

The Question of Legitimacy

Is your faith for real? What happens when you step outside of the safe zone of church and enter a world inhabited predominantly by non-Christians? Can you pray about pedestrian things like work problems, office politics and relationships with clients? Does your faith extend to the water fountain or the campus refectory? Even if you say nothing. If your faith is real, do you feel free to share it at appropriate moments? Or does your life confirm peoples' worst fears and stereotypes about Christians?

Crisis of legitimacy?

These are questions that go to the heart of legitimacy. Different churches stress divergent points of dogma. Surely, people reason, they can't all be right. In a sense, such reasoning is understandable. However, at the end of the day, legitimate Christian faith is not dependant on church affiliation or distinctiveness (churches are more like teams, where we play the game of life together; they are not the substance of that life; Jesus Christ is). If we suffer a crisis of legitimacy, constantly depending on the approval of others, rather than being confident in who God is and what we believe about Him, we will default to the notion that the world outside the walls of the sanctuary is akin to Jurassic Park where only the tough survive and people of small faith fall prey to the beasts.

I believe we unduly separate faith from life. It is all too common for institutional churches to become like isolation wards where those with afflictions remain shut up inside. When this happens we restrict the operation of spiritual gifts to corporate church situations; we believe that only those in charge are anointed to do the work of God; we stop taking God's promises literally and we believe that worship is something we do at fixed times, following pre-determined models set by the director and cast, rather than a way of life.

No wonder Christian young people feel there is a crisis of identify and legitimacy. Let's shed the old skins and live the way God intended, at home, at school or work, where we spend most of our time. If the Holy Spirit lives inside us he can motivate us and help us to extend faith to the marketplace.

Legitimacy not in brand names

Faith is about more than branding. When I was growing up, my Roman Catholic friends and I used to argue incessantly (and publicly, to my chagrin these days) about which was the "true church". The debates usually centred on history, church Realpolitik and leaders, not matters of Biblical faith. If you walk down the streets of cities such as Singapore today you will still find church buildings bearing names such as "True Jesus": Christian friends in Chile told me that, unless I joined their brand, with the cross on its side and worship restricted to daylight hours I was not a true believer. The Patriarch of an ancient denomination based in Iraq tried to assure me that the baptised members of his flock were the only remaining Christians on the planet. The implication of such bigotry (to the uninitiated) is that other churches lack the true Jesus and the authentic message.

In reality, the legitimacy of our faith is not restricted to (or measured by) the church brand name we wear or the sacraments, ordinances, traditions or hocus pocus that makes us unique. Yet, all too often, when we meet other Christians the first thing we do is roll back the sleeve and check the tag. "What church do you go to"? The relationship from that point is determined by the popularity of the label.

I am reminded of a shop (more like a "hole in the wall") in a bazaar in Strait Street, Damascus, where rolls of fake labels of popular clothing brand names are freely available. If one label doesn't suit, remove it and substitute another, until you find one with which everyone is comfortable. I once ministered in a Seventh Day Pentecostal Church in Puerto Rico. Friends criticised me for doing so, rather than rejoicing that, amid the occult practices that exist in that island here was a church that openly proclaimed Christ and moved in the power of God to cast out demons and see lives changed for the glory of Jesus. Paul reminded the early church that only Christ was the true foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10-11; Ephesians 2:20).

Compromising our world views

A second area of lack of legitimacy is world view. Christians often do not validate the world views that inform how they interpret what is occurring around them. What do we mean by a "world view"? In essence, it is a complex mesh of ideas and interpretations that enable us to understand what is going on beneath the surface. Nothing is as it seems. Without realizing it, we can espouse a CNN world view, or an Al Jazira or BCC world view when we watch news and commentary and take their priorities and interpretations at face value. We can unwittingly reflect the anxiety, despair, nihilism and elastic values of non-Christian, or anti-Christian, editors, simply by soaking up and parroting what we see, without engaging in any critical analysis.

The building blocks of our lives can end up being made of faulty materials. Like colonial buildings I was shown in Bahrain, where bricks are tenuously held together with mortar made with sea water, what we hold to can crumble when our environment is disturbed. If we want legitimate faith, we need to ask, "What is God's view?" It is easy to imbibe the values of people who are not in tune with His way of thinking. Jesus taught us to "judge righteous judgement" (John 7:24), seeking the Spirit's wisdom and understanding and not jumping to conclusions that are inimical to God's character.

More than form

If we want to be relevant, we need to be prepared to exchange form for life. Let me illustrate.

I once visited an Assemblies of God church in La Paz, Bolivia, pastored by a wonderful, humble, educated man of God named Cleto Perez. For nearly a week Cleto opened up the pulpit to a group of us who had flown in from Australia. All we wanted to do was to serve the church. For several nights we sang, preached and prayed for people. Beautiful Aymara Christians. During the daytime we visited church members and had open air meetings, where we shared our faith with people in the neighbourhood.

