

Karen Hutton from Pleasantville, California, writes:

*Is there any purpose in staying a member of a traditional Christian Church if you no longer believe the things the church regards as its core beliefs? Why have you stayed with your church, given your criticisms of many of the basic aspects of Christianity?*

Dear Karen,

Before answering that question, we need to identify what it is you are calling "core beliefs" or the "basic aspects of Christianity." I believe that what most people call orthodoxy in religious beliefs is little more than the imposed authority of some part of the Christian faith. The claim to be orthodox in one's belief is not to acknowledge a point of view that is true, but only the point of view that has prevailed. My studies lead me to believe that there never was a single consistent set of Christian beliefs. There were many Christianities from the dawn of Christianity itself. Various groups have tried to define true Christianity, but when they do they almost always define their own institutional, authoritarian system.

Some people, for example, assert that the historic creeds defined primitive Christianity. The Apostles' Creed, however, began as a series of baptismal formulas in local churches in the third century and these formulas differed widely until they evolved into a single form somewhere between 250 and 290 CE. I doubt if the actual apostles would have recognized much of it.

The Nicene Creed, adopted at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, was designed primarily to close the loopholes in the Apostles' Creed. (Henry: I would also add that its purpose was primarily to bring unity to the Roman Empire.) The Athanasian Creed, a product of the late fourth century, was designed to close loopholes in the Nicene Creed. The earliest creed of the Church was only three words, Jesus is

Messiah. The word "messiah" meant a variety of things to the Jews, so even the three-word creed had wide flexibility.

Others assert that believing in the Virgin Birth is a "core doctrine" of Christianity, but scholars can now demonstrate quite conclusively that both Paul and Mark seem never to have heard of it; and John, who was among the last writers in the New Testament, appears to have specifically rejected it since he refers to Jesus on two occasions as the "son of Joseph."

Still others suggest that the physical resurrection of Jesus is the essential core belief of Christianity, but I think I can demonstrate that Paul did not believe the resurrection was physical, and neither did Mark. Matthew is ambivalent. It is Luke and John, the last two gospels to be written, that interpret the resurrection as a physical resuscitation of a deceased body. So determining what the "core beliefs" of Christianity are is not as easy as people seem to think. Some, usually in evangelical or in the conservative Catholic traditions, argue that doctrines like the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Trinity set the boundaries around essential Christianity, but once again these doctrines were not fully developed until the third and fourth centuries and it would be difficult to demonstrate that either Paul or Mark were Trinitarians.

My point is that Christianity has always been a movement and that most churches have simply frozen Christianity at fairly primitive levels. It is not to oppose basic Christianity that is the agenda of Christian scholars; it is to seek truth through the Christian story or through the Christian lens. That is what keeps me active in church life. Christianity is not static or doctrinal. It is a pathway we walk into the mystery of God. I grant that it is easier to walk the Christ path in some churches than in others, but true Christianity is always evolving into what it can be; its purpose is not to protect what it has been. So I would suggest

that for you to see your role in your church to be that of a change agent, you are in fact being a true worshiper of Christ.

I hope this helps. I think institutional Christianity needs people like you and me in it.

- John Shelby Spong