

What do we believe?

The latest polls show almost 1 in 5 Americans believe President Obama is a Muslim. He is not. But it led one fellow to question in a news article: who is a Christian? Christians these days seem to come in so many shapes and varieties, it's a fair question to ask: "As Christians, what do we believe?"

A couple of folks interviewed church members across the country, and this is what they came up with. After interviewing thousands of church members, they discovered that most believe something like this: Call it a 5-point belief plan, or a 5-point plan for short.

1. God created the world and watches over life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as the bible and other religions teach.
3. The central goal in life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

In fact, a great number of professing Christians, particularly among our young people, believe that this 5-point plan sums up our faith. Perhaps the reason that so many believe this way is because too many clergy preach the shallow, hollowed out version of Christianity that the 5 point plan represents.

In truth, the 5-point plan has little to do with faith in Jesus Christ. The 5 point plan describes a life where, most of the time, we are on our own, where God steps in, occasionally, but only when there is an emergency; and where the goal of life is to be happy, to be nice, and when we die, to go to heaven. But Christianity is not this.

At the heart of Christianity is a God so intimately involved in our daily lives that we cannot escape him; at the office, at the school desk, or at home in bed. Allow me to quote:

"You trace my journeys and my resting places and know all my ways. There is not a word on my lips, but you Lord, know it all together. *** If I climb to the heavens you are there, if I make the grave my bed, you are there also."

So says the Psalmist who points to a very different relationship with God than today's 5-point plan.

"If I take wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me; and your right hand hold me fast." [Ps. 139]

This is the God of our faith, not the small "g" god of the 5-point plan.

At the heart of Christianity is also paradox. The 5-point plan is all about doing good and being rewarded. About fitting in. About not rocking the boat.

But to follow Jesus is to enter a world where the 5-point plan is turned on its head. God chooses the losers, the outcasts, the most unlikely scallywags to join the Kingdom's parade.

Rather than "nice" being rewarded with "nice", the Kingdom is promised to the poor; the earth is promised to the gentle; comfort is promised to the mourners; and mercy to those who show mercy. While the 5 point plan describes a faith of getting out in proportion to what one puts in; faith in Christ is all about free gifts, generously given; from a God who wants us not because of what we have, but who loves us for what we lack.

So, we bring empty hands to receive, we present empty wombs that are filled, and we discover an empty tomb, the sign of resurrection.

Faith in the God of Jesus Christ is not about being nice and going to heaven. We hear what our faith is today as the teenager, Jeremiah, in fear and trembling, hears God insist that he knew the lad before he was born. He called the boy before he was even conceived. And he sent this boy to announce true faith to Kings and CEOs; to politicians and priests.

"To pluck up and to pull down, to build and to plant."

Jeremiah objected.

"I am only a boy!" "I cannot go!" "I am afraid!"

And in response, God thunders: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you...!"

So says God to Jeremiah. So says God to you and I.

Jeremiah is sent as you and I are sent. Our baptism is not for ourselves. Our baptism is for us to go and do: to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, healing to the lame. This is the call of our faith, to go out into the world and be, in our daily lives, the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Christ.

And there are more holes in the 5-point plan. In the 5-point plan, God himself is nice, becomes "manageable", becomes someone to be at ease with. The 5 point plan misses entirely the God of mystery and power and otherness; the God who, while deeply engaged with us; also wholly different from us.

The Letter to the Hebrews today reminds of that mystery; of blazing fire, of darkness, of tempest, of awe. Fr. Robert Capon reminds me of this mystery.

“When we try to describe God”, he says, “we are like oysters trying to describe a ballerina.”

The 5-point plan misses the mystery of God. Jesus goes a long way in summing up true faith when he healed, without being asked, the poor bent over woman. He healed in the church. He healed on the Sabbath. He healed for free. And the woman responded as one hopes you and I would respond to such an unexpected, unearned, gift: she rejoiced! She gave thanks to God!

Jesus has nothing to do with the 5 point plan. He wasn't nice when the church leader began scolding others also seeking healing to come back another day. “You hypocrites!” he called them. He pointed out how the 5-point planners treat their animals better than a human being in need. Jesus shamed them. He embarrassed them. No, Jesus wasn't “nice”.

Jesus doesn't call us to be “nice.”

He calls us to be holy. He calls us to be faithful. Not in some future state in heaven, but today, here, now!

So today, if you feel a 5-point plan growing into your life, cut it out, throw it away, be done with it. Embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, where, in order to receive, we must become empty, in order to have, we must surrender; in order to live, we must die to self, die to common sense, die to what the world calls wise.

This is the faith of the Church. This is the faith of Christ. It is not for the faint of heart. But if you choose to come along, you'll be in for the ride of your life!

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