

What I Have Come to

Believe



REV. ARTHUR H. HOLT

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Introduction

One of my earliest theologically meaningful memories was Christmas Eve 1954 when I was just four years old. I remember it so well because that was when my grandfather Papa Holt died.

I can remember going outside and looking up into the clear blue sky, wondering if Papa and Santa Claus were on a collision course. My father told me that “God called Papa home.” I wanted to know why Papa answered the phone call!

My sister—three years older—laughed at my question as she explained that when God calls, you have to answer.

“Not me! I’m just going to keep on walking away from God,” I protested, remembering how I just walked away from Mom or Dad when I didn’t want to come when they called.

Thus began my spiritual pilgrimage as I tried to understand more about this God who had just called Papa home. I don’t think I had thought very much about God before that day.

Just as the death of one grandfather had its impact on my young life, so did the life of the other grandfather. Granddaddy Cannon was one of those primary influences upon my life in so many ways. He had become fully disabled because of bipolar disorder by the time I was born, and since there was a general awareness that this illness runs in families, my mother kept close watch on my sister and me as we grew up. But I also learned to watch out for myself, aware that I could be next.

But there was another side to Granddaddy. Having a joke for every occasion, Granddaddy had been a popular after-dinner speaker in his younger days, and we were always laughing at something when we were together. He was a leader in our church, a popular Sunday school teacher, and a dedicated Christian. His death when I was 11 left an emptiness I still feel to this day.

One Sunday afternoon when I was about five or six, Granddaddy greeted me at his front door by saying, “There’s my little preacher.”

He probably couldn't tell it, but that really made me mad! Didn't he know that I was going to be the next Mickey Mantle? Me, a preacher like two of Granddaddy's sons? No way! Every other kid grew up wondering if they were going to be a "rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief," but I always had another option—preacher—that most of them did not. This was one of the decisions in life I wrestled with. But apparently Granddaddy knew one when he saw one.

I experienced a faith renewal during my freshman year of college, and I quickly switched my major from math to religion. That renewed faith caused me to want to know all I could about the Bible and the Christian faith. I knew from that time on that some form of ministry would be in my future, whether working with youth or being a pastor.

After college, after some youth work and my marriage to Penny, and after trying my hand at several secular vocations, I finally arrived at seminary—the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina—preparing myself for the United Methodist ministry. Graduating in 1979, I was ordained elder in The United Methodist Church in 1980 and appointed to churches in South Carolina until my retirement in 2012.

The title I have chosen for this collection of essays implies movement—movement from what I once believed to what I now believe. It also leaves open the door for further developments in my theology. It really has been a very meaningful journey, and it still is! I have sojourned through many of the theological camps. Beginning at a liberal Methodist Church that emphasized social action when I was a child, I migrated into a more conservative evangelical camp during my college years. I never was attracted to fundamentalism, however, probably because of the influence of my friends in the Charismatic camp. The rigidity of fundamentalism could never have coexisted with the flexibility of the Spirit! It is also true about me that I don't read directions until I have to, and so I would "wing it" first and later check with Scripture's instructions.

I migrated again during seminary, becoming a theological liberal. My drift since then has been slowly but steadily further and further to the left side of the theological spectrum.

I know I am not alone in such a pilgrimage, although some folks have journeyed in the opposite direction. You have probably also been working out your theology, or working out your salvation in fear and trembling, as the Bible states. Yours may not have been as far-flung as mine, but nevertheless you probably are not where you started. I really took the scenic route!

My childhood home was enough in itself to launch a pilgrimage because it made me conscious of how people can be very different theologically. My mom's faith was all about love, joy, and grace; my dad's religion had a lot of rules and a good bit of

fear of hell in it. Dad often said one reason he married Mom was that she was going to help him make it into heaven!

Mom had a college degree and had come into faith through Christian education at her church. Dad had managed to finish high school in just 15 years and had come to faith through an emotional commitment to Christ during a revival. But both had a deep faith in God.

