

## **Cautionary Doubt Preferable to Blind Faith in Christianity**

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Each year a number of conscientious believers are prepared for the Protestant Christian ministry. They are usually thoughtful, caring, intelligent young students who have special training in theology, counseling, and group leadership. It may be that the same kind of candidates are educated as Roman Catholic priests but I do not have current knowledge on how Catholic priests are trained so I will address my comments mainly to the development of Protestant clergy.

Frequently Protestant candidates in-training are filled with enthusiasm, love of God and are motivated towards the betterment of humankind. But it is a sad fact that some, after a few years, begin to doubt whether or not they have chosen the correct career path. Some will doubt their own ability to bring positive changes in church membership or in the growth of Christian devotion and in the strong beliefs they originally possessed earlier in their training.

Those clergy who are reflective and are self-analytical may wonder about their own effectiveness in bringing the Christian gospel to their congregants with sufficient clarity and enthusiasm. Others, perhaps not so self-critical, may begin to question the effectiveness of the Christian message in changing the minds and actions of their parishioners. They may think that what they are preaching has not made a sufficient difference in the lives of those to whom they preach. Still others may begin to have doubts about theological concepts that they felt enthusiastic and clear about in their earlier years of training.

In my own religious journey of over 40 years of association with Protestant faith, I have come to believe that doubt is not such a bad approach in clarifying Christian thought. At least, when compared to blind faith or acceptance of whatever one was told to believe in early childhood some cautionary doubt and serious questioning may be an improvement.

Many dedicated Christians whom we have come to respect were filled with doubts from time to time. Even in the life of Jesus, his words taken from the scriptures express his inner doubts at the time of his crucifixion. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mother Teresa, in her book of letters, expressed serious doubts, at times even wondering whether or not God exists. Saint Thomas, the Apostle and John the Baptist, similarly wrestled with doubts.

These were not signs of weakness but signs of them using their reflective and rational faculties. They were intelligent people trying to comprehend Christian faith and make it meaningful to others.

In some Protestant sects, Google statistics on clergy leaving their professions are surprising. In North America approximately 1600 clergy leave the ministry each year. Although there are new churches built annually, there are approximately 9000 churches predicted to close within the next ten years.

Many conscientious clergy work from 55 to 70 hours per week and some are discouraged by persistent theological disagreements among their parishioners. Many clergy who remain within their religious ministry do so because they recognize that as they age, it may be difficult to take up new occupations.

We presently live in more complex times than was the case nearly a century ago. We now live among neighbours and friends from a broader section of religious backgrounds. Changes in medicine provide better expectations for longer life. For example, there are now cures for certain types of cancer such as Hodgkin's lymphoma, diabetes, hip fractures and drug and surgical treatment for heart and lung problems. These changes allow for more decisions regarding end of life issues. In some health problems ethically religious decisions and prayers are not so readily chosen as was the case years ago.

I personally know three former Protestant ministers, whom I count as my friends, who have left the ministry. Each of them is intelligent, caring and thoughtful. They are all excellent communicators and ethical people who care about making the world a better place for everyone. All have been successful in the work they have taken on and each is a pleasure to have as an acquaintance and a friend.

I write this column today, not as a criticism of Protestant faith but rather as a recognition that being an effective clergy in modern times is a challenging calling.