

Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater

Over the past few years, I have been on a journey of discovery which involved repudiating some of my prior core Christian beliefs and replacing them with what I believe is the actual truth. In the process, I was set free from the negative aspects of popular Christianity, while at the same time hanging onto the “good stuff.” As it turns out, the good stuff is even better than I had anticipated, and far more “believable.” Unlike the aspects of my belief system which I discarded, my new belief system fits very nicely with the latest findings of science, Biblical criticism, psychology, para-psychology, mysticism, intuition, reason, and just plain old commonsense.

I believe that Christian Conservatives resist attempts to discredit the negative aspects of their theology, because they are convinced that if their version of Christianity is disproved, then nothing else remains. We've all heard the platitude, “if you can't believe all of the Bible, then there is no basis for believing any of it.” For them, the choice is between being a Christian or a non-Christian. Most conservative Christian evangelicals arrived at their belief system through a long process of intense indoctrination, which affirmed the “good stuff,” and rationalized away the bad stuff with seemingly impeccable logic. This belief system was continually reinforced with highly inspirational real-life experiences, captivating music, and preachers who spoke convincingly and authoritatively.

Orthodox Christianity has stood the test of time. Who are we to argue with 2000 years of tradition? If we believe that our eternal destiny would be in serious jeopardy, were we to question those firmly held beliefs, then we would be very reluctant to question our faith or look for a more believable alternative.

I personally believe the best approach to “converting” conservative evangelicals to a “better way” and a more inclusive theology, is to show them how they can have their cake and eat it, too. Show them how they can retain a fundamentalist view of Scriptures at the same time embrace a more modern and inclusive theology.

Christianity has stood the test of time because Christianity's core beliefs, values and lifestyle are timeless and equally valid and applicable in all times and cultures. If we are to persuade Christians to successfully “update” their traditional theology, we must begin by affirming the positive aspects of their current belief system. The Bible is a remarkable collection of documents. It can be interpreted in ways that support a more modern, inclusive theology, even when understood as “infallible” and “inerrant.”

For example, the “fires” of God's judgments may be interpreted as symbolic of purification and cleansing, rather than retribution. The apocalyptic imagery of the Book of Revelation can be applied exclusively to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Many theories of the Atonement, besides the substitutionary theory, are fully supported by Scripture. The Greek word “eternal,” when applied to judgments in the afterlife, literally means “age-during,” not everlasting. God's desire and intention to “save” all mankind, not just a lucky few, is clearly taught not only by Jesus, but also the Apostle Paul.

So here's the challenge. If we are going to reach evangelicals with the true Gospel of Christ, we must begin by affirming the "substance" of their current beliefs and then carefully make our case while we have their attention and trust. We must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Once the fear is gone, people might be more open to a revision of how they view Scripture.