

“Easy” (part one)

Psalm 81:1-10, Matthew 11:25-30

August 22, 2021

One of the many blessings in my life is that, according to others, I’m kinda smart. Please understand, I say that not as a way to brag but rather as an acknowledgement of one of God’s gifts to me. I say “gift” because I certainly didn’t get a say in it. Not that I would’ve necessarily chosen some other gift in its place, but rather to emphasize it wasn’t my choice.

I was talking to a kindergarten teacher one day and she shared with me a pretty profound insight. She said, sometimes “smart” is a “blurse.” For a moment, I thought I didn’t hear her correctly. “A blouse?” I inquired. “No,” she replied, “a blurse. You know, something that’s both blessing AND curse.” Her belief was that, for children, that high intelligence was exactly that, a blurse – could be a great gift at times, but it could equally be the cause of a whole lot of bad.

There are lots of things like that, if you think about it. Things that, in the right hands, could bring about tremendous benefit for the world. On the other hand, given to the wrong people or used in the wrong manner, wow, gifts can curse, can’t they?

One of the greatest problems within the Church of Jesus Christ is that sometime in the past, a bunch of “smart” people got a hold of it. And, when I say way back, I mean WAAAY back. Second century, really. That’s when the rise of “Christian Philosophy” began. People like Justin Martyr and Tertullian had tremendous influence upon the thought-life of Christians. They were attracted to the faith because they, in their human wisdom, could see that what these earliest Christians were talking about made a whole lot of sense. That is to say that it seemed, “Smart” to them. And for good reason, right? Compared to its birth faith, Judaism, Christianity was a quantum leap into easy from complexity. After all, there are something on the order of six hundred purity laws in Judaism or something like that. It shouldn’t be missed that Jesus reduced all of the religious laws down to two – love God and love neighbor.

Now look, one can’t argue with results. A whole lot of other “smart” people heard about Christianity’s many advantages and began to explore what it was. And while they absolutely added a measure of clarity to our faith, they also robbed it inadvertently of something essential – simplicity. That is to say that, in order to keep the faith pure, these thinkers began doing what they always do, add complexity.

Some smart people are like that, unfortunately. They just naturally add levels of complexity. And, who knows, maybe those first layers of complexity, like the ones generated at events like Nicaea, Chalcedon, Ephesus and Constantinople were helpful. It was in those first 7 Ecumenical Councils, all held before 800 A.D., that the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ was indelibly established. These became the standards by which faith was validated. Consent to these basic doctrines and you’re a Christian, do not and you’re either a heretic or an apostate, you pick your flavor of wrong.

I’m not going to say they were wrong but what they did, well, it was sorta arrogant. After all, after the canon of our Scriptures was closed long before that point. Every one of the Church Councils happened AFTER the established canon of Scripture was closed.

So, in a way, what began in the year 325 was a group of smart people coming together to disagree about definitions. And make no mistake about it – boy, was there acrimony. The stakes, in their minds, were high. They felt tasked to figure out how Father, Son and Holy Spirit worked and what exactly Jesus Christ was made of and a host of other big, important questions that absolutely had to be figured out. That part was true though. The reason for these councils is because the early Church began arguing about theology.

It was, strangely, around that same time that the instances of the church’s miraculous power begin to reduce in number. That is to say that the “work” the members of the Church performed, “healings and resurrections” gradually started to reduce. That may just be a coincidence, but I tend to think not.

You see, while a certain level of complexity is required in any expansive system, there is a point of diminishing returns. Take for example, dinner. Tell people that you’ve got a three-ingredient recipe that’s really good and they might be dubious until they taste it. Tell someone that you’ve got like 28 ingredients in thing and what many people assume is that it could be better. Complexity, that is, is attractive to a great number of us. Not everyone, by any stretch of the imagination, but some, to be sure.

Because while these really, really smart men left behind the work of the church to, well, argue, there were others, not invited to the councils, who were presumably doing the actual work Jesus Christ called us to. There is, to my knowledge, no direct verse in which God essentially commands us to “figure it all out,” so to speak. In fact, quite often we’re told the opposite. That whole My ways are higher than your ways things kinda words as a soft rejection of the idea of figuring God out.

But it was that philosophic desire to know everything that led to a great deal of arguing. Intellectuals are like that. Always have been, I guess. Tell them the stop light is red, and the next thing you know you’ve got them squawking at each other.

“It’s NOT red, it’s burnt red,” one declares. A nuance of the thing. “It may be any other color in the spectrum but it is decidedly NOT RED” says another. A rejection of the type of thing. “Ah, how cute, you see it as a color when anyone with half a brain recognizes it a tool of oppression, preventing people from reaching their full potential.” A recategorization of the thing.

Can’t you just see it? While arguing about what a traffic light IS existentially, they fail to grasp its message. STOP! And, eventually you know what’s going to happen? They’re going to crash.