Perhaps I had to journey so I could discover a way to blend those different theologies together.

My mother-in-law died in the fall of 2018 at the young age of 94. I watched her faith evolve during the 48 years I knew her from barely important to vitally important to her. She really lived it, too, delivering meals on wheels and visiting nursing homes even after she turned 90.

Soon after her death, I was thinking about this and became more aware of how much I had also changed during those same 48 years. I didn't sleep very much that night, and these essays were born from that sleepless night. I wrote them primarily for myself as a way of taking stock of my journey. Then I thought that maybe the story of my spiritual journey could be helpful to others. Perhaps it could cause others to lose a night of sleep also as they consider the state of their faith. So I began polishing my words.

Then fear hit me. I've never liked controversy and am very allergic to personal attacks! What if my thoughts cause someone's faith to waver rather than be strengthened? Not everyone benefits from such a time of reflection, especially if they feel the need to line up their own faith experience with mine. This fear has halted my willingness to broadly share my thoughts by a couple of years.

Now that I am in my 70s and aware that the men in my family don't have a very long "shelf life," I have decided to risk the rejection if it will be helpful to others, as my friends who have read it think that it will.

One person who read these essays told me that he agreed 100 percent with what I have written. But most have said, "I really liked this chapter but wasn't too keen on that one." Maybe that is the way to read my essays—like a cookbook! You won't like all of the recipes, but maybe there are a couple of good dishes here.

I especially hope to challenge some of you who have given faith the boot out of your lives, believing that it has no place in our modern scientific world. At the very least I hope to give you a new way of looking at faith. I will not be repeating the traditional explanations; I want to state what I believe in a different way, using different terminology. Sometimes repeating old formulas numbs our minds so that we don't think fresh ideas. I'll be coloring "outside the lines" a number of times, and that will be helpful to some and threatening to others.

Above all else, please remember that I do not claim to have a corner of the truth.

I might be wrong! Feel free to find a trash dumpster for these essays if you don't find them helpful (please recycle).

But what I really hope is that some other pilgrim will read my words and feel less alone than you did before reading them. You've come to these same conclusions, but you have lacked the confidence to publicly proclaim them. Maybe now you will have that confidence.

I am a pastor and don't claim to be a scholar. So this is not a dissertation—it is a pastoral letter. I will call attention to references when I can because that may help you, but don't expect a lot of footnotes. I have some ideas to share, not a position I feel I have to prove or defend.

The message from God is good news! Let's get to celebrating it.

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Chapter 1

What I Have Come to Believe about Jesus

It might not come as a shock to you that a Christian preacher would believe in Jesus. Actually, my Christology is very ordinary and orthodox, but I am going to try to say some old truths in some new ways just to make you think about your understanding of Jesus.

After a lifetime of being immersed in the study of religion, I have finally come to believe that no one will ever give us a more accurate picture of God than Jesus of Nazareth did. For me, Jesus is the mirror of God. His words and deeds, his attitudes and actions, reflect nothing less than Almighty God's likes and dislikes, God's hopes and dreams for his creation. If I want to know how God feels about something, what God thinks about something, I start with Jesus.

I know that there have been many great philosophers and teachers throughout history, and they all are very valuable. We all have to pick who our authorities in life are going to be. Some of my friends find this authority in Moses and others in Muhammad or Buddha. Still others find it in the great Greek philosophers. Jesus is that someone for me. I personally don't feel the need to look elsewhere for God.

While others cite chapter and verse in the entire Bible for reasons to justify their beliefs, I look mainly at the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But even then, I filter Jesus' words through his life and attitudes, which, to me, are even more telling than his words. Jesus could set very high standards, but then he could extend grace and mercy to those who failed to reach those standards. All of the Bible, including his own tough words, is best understood in light of his actions.

