have run away. He could have stayed on the margins of society, but he didn't. He knew that there would be a lasting impact only if he challenged the powers at hand. Those powers thought they could extinguish Jesus with his message about God's kingdom by crucifying him. The true power of the resurrection is that God brought back a living presence of Jesus in the hearts of his disciples even after his crucifixion. He did so in ways that were so powerful that the disciples would continue to preach the ways of God as taught by Jesus, even if it cost them their lives. So if you want to ask how I am saved by Jesus, I would respond that I am saved just a little bit more every time I choose to live with love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and peace. If I am to honor Jesus then I must choose that path. From my understanding of Jesus, I don't think he really cares whether I go to church and worship him on Sundays. What he would care about was whether I was following him in how I treat other people.

The other church construct that runs contrary to a God of grace is the doctrine of hell. Hell, visualized as a place of eternal torment and damnation, has very little in common with the Hebrew and Greek words in Scripture that ultimately were translated as hell. Aside from that, it makes no sense that a God of infinite love and forgiveness would condemn anyone to eternal damnation. It makes no sense at all that two thirds of our world's population would end up in a place of eternal damnation simply because they don't embrace the Christian faith. Either love ultimately wins or it doesn't. Jesus would have us believe that love ultimately wins. If we want to continue to use the words heaven and hell, we ought to think of them more as states of being rather than places to go. Heaven is when I am close to God, hell is when I am separated from God. Thinking of heaven and hell in these terms is much more useful. I create my own heaven or hell right here on earth depending on how I choose to live.

I run a program for at-risk youth in a tough section of Philadelphia. Most of my volunteers for that program come from college kids and young adults in their 20s. Those volunteers could care less about theology. The vast majority of them are not going to buy into a doctrine that requires a gruesome death on a cross for things to cool with God. They're not going to buy into a doctrine that has people going to hell just because they don't believe the right things about God or Jesus. What they will buy into is a God who wants us to live amongst each other in love and peace. They will buy into a Jesus who teaches that first and foremost we should help those who have been marginalized by society through compassionate giving of our time and resources. Yes, the Christian church is at a crossroads. If it wants to remain a significant force in the world then there must be an end to dogma and doctrine that divides and separates people into worthy and unworthy groups. The Christian church must focus less on divisive theology and more on social justice for all. Let's get back to what Jesus focused on, which is how we treat one another, living together in the way that God intended.