Which, I hope you’ll notice, is exactly where the Church of Jesus Christ IS right about now. I wish I could show it to you. One of my son’s favorite books to look at and read growing up was Richard Scary’s Cars and Trucks and things that Go.” There’s a page towards the end when ALL of the many cars and trucks and things going go end up in a wreck. And while nobody was hurt, it’s was the kind of pile up that’ll take hours to clear up.

That’s where we are. We are a HOT MESS. Disagreements abound, denominations exist. Go into three different churches on a Sunday morning and what you’re liable to walk away with is three entirely different conceptions of what we believe. Go to another and you’re likely to feel like you’ve been to a movie or a rock concert. The whole endeavor is a great big mess and it began in one place – smart people that thought that their “figuring out” Christianity” was needed.

To some degree, we see this same drag in our society right now. Remember, despite what anyone may tell you, the Founding Fathers recognized the need for government. But they also realized that, left unchecked, governments tend to become tyrannical. So, they worked to make things EASY. Almost 250 people of smart people running the thing and isn’t it interesting to note that the country seems to be in the same darned place? Divided. Growing complexity in both government and in all things, really.

Think about this. Back when I was a kid, on any given night, you were given just three options for new programming. You know what that meant? The next day at the water cooler, there were really only three television topics of conversation. It wasn’t that hard to communicate with people on a social level.

“Did you see Good Times last night?” “It was Dy-NO-Mite, man. “I did too!” says another. Soon, three people are chatting. Idly mind you but interacting.

Nowadays, there are so many channels and content streaming that if three people meet at the water cooler and any of them have seen anything identical in the last three months is highly unlikely.

And it’s nice, in some ways. Helps pass the time, I guess. But notice this, we live in a place of increasing complexity. And here’s what I’ve come to believe. Complexity creates friction. Friction creates heat. Anyone here notice that the temperature is rising? And I don’t just mean the weather outside.

Now, just imagine if you could, that you could travel back in time. If you went far enough back, you’d get to a time when things in the Church of Jesus Christ were far less complex than they are now.

Take, for example, a group I subscribe to on Facebook. It’s called, jokingly, “What the Furtick?” and it focuses on how mega-churches fleece their congregants. At first, I thought it was quite witty. I mean, a lot of times, the contributors on that page are quite witty. But as I’ve read those comments for several years now, they actually have the opposite effect. It isn’t that they’re wrong all the time. It’s that they’re wrong about what they’re doing.

Why waste time?

While we all need some enjoyment, is spending 45 minutes writing a satirical piece mocking sheep for following what you perceive to be a false shepherd? Not really. Because if you really believed that, that someone was imperiling someone else’s salvation with their heretical beliefs, you wouldn’t waste a second of time mocking the source of the problem. NO, you go directly to the person being harmed, wouldn’t you?

Which is exactly the opposite of what those people do. Why? Because they're theologians. Arm-chair or otherwise. And what theologians do is spend an awful lot of time and effort arguing about what other people should or should not believe. It's a disconnect really. A trap, perhaps. In the grand scheme of things, what you think, well, it doesn't really matter. It does to you. But not so much to the world.

James told me a story the other day about a young man back in his days working for a race team. A young mechanic comes up to the owner with an idea. The two experienced can see that it isn't a good one and tell the owner so. The young man, well, he's anxious, wants to make a good impression and believes he's right. "You ought to listen to me," says the young man.

"Why is that?" says the owner. "Because I think about engines all the time."

Who do you think the owner listened to? The young man who thought about engines all the time, or the people who'd successfully established that not only did they know about engines, they'd done something positive to them. Better still, they had experience.

Now, every once in a while, that young man is right. Every once in a while, that kid who'd just thought and thought and thought and thought. And, yes, that young man WILL encounter skepticism. But you know what, if he works hard and takes the time to learn why the experienced mechanics disagree and then sets out to gently and lovingly show them the error of their ways in this particular way? What if he invites them over to dinner, takes care of their pets while they're away? Show up for work every morning ten minutes ahead of time and stay 30 minutes late. What then? Don't you think somewhere along the line, even if it was only just to humor him, they'd give his big idea a shot. OF COURSE, THEY WOULD. WHY?

Because they want to win, too. Egos vanish when there's a shared vision.

I say that very deliberately because, 15 years ago, I was that young kid. Except I wasn't so young. My greatest mistake in ministry was believing that because I was a second career pastor, I knew more about doing my job than I really did.

But you see, I was smart. I learn complex systems and thoughts rather easily. So, I leaned theology. Could twist and turn it like one of those speed cuber's turns a Rubik's Cube. That is to say looking back, I sure sounded like I knew something when, in actuality, I was blind.

And I did, I do, I think about Christianity a lot. Ask my kids, sometimes it's hard for them to talk to me about Carmen Santiago without having me somehow turn the conversation to Christianity.

