

Folk Christianity and Doctrine

Folk Christianity is a form of religion according to Roger Olson¹ that “thrives on clichés and slogans that fit on bumper stickers and resists their critical examination even by the litmus test of Scripture. It revolves around cute or comforting sayings drawn from choruses, church marquees, and devotional books. It elevates to canonical status fascinating spiritual stories passed around orally or on the internet. Above all it resists any attempt to subject these to critical scrutiny.”

Folk Christianity has little scholarly activity, preferring to care more about feelings and experiences, rather than doctrine or critical reflection on beliefs. Theology is mostly an anathema to folk Christianity, with passive intake of religious understanding coming from conferences, sermons, audio teaching and books.

Folk Christianity, at one level or another, exists in the churches in Australia and the U.S. Although a person may not realise that they are operating in a level of folk Christianity, there are a number of tell-tale signs:

- (A) Off-hand retorts, expressions and comments that are unscriptural.
- (B) A lack of the desire to have sound doctrine.

Some off-hand comments that folk Christianity expresses will be quite familiar. You may even use them yourself. Here are some of them:

1. “Cleanliness is next to godliness.”
2. “The Lord works in mysterious ways.”
3. “God helps those who help themselves.”
4. “A chapter a day keeps the devil away.”
5. “The Bible has all the answers.”
6. “Jesus is the answer.”
7. “God can do anything.”
8. “God is always in Control.”
9. “Everything is God’s will.”

Folk Christianity also uses some misquoted scriptures and religious phrases like:

1. Spare the rod, spoil the child
2. Money is the root of all evil
3. Pride goes before a fall
4. This, too, shall pass
5. The Three Wisemen
6. The Seven Deadly Sins

There is of course the very opposite to folk Christianity where a person is totally focussed on doctrine so that their spiritual life is extremely religious and legalistic. Similar to this pole are those who see scripture as the most important thing that can be spoken and quote passages in nearly every breath.

You can see from the above lists that folk Christianity has seeped into modern-day Christianity. This should be obvious because of the many times you’ve heard the listed phrases used by well-meaning people. The expressions have even found their way into the national culture due mainly to the exit from the church of the children of Christians over the past 50 years.

The origin of today’s form of folk Christianity has been attributed to the Jesus People Movement of the

1 – Roger E. Olson (2007) “Questions to All Your Answers”, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan

1960s and 1970s. These hippy generation saints were anti-establishment, anti-tradition and anti-intellectualism (although not anti education). The Jesus People was a populist Christian movement – much like the Quakers and Puritans – who wanted to see the elimination of old irrelevant religious habits and the introduction of relevant piety. Genuine Christianity was their goal, but it included some cultural baggage such as democracy and anti-intelligentsia.

“But the Jesus People movement was the quintessential folk religious phenomenon. It thrived on passion and ardor to the exclusion of critical thinking. It was a wonderful and heady swell of spiritual passion, but it left many of us longing for something more solid than inward movings of the Holy Spirit...However, the intensely subjective spirituality of the Jesus People movement seeped into the mainstream of American evangelical life...People who never heard of the Jesus People movement are still under its influence; churches that once despised the shoeless, long-haired, guitar-playing Jesus People as fanatics now sing their songs (“I Wish We’d All Been Ready”), repeat their clichés (“There’s no trip like Jesus!”), and, like them, denigrate denominations and theology (“religious head trip”).”²

The reason for examining folk Christianity is to allow you to check ‘what makes you tick’ as a spiritual person. You may have been Baptised in the Holy Spirit and embraced the importance of The Kingdom, but the question remains, “Have you divested yourself of all forms of religion?” Are you still hanging on to teachings that you think are important but are irrelevant in the Kingdom? Are you still operating and speaking out of past error?

While being beneficial in being a correction for dead orthodoxy, formalism, creedalism and denominationalism, folk Christianity has had its down-side. For instance, it avoids doctrine and an intelligent expression of faith, while focussing on feelings as the only foundation of faith. ‘Pew-warming’ which we object too, could rightly be traced back to the folk Christianity that came out of the Jesus People.

We promote the ministry of all believers, but we want to be passive in the way we imbibe doctrine (what we believe). We have a tendency to accept whatever we are told, but we are strong on testing prophecy. It reminds me of Paul’s statement to Timothy:

2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NIV) – *For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

Today, amongst the Charismatic and Pentecostal saints there is a strong focus on the things of the Spirit, but often very little interest in sound doctrine or a scholarly pursuit of truth. This could be a legacy traceable back to the Jesus People movement which has produced the church leaders, teachers and bible college lecturers of today.

Paul told both Timothy and Titus to adhere to sound doctrine³ and the Roman saints to stick to the doctrines that he taught.⁴ Peter admonished the saints to be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope they have.⁵ This doesn’t sound like living on feelings as folk Christianity can do.

Jesus spent 3½ years teaching the people of his region the things of the Kingdom and he spent even more time and effort teaching (discipling) his 12 friends. Remember, ‘teaching’ is the simple term for ‘doctrine’.

In the towns and cities he visited, Paul went into the synagogue and boldly spoke about the things of the

2 – Roger E. Olson (2007) “Questions to All Your Answers”, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan p:12

3 – Titus 2:1; 1 Timothy 1:10

4 – Romans 16:17

5 – 1 Peter 3:15

Kingdom of God, reasoning⁶ and persuading his listeners.⁷ He reasoned daily in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus for two years, so that all the people who lived in Asia heard about the Lord Jesus.⁸ While on his journeys around Asia Minor and the Middle East, Paul spent much of his time teaching the saints what he called ‘traditions’ or ‘doctrine’.⁹

So, in the lives of the first believers, logical belief and doctrine partnered with their spirituality and mystical activities. Paul highlights this, emphasising that a sound belief system is the key to staying on track and refuting error.¹⁰

“Test them all.”¹¹ That was Paul’s imperative to first-century Christians. Apparently Paul wanted the Thessalonians to include critical thinking in their arsenal of weapons of spiritual warfare. How odd that sounds today — critical thinking as a weapon of spiritual warfare. But why not? It’s biblical.”¹²

Today, we do well to know what we believe, and know that it is the truth. If not the truth, it must be discarded.

DO NOT despise sound doctrine. However, steer clear of theology which is based entirely on mental processes – it kills the Spirit, and leads to legalism and lukewarmness.

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6 – i.e. using intelligent, logical thinking

7 – Acts 19:8

8 – Acts 19:9-10

9 – i Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15

10 – Titus 1:9

11 – 1 Thessalonians 5:21

12 – Roger E. Olson (2007) “Questions to All Your Answers”, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan p:12