

**Compassion is Always ‘Sound Doctrine’**  
Reflection on 2 Timothy 3:14- 4:5 & Luke 10:25-29  
Sunday October 24, 2010  
Trinity United, Ottawa  
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This morning’s first Bible reading returns to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to Timothy, one of the letters that claim authorship by St. Paul, but are now reliably dated as written after his death. When this letter was composed, the church was beginning to take on an institutional form and shaping an orthodox Christian doctrine, in reaction to threats to its existence, from the established religions and from the Roman Empire.

As you listen to this, I invite you to notice how **you** respond to it. Do you feel comfort? direction? righteousness? judgement? defensiveness? reassurance?

Reading of 2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:1-5.

People respond to that passage in lots of different ways. Certainly, I found myself wanting to preach ‘in tension’ with it. Words like ‘reproof’ and ‘judgment’ catch for me, and I have to stop and reinterpret them in their historical context. And I easily feel defensive about verses that get quoted today as criticisms of progressive Christianity, dismissing our thoughtful faith as “accumulating teachers to suit our own desires,” “cherry-picking scriptures” or “wandering away to myths.” Wait a minute! I want to say: Myth - truth and wisdom communicated through story- that is the very literary form in which most of our Bible was written!

Whatever our response to this reading, I think most of us yearn for ‘sound doctrine’ that does not contradict our having ‘sound minds.’ And most would agree that these are ‘unfavourable times’ for Christianity. Those of us whose spiritual journeys are supported by our Christian practises and community, often feel squeezed today between the public perception of Christianity as fundamentalist, and the vocal criticisms of the ‘new atheists’ like Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens. These three are mostly jousting with outdated or fundamentalist theology that we don’t believe in either.

The useful questions that arose for me from the Letter to Timothy are these: What is 'sound Christian doctrine' today, in these seemingly 'unfavourable times?' And why do thoughtful, Jesus inspired and God-centred practising Christians in our time find ourselves caught in between the public judgements of atheism and fundamentalism? World religions scholar Karen Armstrong, author of 'The Case for God', carves out some welcome space for our faith - and for the faith of mainstream Jews and Muslims - with her broad understanding of religion in history.

Did you know that in pre-modern times, before the Enlightenment - roughly 300 years ago - no one read Torah or Testament or Qu'ran as literal historical fact or scientific truth? In pre-modern times, religion existed within a mystical, mythical worldview. Everyone recognized that talk about God, like talk about music, couldn't define God. Religion, like music, was about practise and lived experience. As George Steiner wrote: "What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God."

In the Enlightenment period, modern mechanistic science erupted with new explanations for life. The scientific method became accepted as the only reliable means of attaining truth. So theologians adopted that criteria. They began to force the wisdom myths of Christianity into a rational style of thinking that was utterly foreign to them. Armstrong writes: "We lost the *art* of interpreting the old tales of gods walking the earth, dead men striding out of tombs or seas parting miraculously." Religious 'belief' had always been centred on practise and mystical experience, on living according to the wisdom of the scriptural myths and prophetic teachings. But mysticism was utterly dismissed by Enlightenment thinking and the word 'belief' came to mean 'a credulous acceptance of doctrines.' Faith as believing in what you didn't really believe. Is that what you grew up with?

Armstrong explains how The Enlightenment's rationalized interpretation of religion gave rise to two new modern phenomenon: atheism and fundamentalism. The two are related. In a world-view where God can't be real unless God can be proved by objective, repeatable experimentation, atheism is born. I remember being firmly of that persuasion! Prove to me that God's real! A teenager's best argument for not having to go to church!

But what of those who for varying reasons, were unable or unwilling to deny the reality of God or the efficacy of their religious practises? Well, if rational thinking was the only framework of reality, some chose to just force the Bible to fit into a ‘scientific’ mode. Or vice versa. The 20<sup>th</sup> century invented fundamentalism in reaction to atheism. This ‘reactive pietism rose up simultaneously in Christianity and Judaism and Islam, taking forms like biblical literalism and ‘creation science’ and jihadism and zionism.

I have a certain sympathy with fundamentalist Christians who were and still are trapped by the modern world-view. When God was proclaimed ‘unreal’ by rational science, what were people to do with their personal mystical experiences? Their ‘God-sense’? Throughout human history there is a world of evidence that people have transcendent experiences that Christians call ‘God’ or ‘Christ presence.’ Some describe ‘seeing beyond the veil’, others feel inspired or transported to a loving dimension where everything is connected. People discover the ‘thin places’, feel a ‘calling’ or experience inexplicable reassurance and angelic guidance. (That’s why most of you are here, right? Because you’ve had such a transcendent experience, or you’ve recognized it in the stories of Jesus.)

Out of our yearning to share such inexplicable and yet undeniable personal mystical experiences, humanity has created religions. Out of our desire to live more fully in that ‘awakened’ or ‘enlightened’ consciousness, humans have named Gods and pointed with myths, and remembered and reminded with rituals. In search of more glimpses of ‘the peace that surpasses all understanding’, we band together to practise faith. We want to live in the ‘God dimension’ that we *know* is real. Because we, or those we trust intuitively, have been there.

Happily, we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century today, and truth is no longer governed by the rational, mechanistic modern world-view. These are post-modern times, when awareness of the quantum reality offers us a ‘scientifically’ credible realm for religion’s Mystery. The quantum paradigm once again makes room for a plausible unifying Creative Force that permeates the universe. Religions are being renewed, as

challenge to the Enlightenment-born distortions of atheism and fundamentalism. We can once again dare to share our transcendent experiences, be transformed and aspire to transform our world into Jesus' 'Kin-dom' vision.

As post-modern Christians, we are free to know Jesus again, as the historical, mystical prophet he was. And to reshape doctrine according to his life and teachings. We can look critically in our scriptures for 'sound doctrine' to unite humanity in hope. Our Gospels show us his radical 'Way of compassion' for all people. We have that in Jesus' 'Great Commandment.' When asked what laws or doctrines mattered most, Jesus spoke of what we call Christian Love, better translated, we now know, as Compassion for All.

Reading of Luke 10: 25-27. "Love God...and love your neighbour as your self."

According to Jesus that 'neighbour' to whom we must extend loving compassion, was of course, everyone. Every 'other' including other religions, like the Samaritan in the story that follows. Is that not 'sound doctrine' for today?

Karen Armstrong, a practising Christian in a Harvard progressive church, initiated a World wide web action called The Charter for Compassion, which invites us to practise sound doctrine in these difficult times. Faith leaders around the globe contributed to its crafting. I've signed the charter. Have you? Compassion is the measure of 'sound doctrine' for Christians. Timeless and timely, compassion for all was Jesus' top priority. Let's make it ours - to live.

Video reading: The Charter for Compassion [www.charterforcompassion.org](http://www.charterforcompassion.org)

Hymn: They'll Know We are Christians By Our Love

"The Case for God" by Karen Armstrong. Knopf. Toronto 2009.