But what I've come to believe is that knowing a thing and doing a thing, well, they're two entirely different things. And, if you're going to have an impact in this world for Jesus, then it can't be just knowing Him. Because, if you know Him, then you'd also know there's things we the Church should be doing.

And they're not tough things. Not when you really know Jesus, they're not. But, if all you know about Jesus is what other people tell you about what they know about Him or what is KNOWN about Him by people of faith, even if they're pastors, you probably don't know Jesus. Heck, you may think about Jesus all the time and YET STILL NOT KNOW HIM. And I say that very gently. Because, as the old saying goes, it takes one to know one. I may have known theology, but I didn't know the WORD and thus, I didn't really know Jesus.

There is faith in doctrine. There is faith in Jesus Christ. These are two different things. Now, I'm not making this a salvation claim. Meaning, if you find yourself in the first category and feel like now you're eternal salvation is at risk, relax. It's not. How do I know that? It isn't logic, it's Biblical.

In the Gospel of Luke, a group of lepers approaches Jesus. They BEG him to heal them. Jesus says, go, show yourself to your priests. Priests, back then, were required to clear you as having been healed from a skin disease like leprosy. As they were going, the ten lepers say that they'd been healed.

You know what? Nine of them kept on going. Back to their homes, back to their lives. Who could blame them? Life often gives us more than one good option. They were healed, after all. People who believe in Jesus, they're saved. Let's not worry about them or berate them any longer. IT's not so important that we find them, they're good.

It's the others. The other lepers. Because you see, one of those ten lepers, well, he came back. He came back because he wanted to know more. The healing sparked within him an awareness – there was a power in this world that was heretofore unknown to him. And not only was there power, it was power directed toward healing other people.

For a tender-hearted person, there is no better news in the world. Tell someone with a big heart that someone they know has been cured of cancer and they rejoice, even if they're still facing it actively. I know it can happen; I've seen Christians do it.

So, this one leper comes back. And, get this. He wasn't one of the insiders. Not one of the communities. An outsider. There's a whole sermon there for another day.

Why do I tell you all this? I want you back. If you've put your faith on cruise control because you think you know enough, come back. If you've never felt like you've really known Jesus Christ, like you've known about Him, but not Him, come back. If you've always been confused and feel like you'll never figure out what it is we believe, come back.

Because there's work to do. There is a sea of lepers out there needing healing. And we who are the body of Christ are the ones who do it. That's what we do. Because, as much as those smart people want to make faith about doctrine, it's not. It's about Jesus and his ways are to heal and send out in His name to do likewise. "As the Father sends me, so I send you,"

So come back. Not to feel good about yourselves, not because the faith is way to help you live your best life now or even to feel superior to others. Come back for the right reason.

And the right, the ONLY reason to come back is easy. In fact, it's so easy Jesus says take my yoke, it's burden is easy, light. But come back, and let's all put our backs into this thing and see where we are in six months.

"If I could, would 'a". Learned that little expression way back when I was 18 and selling cars. It was a negotiating tactic. Make the customer articulate precisely what it is that's preventing them from signing on the bottom line, so to speak. "Well, the payment is too high." "Mr. So-and-So, if I could get your payment exactly where you want it to be, would you buy this car today?" "Well, I really wanted a red one." "Mr. So-and-so, if I could get you a red car at exactly the payment you want, would you buy that car today?" "Well, I need to make sure my wife would like it." "Mr. SO-and-So, if I could let you drive that red car with payments exactly where you like them to be home and show your wife AND she loves it, would you buy that car today?" Man thinks.

Here, of course, the purchaser assumes that he's layered in too many demands, it just can't be done. But it's a risky strategy to employ if you don't really want to buy a car.

Why? Because what if the car salesperson meets every one to a T?

Well, then you're left with but three choices at that point, only two of which are ethical if you're honest about it. Because you could at that point, of course, create another objection, one that you know NO ONE could make happen but only at the cost of not keeping your word, which is dishonest, which is unethical.

No, your two ethical choices are simple.

You either speak the truth, "I'm really sorry I wasted your time, I never really had any intent of buying the car." Or you sign the papers, get the keys dropped in your hand and you can count on enjoying that new car smell for a little bit.

So, let's try this.

If I could fashion a Christianity that you totally understood at a level that provided you comfort and confidence, would you come back and really be a part of a church?

If I could fashion a faith in which you knew that, as long as you did one thing, you were guaranteed salvation. And that one thing was really, really easy. Just believe Jesus Christ is Lord and you're in. Would you come back and participate if that were the case?

If I could fashion Cook's Memorial Presbyterian Church into being the kind of place where you felt like everyone heartbeat with the same accord. A place where the love was so palpable you immediately recognized it was different from other places, would you come back and participate?

Well, unfortunately, I can't.

But HE CAN! Let's let Him.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.