

This I know, for the Bible tells me so? (Part One)



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Another one of those odd moments occurred the other morning. It could have been due to listening to a podcast the night before with Bible scholar Bart Ehrman, or maybe yesterday's reading of Bible passages in preparation for my next class on Christian Nationalism. What came to mind was a song first

learned in Sunday School as a child: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Funny how these early tunes stick in memory like velcro. Some might say it indicates the subtle "indoctrination" we received as children, which may be true, yet it led to another memory from seminary, and relates to one of the theologians we read and admired.

Karl Barth (1886-1968) has been called "the most significant Protestant theologian of the 20th Century" and one of the greatest of all Christian history. In my Masters program, we read selections from his massive "Church Dogmatics," a

13-volume work where he laid out major doctrines "rooted in his theology of the Word of God" (quotes are from Carol's "All Saints" book, that includes Barth among the "saints and sages" of history, not all Christian). I don't remember much of anything from Barth's writing, or other Swiss and German theologians we studied like Bultmann, Brunner, Moltmann, Niebuhr, Tillich, Kung and more. But I do recall an anecdote passed around among seminarians, something Barth supposedly said when asked how he would summarize all he knew of faith and theology. He replied: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

We found that both amusing and refreshing.

Even before I entered seminary, I was somewhat familiar with Barth, having graduated with a degree in Religion and Philosophy from my Christian college. Spending a summer in Europe, I was thrilled to sit in on a seminar in Basel, Switzerland, taught by Karl Barth's son Marcus, a biblical scholar himself. Normally he taught the class in German, but he switched to English for "our American guest." Theology was interesting to me in those younger days. But I was

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soon to learn that practical theology was more useful and meaningful than the academic “study of god.”

Some of the most influential courses I chose in seminary exposed me to the radical thought of “Liberation Theologians,” primarily Latin American Catholic priests working with the poor. The fact this was considered “radical” puzzled me a bit, since my reading of the biblical story, in particular the Jesus Story, seemed to present a message I was hearing from these socially active believers in Central and South America. A special concern for the poor and oppressed, addressing daily issues of housing, health care and hunger, as well as larger policies that intensified those human concerns, looked like the kinds of things Jesus would be involved in today. Now, with a strong background in academic theology, Bible and Philosophy, I was discovering a “new” practice of faith activated not so much by beliefs but human service. Traditional theology is based on supernatural explanations of the unknown and unexplainable. A theology of liberation is centered on the immediate response to human needs in the natural world here and now, not in denial of academics, not to the neglect of education, but concerned with an education that arises directly from the people rather than from an ancient book or voice from beyond.

Karl Barth appeared to evolve in his thinking and believing. While a professor in Germany, he witnessed the rise of

Hitler. Fearing that masses of the population were following a charismatic political figure instead of God, Barth helped write the “Barmen Declaration,” expressing the voice of the “Confessing Church” that resisted authoritarian power and the complicity of the Church in a State run by a strongman. He was forced to flee back to Switzerland.

Later in life, Barth apparently expanded his theological viewpoints, believing that salvation was universal, even exploring the idea that God may not exist without humans! A fascinating concept that, in some ways, fits with certain beliefs taught by Liberation thinkers. After all, what is liberation but liberty of thought, freedom of belief and full participation of each individual in a healthy, happy life?

It isn’t enough, it’s never been sufficient, to rest in the comfort of a very personalistic belief expressed as: “Jesus loves me, this is known, for the Bible tells me so.” As Karl Barth knew, a life of faith must be much more. Along with people of many faiths, and those who believe in freedom without a god, the ultimate goal has to be the immediate act of love expressed in justice and real liberation for human beings in compassionate community (not necessarily in congregations).

Theology talks; love walks. With or without a Bible.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).