On the final night (with the agreement of Pastor Cleto) we encouraged the congregation to go beyond form and reach out to God for something new. The result was transforming. When we prayed for peoples' needs the Holy Spirit "touched" the congregation in an awesome way. People were visibly set free from demonic oppressions. Some were healed. Numbers of people became Christians for the first time. Children as young as ten and eleven years of age received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Men and women openly repented of sin in their lives. People who had been estranged by events were reconciled. The meeting went on for more than five hours. Nobody (there were more than two hundred people in the meeting) wanted to go home.

People told us later they had visions of Jesus as we worshipped and prayed. Young people wept as they told how they heard the voice of Jesus calling them to commit their lives to full-time Christian service. These were poor people, many of them with little education and almost no money. They lived in the difficult environment of the High Andean steppes, known locally as the "Altiplano". The average life expectancy was less than fifty years of age. But what happened that night changed lives. It didn't make them more prosperous. It didn't create celebrity ministers. But those who responded to the "touch of God" (and there were scores) were changed.

In the days that followed, many reported that they had spent hours on their knees, or their faces, seeking God and surrendering their lives to Him. They gave up habits that had bound them for years. They discovered the ability to laugh in the midst of atrocious economic circumstances. They were reunited with family members and neighbours from whom they had been long estranged. This was the work of God. It took place because it was permitted to happen. Those in leadership were sensitive and recognised the cues and moving of the Holy Spirit. No one doubted that what they had was real.

Is your faith a source of life or death?

Does your brand of Christianity produce life, or is it stagnant? Consider the analogy of the Jordan River in the Middle East.

The Jordan River is a defining feature of geography between the West Bank and the nation of Jordan. It is the only sizeable flowing body of water in the whole of Palestine. Its source is high up in beautiful, snow-capped Mount Hermon, on the Syrian-Israeli border, from where it flows south (the name "Jordan" comes from a Hebrew word meaning "flowing downward"). On the other side of Hermon, melted snow simply runs away into the Syrian desert.

The Sea of Galilee (the Romans called it Lake Tiberius, after one of their emperors) was the locus of much of Jesus' early ministry. It is twenty kilometres long and from three to ten kilometres wide. The waters are deep enough for fishing and swimming and human settlement has been evident along the lake's shores for millennia. Over the centuries, towns on its edges were known for boat building, tanning, fishing, fish curing and market gardens. On a hot summer's day children can still be seen frolicking in its sweet waters. The verges are rich and green and traders do a brisk business. There are more than thirty species of fish and nearly fifty species of birds live along the shores.

At the southern end of the lake, the river continues its inexorable journey. It is not long before the landscape changes from verdant grassland to desert slopes. On the eastern side the scenery is cluttered with untidy villages, broken down huts, oily roads and desert-like conditions. The West Bank is grassed, but the vegetation eventually gives way to rocks, sand and barren hills. The countryside gradually descends until it reaches its nadir 395 metres below sea level. The temperature rises and in summer is almost unbearable. After the Allenby Bridge it passes a site (in Jordan) revered as the traditional baptismal site of Jesus Christ. Finally, the now muddied water enters the Dead Sea, the lowest geological point on the earth's surface.

The Dead Sea forms a natural trap for mineral deposits and plant extracts. Due to high temperatures, evaporation and the fact that the lake has no outlet, it is about 6 times more salty than sea water. The therapeutic and cosmetic properties of its mud have been popular with tourists and pilgrims for many years. Hotels in the Middle East stock their bathrooms with Dead Sea mud soap. From antiquity people from surrounding nations (including Queen Cleopatra of Egypt), have swarmed to this place to take advantage of its healing and beautifying properties. Tourist brochures promise skin cleansing, improved blood circulation, skin renewal, relaxation and improved well-being.

When I first swam in the Dead Sea I was amazed at its saltiness, the bitter taste of oily water that touches the lips and causes any cuts or grazes to sting, and the buoyancy that makes it virtually impossible to sink. (Don't open your eyes under water!) Tourist brochures feature photographs of swimmers lying in the water reading or sunbaking. In reality, the skin burns quickly. I could not wait to stand under a shower of "normal" water to remove the brine. I felt as though I was being slowly pickled.

The Dead Sea is practically devoid of life. No fish can live in its salty depths. The water that flowed through the Sea of Galilee, bringing life and refreshment, a place for children to swim and play, is now moribund. Why is this so? As I stood surveying the desert it occurred to me that the single major difference between the two bodies of water is that, whereas the Sea of Galilee gives what it receives, almost drop for drop, and is continually refreshed because there is room for new water to enter, the Dead Sea only receives; it gives nothing back, and it dies in the process.

There is an important lesson here, which we cannot ignore. As Christians, we can be like the Sea of Galilee, infused with life, associated with joy, refreshment and cleansing, freely giving out of what we have received, spreading the blessing of God beyond our own lives, families and churches. Or we can focus on ourselves, our programs, our goals and visions, selfishly giving back nothing in response to all that we receive. Our churches may become places of interest, sacred sites even, but it will be known that there is no life there. The choice is ours. Let's decide for life.

Making reality real

As Christians we are incredibly blessed. Not because we deserve it, nor because our church or worship style is the best, but because God loves us. Our legitimacy and identity come from Him alone. We can have confidence as we face life because Jesus is Truth and we are the people of His power.