

Chapter One

FAITH IN CRISIS

The Need For Re-examination

We live in a time of great change.

Our individual lives are often in great flux. Many people find themselves changing jobs, moving from one place to another, often from one profession to another. Even the nuclear family is unstable. The divorce rate is astounding—in 1990, almost half that of new marriages. Family ties no longer have the strength of former times.

This great instability is reflected in our society. The old patterns are breaking down, and great political and social change is taking place. On the one hand, communism is rapidly dissolving in the face of growing economic and social pressure. On the other hand, democratic societies face a myriad of seemingly overwhelming problems. There is an onslaught of violent crime, growing drug problems, increasing homelessness, spiraling environmental contamination, unrest in our inner cities, and epidemics of ‘modern’ diseases—most notably AIDS and cancer.

The depths of these problems is difficult to comprehend. In the United States alone, up to 3 million people are homeless on any given night. Unemployment among certain segments of our population is 25%. In May of 1992 our major cities erupted once again in violent response to social conditions. Sparked by the decision in the Rodney King case, the breadth and violence of the rioting and looting which took place in the next few days stunned the nation and the world.

The situation with AIDS is just as sobering. What we are seeing now is just the tip of the iceberg, and already by the end of 1990, in major US cities, AIDS was the main cause of death for women between the ages of 20 and 40. There are estimates of 10 to 20 million people infected with HIV, the precursor to AIDS, world wide.

These are just samples of the great problems facing our society today. We could go on reciting them for volumes. These problems, in and of themselves, force dramatic changes within the lives of individuals, and society as a whole. And that change necessitates further changes.

CHANGE WITHIN CHRISTIANITY

Churches find themselves caught in the middle of this great whirlwind of change. Uncertain how to react to the drastic modifications in needs and attitudes of their

members, they themselves must respond to the issues at hand. This internal conflict is vividly expressed by L. Howard in his article in the July 15, 1991 issue of *Christianity & Crisis*. He had been present at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Baltimore when it voted on the report of its committee on human sexuality, which urged greater acceptance of homosexuals by the Church:

What is perhaps most clear in Baltimore was that the crisis in human sexuality in our society and our churches is not limited. As the pastoral letter says, "We are being torn apart by issues of teenage sexuality and practice, sexual violence, clergy sexual misconduct, new reproductive technologies, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and the sexual needs of gay and lesbian persons, the disabled, and older adults."

The report may not have been received officially. But the Presbyterian Church is forever changed by the debate it engendered.

Out of necessity, there is great change within most denominations. Views are changing regarding birth control, homosexuality, divorce and a myriad of other social and religious issues.

In response to all of this personal, social and religious upheaval, many people have found themselves re-evaluating their own faith. Some have come to reject the concept of a deity outright. Others now have serious doubts about some of the doctrines of their religion.

CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF JESUS

At the core of those doctrines is the identity of Jesus Christ. For most Protestant denominations, Jesus is part of the Trinity and might be defined as God's manifestation or revelation of Himself in human form. Catholics also accept the Trinity and bestow upon Mary the title of the 'Mother of God,' thus asserting that Jesus is, for them, truly man and truly God.

Some of the more recently formed denominations have quite a different view. For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses do not accept the Trinity and see Jesus as the ransom sacrifice to redeem humanity, not God Himself. And Unitarians generally see Jesus as a great teacher and example, but fully human and God's son only in the same sense that all humans are His children.

On the scholarly front, there has long been a wide range of understandings of Jesus. He has been seen as an Essene scholar, a member of a radical Jewish political movement, a witty rabbi, and many other things. For years a number of scholars have worked to discern the historical figure of Jesus Christ from the background of the scriptural narrations and whatever other sources they could find. That interest continues today, as is witnessed by the recent paper back reprinting of Albert Schweitzer's book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and the new release of John Crossan (*The Historical Jesus*, Harper Collins, 1991).

For some scholars, like John Bowden, the search has ended in serious questioning and skepticism. For others the skepticism goes farther. As an example, G. A. Wells poses the

following question about Jesus: “Can we really be sure that a person described in these terms ever had any earthly existence?” His answer is summed up by the last thought in his book: “is it not time to look elsewhere than in the Scriptures for guidance in our living, and to stop basing our decisions and choices on ancient fantasies?” (*Who Was Jesus?* G. A. Wells, Open Court Publishing, La Salle, IL, 1989.)

The popular press also reflects a reassessment of our moral and religious values. Such reassessment is natural given the relatively recent surfacing of television evangelist scandals, the fresh memory of the Jonestown horror, and the realization that even Hitler used the banner of Christianity to try to help justify the abomination of genocide.

With all these factors, it seems almost imperative that thinking people re-examine their own beliefs. Thus, the writing of this book.

Such reassessment is essentially a personal task. Within this examination, a great deal can be learned from the excellent work done by many scholars. I have referred to such work often in the following pages. But the essence of faith is very personal. No one else can tell you exactly what your personal relationship should be with your Creator. You must find that for yourself. And no one else can tell you who Jesus is for you. This is a totally personal issue, between you and God.

Christianity is a religion of great diversity. The brief inventory of different denominational views of Jesus given above and a quick perusal of the church listings in any phone book leaves no doubt of that fact. The variability in beliefs and practices is matched only by the variability of human beings.

It is not the intention of this book to address the beliefs of any specific denomination. Nor is it the intent to attack any of them, nor Christianity as a whole.

Rather, in this first portion of the book, I hope to give you some insight into certain Christian beliefs in relation to the teachings of Christ as they are recorded in the scriptures. Later in the book I hope to introduce some new information that you may find useful in the assessment of your own beliefs.

My hope in doing this is that you will find your own personal way to go about following the most important commandment for all humanity, the commandment which Jesus himself called the Great Commandment:

*You shall worship God with all your heart, and all your soul,
and all your mind and all your strength.*

[Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27]