

BURNING THE BULL

We have been in the post-modern era. One characteristic of this period is toleration and openness to various perspectives, which includes a discomfort for absolute and non-negotiable ideology.

The down side to such inclusion breeds vague and lukewarm principles and theology; nevertheless, most scholars believe post-modernism is fading.

More and more, cultures are experiencing polarization as sides become entrenched with rigid and unmovable positions.

It is one thing to have strong values and being committed to a ideals that advance justice and grace. It is quite another matter to retreat in fear to fundamentalism, bigotry and draconian judgment.

It is noble to stand up for and defend one's belief,.....if that "asserted" position is valid,..... if it is true. And, there lies the rub: it can be hard to know what is true / what is worth proclaiming and fighting for. Mass media throws out so many "official" declarations by political leaders and other so called experts, that finding the truth can be a challenge. Debates and confusion has become the norm, even so differences of opinion / Political and theological debates are not new.

Nearly 3,000 years ago, the prophet Elijah took an assertive and aggressive stance for the truth he believed in.

During this period, between 873 and 851 BCE, Monotheism was not set in the Hebrew theology. The notion that Yahweh was the one and only God was still in formation.

Henotheism was the norm. Henotheism fits into post-modern thinking. Henotheism focuses on one God, without denying the existence of other Gods. Generally, at that point in time, the Hebrews believed that Yahweh was **the** one God for the Hebrews, and others had their own gods, too.

That attitude appears to be tolerant and accepting, yet that down side is that invites religious marketing and shopping around, and that is what was happening.

The priest of Baal worship were proselytizing the Hebrews.
The prophet Elijah refers to them as prophets.

Elijah was a strong defender of monotheism. He was confident and unmoveable in his theology,..... and he was very concerned, even outraged by the growing popularity and rise of Baal admirers in his domain. Many Hebrews were claiming Yahweh as their God, while they joined in the Baal festivities.

Baal was a fertility cult.

It was a religion of self indulgences and promiscuity, and I'm sure they had extreme parties, too, and it was entertaining.

It was a feel good religion with a great sense of fellowship / of community, and no doubt potlucks were very popular, too,... albeit it with an added twist. Baal was entertaining.

People enjoyed being a part of the Baal family of faith, and they believed they had the security of Yahweh to fall back on, just in case.

However, Elijah cogently tells them that they can NOT have it both ways / that they have to pick either the make-believe god or the One true God to worship.

To emphasize his point, to expose the Baal myth and rid the land of the Baal proselytizers, he challenges the Baal leaders to a test.

This test is a fascinating story.

The challenge consisted of each side killing and slicing up a bull, and placing the meat on top of wood to be burned. Each side would call upon their god to light the fire. No human could set the wood on fire.

The side that had well done steak for supper would prove which god was real and which one was a myth.

The Baal group won the coin toss and went first.

They prepared the bull and arranged the wood under it, and then chanted and called out to Baal to send fire. They cried out to Baal from morning to noon, yet nothing happened. The bull meat was still raw. Feeling pretty confident, even cocky, Elijah taunts them, saying, "Maybe you should cry out louder? Maybe your god is meditating or perhaps your god has wandered away on a long journey,..... or maybe Baal is simply sound asleep. You better make more noise."

So,..... the Baal leaders started screaming for Baal to light the Barbeque. They even dared Baal to come by mutilating themselves.

The blood covered, shrieking Baal prophets finally surrendered.

Their time was up, and nothing,.....nothing happened.

Their religion failed the test.

It was Elijah's turn.

Meticulously, Elijah built a symbolic altar, which included 12 stones representing the 12 tribes from Jacob.

He arranged the wood and place the bull meat on top.

Then,..... just for fun AND for effect,..... he told his helpers to fill four jars of water and pour the water all over the wood and meat.

They did just that.

But, Elijah was just getting started. He told them to do it again,..... and then a third time.

The meat, the wood was drenched and puddles of water surrounded the altar.

Then it was the moment for truth to be revealed.

Elijah petition Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. As a humble servant, Elijah asked Yahweh to show everyone that Yahweh was the ONE and only true God.

Suddenly, fire fell upon the meat and the wood,..... and they were consumed in flames,.....and so were the stones... and the soaked earth until the puddles of water disappeared.

The match was over, but Baal didn't lose and Yahweh didn't win,..... because Baal never existed and God has nothing to prove.

What happened was Myth was exposed and truth was revealed.

The people fell to the ground and proclaimed that Yahweh was the one and only God. Elijah's evangelistic exercise worked.

We often regard those who try to persuade people to believe in God as evangelists, and part of that persuasion could include exposing myths. So, in a way, this burning the bull test was like a revival meeting. After all, people's convictions had changed, and they had their heads down and were praising God.

While their faces were to the ground, the Baal leaders tried to sneak away,..... but Elijah ordered that they be captured.

It's a pity that this episode didn't end here, but it doesn't.

Elijah got a bit carried away in his zeal,.... and had all the Baal leaders executed.

Prudently destroying a myth is enough.

Attacking and destroying those that believed the myth is simply "Bad Evangelism."

In many circles, Evangelism has acquired a negative reputation.

