

Honest and Dishonest Faith

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by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

What is the difference between 'honest' and 'dishonest' faith?

Many today tell us that all faith is dishonest. According to this perspective, faith in the supernatural is dishonest because it is based on claims that cannot be proven. For example, millions of Christians just recently celebrated Easter – the day on which, according to the New Testament, Jesus Christ literally rose from the dead. Can a person honestly believe in such an event?

To answer this question, we must first look in the mirror. Before asking if we can honestly believe in the resurrection, we should first ask ourselves what it means to believe honestly in anything. The answer is more complicated than we might expect.

On one hand, there are some things about which we can remain relatively objective. $2 + 2 = 4$. Water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen. Both of these facts arouse little debate. Neither arouses any significant reaction in everyday experience.

Yet when it comes to facts that have the power to change us, the matter is quite different. Some facts, if true, make demands upon us. For example, take the question, "Is there a God who created all things?" If so, this fact has consequences for all sorts of life-changing questions: "What is freedom?" "What makes an action moral?" "Are all religions equal?"

When it comes to these sorts of facts, nobody is neutral. Our willingness to believe such facts will not be determined simply by our *reason*, but also by our *affections*. Put another way, what we believe to be *true* will be closely connected to what we believe to be *good*.

As a pastor, I have found it interesting to note how a person's belief about whether there *is* a God is not infrequently tied to whether that person *wants* to believe in God. If you have had positive experiences of religion or religious people, you will be more inclined to think belief in God is good. If experience has taught you dark lessons about your own capacity for selfishness, you will find hope in the message that there is a Savior. On the other hand, if you have had bad experiences of religion and think of yourself as a generally decent and tolerant person, you will tend to see religion as less helpful – and potentially even harmful. If you think you are managing things pretty well on your own, why would you *want* to surrender your life to God?

Because nobody is purely objective, honesty is a challenge both for believers and non-believers.

The question of Easter, then, is not simply whether a person can honestly *believe* in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The question is also whether a person can honestly *deny* it. Christianity claims that the resurrection of Jesus Christ changes every thread of human history forever. For some, this is the greatest news imaginable. For others, it is the darkest hoax ever perpetrated. But nobody can honestly face this question without feeling some attraction or repulsion. Our response to the *evidence* of the Gospels will always be colored by our *prejudice* for or against the resurrection.

Is there anything we can do? In his book, *Encounters with Jesus*, Timothy Keller suggests a way forward: "Few people can entertain an invitation to give up their freedom without some prejudice against it. You're afraid of the claims of Christianity being true – that's fine. If we're honest, we all are. You'll never be fair-minded with the evidence if you don't acknowledge that you can't be perfectly fair-minded... So, to take seriously at least the possibility that it is true, why not consider praying? Why not say, "God, I don't know if you're there but I do know what prejudice is like, and I'm willing to be suspicious of it. Therefore, if you are there and if I am prejudiced, help me get through it." Break the ice with Jesus—talk to him. No one has to know you are doing it. If you're not willing to do that, I suggest that you're not willing to own the prejudice that we all start with."

All people have religious prejudice. Honest faith acknowledges and seeks to overcome it. Do you?

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