

DO YOU HAVE A BAD CASE OF THE RELIGIOUS SIMPLES?

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Some years ago the late Senator Thomas Benton was asked about the most difficult aspect of being a United States senator. His answer was interesting. He said that for him the hardest thing to deal with was the frustrating fact that his constituents in Missouri had what he called a "bad case of the simples"! That is they wanted to reduce complex problems to little black and white simplicities. They wanted easy answers to questions that didn't have them. Which reminds me of the old saying, "For every complex question there is a simple solution – and it is wrong!"

I wonder if there isn't a religious equivalent of a "*bad case of the simples*". Certainly Paul seems to have met a problem like this in the Church in Corinth. He writes "Do not be childish in your thinking, my friends, be infants in evil but in your thinking be grown up". Says Paul, let's get real. Let's grow up. Let's be adult in our faith.

Firstly I think we have a bad case of the religious simples if we fail to use our intelligence when it comes to faith. This was the problem in Corinth. For some in that church their faith was full of emotion but it was brainless, mindless. And for Paul that is dangerous and wrong. When you pray he says, use your mind, when you sing hymns think about the words, when you preach use your intelligence. "In your thinking be grown up".

Today this warning is still necessary. When you hype people up in religion and then let the mind go you are playing a dangerous game. Let me tell you about the Baby Church of Jesus. They had the worst case of the religious simples I ever came across. They came from my own county Norfolk. Their leader announced that as Jesus had walked on water he would do the same. The Sea of Galilee being rather distant he decided to start with the River Yare in Yarmouth. Six times they fished him out. The 7th time he drowned. His followers then said "This is a test of faith". So they sat around the body praying that on the third day God would raise him up. After about a week the sanitary people came and took the body away.

That's an extreme case but I've seen all sorts of cases where real damage has been done when religious people have switched off their minds. Did you see the Dispatches Television programme this week about the pastors who were extorting large sums of money from members of their congregations before exorcising them of non-existent demons? Or what of creationists to whom it is a matter of faith that the world was created in 4000 BC – 4000 year after the foundation of the city of Jericho! If we haven't understood that God gave us our intelligence to use we have a bad case of the religious simples.

Then secondly we have a bad case of the religious simples if we expect instant results when really we need patience and a long term commitment. I think of a lady who came into a church where I was a minister once. She had a problem in her life and she wanted it solved. So she came to Church a few times, she said a few prayers, and when everything seemed just about the same she went off announcing that she had tried Christianity and it didn't work. She had a bad case of the religious simples.

The truth is the things that matter most in life do not come easily, quickly or simply. They take time, effort, sacrifice, commitment. There are things in life you can get immediately by

pushing buttons or pulling out a plastic card. But the great things, the real values, do not come that way. Not long ago the then Bishop of Lincoln had a sign above his desk, "I want patience - and I want it now". Fine as a joke, but in life the deep qualities do not come that way. They have to be grown and cultivated. You can obtain a colour television or a new car with a quick-down payment, but you must wait for, long for, and slowly grow into character, morality, values, faith, maturity and spiritual strength. Next time someone offers ten simple ways to increase spiritual maturity in 4 weeks just give it a pass.

And then thirdly we have a bad case of the religious simples if we make God too small. In one of the episodes of "Till Death us do Part" Alf Garnet is explaining to his son in law that God is everywhere. The Son in law establishes that God is in the pub where they are drinking, and indeed in that particular bar. "Then is he in my glass?" he asks. "Well yes" replies Alf "he's everywhere". At which point the Son in law turns his glass upside down, slams it down on the table and shouts "Got him".

There are Christians who treat God in that sort of way. They like to imagine they can see straight into his mind with total clarity. There isn't a question about him they can't answer without absolute certainty. Everything that is to know about God they know. On a good day he will find them a parking place for their car.

I recently read about a man who wanted a revelation from God. "I want a revelation" he told his minister "I want God to speak to me simple and straight".

Finally his minister said to him "The next time it rains, go outside, look up into the heavens, and ask God for a revelation".

A few days later the heavens opened. There was torrential rain. The man came back to the minister utterly sodden, dripping water everywhere. "I followed your advice" he said "I stood in the rain for over an hour, looked up in the skies and asking for a revelation from God. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. The rain pelted down by face, the water ran down my neck, I just felt ignorant and stupid".

The minister replied "What greater revelation do you need?"

I hope most of us don't need to stand in the rain to realise how ignorant we are in this complex universe. As Thomas Edison once said, "We don't know the millionth part about anything". Above all this is true when we speak of God. If we ever even begin to imagine that we have understood the nature of the creator and sustainer of the universe then it's time we grew up. A minister's daughter once asked her father a question he couldn't answer. "I don't know dear" he replied, "In fact sometimes I think I don't know anything". "Daddy" she said "If you know you don't know something, you actually do know something". She was quite right. When it comes to God if you know you don't know everything then you do know something profoundly important. There is an old Latin phrase which puts it well. "Deus Cognitus, Deus nullus". "The God who is known, is no God at all". Says Paul "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?"

Belief in God is not about having answers to every question. It is finding in life a mystery a marvel, a wonder that we can never fully understand. It is when I listen to music or walk in the country and I feel an awesome presence. It is when I find myself in times of weakness and

somehow I am made strong. It is when I sit in the quietness and there is a still small voice. It is the times when we worship and the spirit is there.

It all comes to its heart in Jesus. The wonder, marvel and mystery are centred on him. In that life as nowhere else God finds human form and I know I will trust him for life and for death. There is enough of God plainly there for me to live my life by.

But that doesn't mean the mystery of God has ended. The mystery of God stretches away into mysteries where we cannot follow.

Let me give you an illustration from sound. The birds can hear sounds that we cannot hear. There are sound waves so high that are beyond the top note that the human ear can pick up and so low they are below the bottom note that the ear can detect. All music lies within a few octaves. Beyond that is utter mystery. So with God. Jesus is the octaves we can hear of God. Wonderful music that charms our souls. But beyond it all the awesome mystery of God, as far beyond us as Beethoven's music would be beyond someone who was tone-deaf. So whatever you do don't make God too small. He is bigger than you can even begin to imagine.

It is no simple matter to be a faithful Christian. It is a growing developing thing. It is not a single act or an event but a life-time commitment. It is a wonderful thing to become "new born" but to remain a spiritual baby is tragic. Babies are sometimes sweet and adorable but if they never grew up we would consider it a calamity - and it would be. Becoming a faithful Christian is an on-going process, a pilgrimage, a life commitment. Wherever we are on that journey there is further to go and yet more light and truth to break forth from God's word to guide us on the way.

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