That's unfortunate, because originally, from the Greek, an Evangelist was someone who proclaimed the good news of God's mercy and grace. They introduced the truth about God and God's love,... and that's powerful. Responding to that reality can set hearts on fire.

Yet,...good intentions can turn ugly.....if the focus on the core, simple message of Good News is neglected.

The shift / the motivation to conversion and control mutates into crusades, inquisitions, witch-hunt's, militant fundamentalism... and all possess bad theology.

This past week, on the CBC radio show "Q", John S. Dickerson was interviewed. He's an "evangelical" pastor at an Arizona church. He lamented the tarnished image of *evangelical*, ...and admitted that evangelicals got off track back in the early 1980s when it turned to trying to control people through political power. Jerry Farwell's moral majority was one of the first incursions into grabbing political influence.

I think Dickerson's is partly correct, yet there is more to what caused the evangelical derailment,..... and that derailment has affected most of the cars of the Christianity train of thinking.

When Christianity turned to selling itself, instead of sharing the truth of God, things got out of whack.

Sales and marketing entered in. Theology was altered to be more appealing / more attractive,.....even easier.

Subsequently, myths were twisted into Biblical lessons,.... and the people loved it.

Even Christian groups competed against each other, using flavour enhanced theology as an enticement.

One example, is the theology of prosperity. Those who sell that flavour don't call it that, but they advertise Christianity as a means to financial success, asserting that God will bless you monetarily for your faith declarations.

Obviously, that theology is consumed by those who seek affluence, and it is affirmed by those who have been financially successful.

Yet, it is still bad theology.

There are many other examples of bad theology--some are embellishments with lots of promises..... and some are simplified for easy acceptance. Some include the disclaimer: "If you only have enough faith, God will do it for you."

So, what IS bad theology.

Bad theology is basically a theology that is either destructive, which is counter to God's grace and love..... or..... it plain and simply doesn't work when tested.

In other words, it is all raw bull.

Some common tests are struggling with calamities,.... disappointments,.. death cancer,..... divorce..... sexuality issues.....violence and hate, scientific realities..... and so on.

If your theology flounders during such testing,..... then you've consumed some raw and tainted "bull".

Moreover, those searching and looking for truth,..... tend to identify bad theology before "believers" do. They see the myths.

One of today's passage's, which we didn't read, is Galatians 1:1-12. It's printed in your bulletin.

In that text, Paul ridicules those who have perverted / altered the Gospel message.

Paul suggests that the Gospel was changed to make it more appealing, perhaps even more "entertaining".

In verse 10 he emphasizes that he is NOT out to please people or get their approval,..... and this declaration is worth noting.

At a pastor's gathering, two years ago, all the pastors were asked, "How do you know if you're doing a good job preaching." The overall response was a bit troubling, because most said, "If people like or appreciate what I say."

That measure/test could be perfectly fine..... yet it could also be indicative of a culture of entertainment.

And,..... we are NOT in the feel good, entertainment business.

As I said, Bad theology fails when tested, and therefore it is more than likely untrue,.....or at least containing myths.

Elijah message was tested and prevailed.

The Centurion, in the Luke passage, had a theology of love and compassion, which included the belief that Jesus had the power to heal. And, other's testified to his goodness. Moreover, his truth included a faith that Jesus need not even be present to bring healing,..... and his theology / his truth was valid. It worked.

Paul constantly shared his faith stories. His theology was based on the Good News and his real life tried and tested experiences of living with that faith and power of the Holy Spirit. It was real. It was Paul's truth/ it was valid.

Truth is dynamic. Truth is alive,.... and even growing, and truth arises from what is real / what is valid / what works.

The seed of our own truth rises from the Evangelists implanted message: God is merciful, loving, gracious and just, and Christ presents all that.

We enter our journey of truth by joining into the Good News / by living and testing the message / by choosing to follow Christ,... with the help of God's Spirit.

As followers of Christ we are not buying insurance, nor are we buying into or selling an enticing product.

Our true theology is what we experience / what is true,.....and it doesn't need to be polished, embellished or enhanced.

If we don't hold tight and reveal the truth, then we are left with..... rotting bull and dry wood.

Moreover, if your theology is working, honestly working,.... then that is very telling and transformative.

The truth is powerful, and it lives and thrives in openness,.....so let us share our "true" story / our "true" journey with God, out in the open air.

Whatever your story is, share it.

Maybe you attend church merely because you're attracted to the sense of community ... or because you grew up in a church and it's familiar.

If that's your truth, then tell it..... because.....amazingly, you keep coming back,.....and there sure are more enticing forms of community and entertainment out there.

Something more is going on....., and your story may include that search, too.

Your truth may be full of doubt and disappointments,.....yet something / Someone is still holding on to you.....and you're still holding on,..... and that truth is powerful.

Doubt is fine. Doubt got Thomas a personal Jesus visitation,...with albeit with some constructive criticism,..... and that experience is great, too,..... because it's true,..... and revealing.
Doubt is inviting.

If you're like me, you may be wondering why God has chosen to use you. Surely, God could have been more particular.
Yet,..... that truth is powerful,..... It says in spite of a flawed person,..... there is God's love and grace at work.

Test your theology. Risk asking bold questions.
And,..... share your story / your truth.
Truth thrives out in the open.

The world desperately needs truth,..... and so do each of us.