

# Faith & Belief: Different and Important

Romans 4:1-5, 13-25    Genesis 12:1-5; 17:1-7, 15-16  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to return to a familiar theme this morning, the difference between faith and belief. Back in the fall of 2010, the Book Study Small Group here at College Hill (not to be confused with our Book Club) read and discussed what was then a new book by Harvey Cox, a Professor of Divinity at Harvard, entitled, *The Future of Faith*, (HarperOne, 2009). The premise of the book is stated on the back cover.

There is an essential change taking place in what it means to be 'religious' today. As religious people shift their focus to ethical guidelines and spiritual discipline – not doctrine – we are seeing a universal trend away from hierarchical, regional, patriarchal, and institutional religion...

Doctrines and dogma are giving way to new grassroots movements based in community, social justice, and spiritual experience.

It is my assessment that College Hill has done and is doing quite well on the first two, building community and promoting social justice. But as I have stated recently, I think our cutting edge is on the third element – focusing on spiritual experience.

Though Cox doesn't use the term specifically, what he's observing is at the very heart of progressive Christianity. He is among a growing trend of scholars who seriously questioning what the future holds for religion, and for Christianity in particular. Within Christianity, many historians are convinced that we have entered into a period of religious transformation as epic as the Reformation was 500 years ago. Cox is among those who think it's even bigger than that.

Christianity, according to Cox, has entered into "the most momentous transformation since its transition in the fourth century CE from what had begun as a tiny Jewish sect into the religious ideology of the Roman Empire."

Cox divides Christianity into three eras: The Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and the Age of the Spirit. Let's look first at the beginning: the "**Age of Faith**". Beginning with Jesus and his disciples, this era experienced explosive growth, along with occasional brutal persecution. The term "**faith**" meant **hope and assurance in the dawning of a new era of freedom, healing, and compassion that Jesus had demonstrated**. To be a Christian in these first few decades was defined by living in Jesus' Spirit, embracing his hope, and following him in the compassionate and inclusive work that he had begun.

It wasn't many decades after Jesus' execution, however, that things began to shift. **The emphasis on faith in Jesus was beginning to be replaced with beliefs about Jesus**. Christianity had entered what Cox calls the "**Age of Belief**." By the end of the

third century an elite clergy class emerged, bringing teaching manuals and lists of beliefs to adhere to. But these beliefs varied widely from region to region, and differing theologies abounded, especially about the nature of Jesus himself, **Emperor Constantine commandeered Christianity for the sake of peace in the Roman Empire early in the fourth century at the Council of Nicaea.** Christianity soon became the primary religion of the Empire, and creeds were agreed upon after spectacular debates. Cox laments:

For Christianity it proved to be a disaster: its enthronement actually degraded it. From an energetic movement of faith it coagulated into a phalanx of required beliefs, thereby laying the foundation for every succeeding Christian fundamentalism for centuries to come.

The empire eventually became officially Christian, and **Christianity became imperial.** Heresy, which simply meant any disagreement with determined orthodox thought, became treasonous, at times punishable by death. The Age of Belief lasted roughly fifteen hundred years, and was barely altered by either the Renaissance or the Reformation. Yes, many long-held beliefs were changed, but the focus was still on what the church taught people to believe.

As previously stated, Cox is among many who believe that “we stand on the threshold of a new chapter in the Christian story.” We have entered a “post-Constantinian” era that Cox terms the **“Age of the Spirit.”** This new age, as it turns out, has more in common with the original Age of Faith than with the dominant Age of Belief. For there are movements afoot, especially outside the West, that **“accent spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope; pay scant attention to creeds; and flourish without hierarchies.”**

This emphasis is my hope for the continued direction of College Hill. I am inspired to pay less attention to ancient church doctrine and dogma and **focus more on spiritual experience and how we choose to live out our faith morally and ethically.**

While there is so much more to be said about all of this, there is one particular point I want to emphasize this morning. That is **the difference between ‘faith’ and ‘belief.’** While a majority of Christians think these are simply two words for the same thing, they are not the same. This isn’t an entirely new concept, however. Back in 1952, William Spurrier, a professor of theology at Wesleyan University, wrote a book entitled, “Guide to the Christian Faith.” He states:

First, let it be said what the Christian faith is not. It is not an idea about God, nor is it the passive acceptance of some dogmas, nor submission to some intellectual proposition...

**Christian faith is an active commitment to a way of life...**it is a dynamic activity that engages the whole personality...it is the name given to this viable relationship between [humanity] and Reality, and theology is the attempt to describe and explain it.

And this is my favorite part, and remember this was 63 years ago, **“Faith is not blind; it is precisely the opposite.** It is an experience of some new truth, new insight, new meaning, which lights up other truths whose connection with each other we could not see before.” Or as Harvey Cox put it much more recently, **“Faith is about deep-seated**

**confidence.** In everyday speech we usually apply it to people we trust or the values we treasure. It is what theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) called 'ultimate concern,' a matter of what the Hebrews spoke of as the 'heart.'" Therefore, what we put our faith into, by a large measure, determines how we choose to live our life.

"Belief, on the other hand," Cox continues, "is more like opinion. We often use the term in everyday speech to express a degree of uncertainty." He adds:

Beliefs can be held lightly or with emotional intensity, but they are more propositional than existential [more of the head than the heart]. **We can believe something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our faith only in something that is vital for the way we live.**

Christianity, once based in faith, shifted to specific beliefs and theological doctrines that were then set in stone. **To be a Christian in the Age of Belief meant to give intellectual assent to those beliefs, as determined by the Church to be fundamental. The majority of Christianity still approaches religion this way.**

However, an ever-growing number of Christians, including many in this congregation, are experiencing both the questioning and the changing of their beliefs. And yet, contrary to the nay-sayers, we continue to maintain faith in a loving God, and a realization that we are called to live in love and in accordance to what Jesus taught. That's why I am among those religious leaders that believe **it is more important to live in accordance to what Jesus taught, than it is to agree with specific beliefs about Jesus himself**, most of which developed decades and centuries after his death.

There is a biblical example of what I think reflects the difference between faith and belief. That's the life of Abraham – as told in the Old Testament Book of Genesis, and as used as an example of faithfulness by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. Before there were any laws or even a religion called Judaism, there is the story of a man, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah, that revealed that **faithfulness wasn't a matter of adherence to theological doctrines but of simply following where they believed God was leading them to go.** They had faith, which meant they put their trust in following God.

Let me be clear, however. **I am not saying that it doesn't matter what you believe, or that belief isn't important. For indeed, what you believe will indeed have a strong impact on your moral and ethical decisions and actions.** For instance, if a person believes in an angry, judgmental, punishing, and even violent God, then most likely elements of those same traits will be evidenced in how they live out their faith. On the other hand, if you believe the nature and character of God is defined by love, forgiveness, healing and wholeness, and is demonstrated in a nurturing community, then it is these traits that will guide your life of faith.

So what you believe is indeed very important. But in the Age of the Spirit, much like the original Age of Faith, religion will not hierarchically seek to essentially force everyone to believe the same thing. Instead, and again this is my deepest hope, we will **focus not so much on doctrine but on spirituality, the experiencing of the Sacred/Divine in our midst, as well as how we choose to live out our faith in moral and ethical ways.**

And that's the difference between 'faith' and 'belief.'

Amen.