The early Christians were convinced that no one would ever mirror God here on earth more closely than Jesus did, and that is really what they were trying to tell us when they called Jesus Messiah and Son of God. They debated and fought for four centuries over Jesus' nature (divine versus human) and over the kinship between God and Jesus (the Trinity and the virgin birth). What they were arguing about was what

they believed was Jesus' unique place in their lives and why this is so. They wanted to preserve their belief in only one God and at the same time say that somehow Jesus was a part of the one God.

Maybe it was because of biology! The early church came up with the "virgin birth" as one way of expressing this close kinship. That is a tough doctrine to defend in our day. Lots of folks think they don't need it for their faith. A seminary student was being interviewed by a church before they decided to offer him a job with their youth. They finally got around to that question, "What do you believe about the virgin birth?" That student was tired and annoyed with this inquisition, and so he came up with a worthy answer: "I believe every word the Apostle Paul ever wrote on that subject!" The committee was satisfied.

None of them seemed to realize Paul never said one word about the virgin birth. In fact, if it wasn't for the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke, we would have never heard about it. But the point of that doctrine is to say something about kinship and connection. Jesus was somehow connected to God in a special biological way that allowed Jesus to be the mirror image of God.

There was another way the early church tried to connect Jesus to God. This was known as "Dynamic Monarchianism," or "Adoptionism," the belief that Jesus was not God's son at his birth but rather he became God's son by being adopted at his baptism. Or maybe it was at his resurrection. Or maybe at his ascension into heaven. Anyway, it was sometime after his birth.

Not to be outdone, the Christians connected with the youthful Apostle John believed the kinship between God and Jesus predated Jesus' birth. They believed Jesus pre-existed with God before Jesus set foot on this planet. Now, there is a concept you New Agers can get into! But again, the point John was trying to make is there is a kinship between God and Jesus. Maybe it was simple (or not-so-simple) biology. Maybe it was kinship via adoption. Perhaps this kinship has existed from the very beginning of all things—in the distant eternal past.

As I said, the early church wrestled with all this for four centuries. The leaders of the different sides actually physically fought with one another! Then six centuries later, the church split in two—Roman Catholic in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East—over the kinship between Father, Son, and Spirit. So if you have a hard time understanding it, join the club. Just know that you are in very good company. Maybe we are all trying to put into words that which cannot be verbalized. Sometime, just for fun, try reading the Nicene Creed, one of the finest tongue-tying riddles to come along since "Peter Piper." As someone said of that creed, "It is a nice-un."

When my oldest granddaughter was three years old, she came home from Sunday school to say, "Somebody with a funny name, I think it is 'Jesus,' is somehow kin to

God. I think they are cousins.” Even a three-year-old can see there is a kinship connection between God and Jesus. Maybe that is enough!

We Southerners have a very crude way of expressing it when a child looks like a parent: “That boy is the spittin’ image of his father.” That’s what the early church was trying to tell us about Jesus. He so accurately reflected God’s actions and attitudes that he is the spitting image of God. He must be God’s son!

Is Jesus unique in this kinship? Is he the only one who is God’s son? We live in a day when it is self-defeating to tell others that we are the only ones who are right and that they are all wrong. Think about how you feel when a person from another faith tradition discounts what you believe; they say that you were not baptized in the one and only correct manner or that you are not a member of the only correct church. Maybe you don’t believe that the bread and wine actually become Jesus’ flesh and blood. Too bad. You are just plain wrong! No matter how much truth the other person might have to share with you, he just lost the right to tell you anything. In the same way, people will turn you off in a heartbeat if you say Jesus is the only one who is God’s son. You need to be a better salesman than that.

I was a life insurance salesman when I was in my 20s. One of the things they taught us salesmen was to never ever criticize someone’s insurance, even if it had been purchased from a lousy company. As they said, “Don’t speak badly about anybody’s insurance because any is better than none.” By having that attitude, I got to tell our insurance company’s story to friends, not enemies. And I sold a good number of our policies. Do you hope to “sell” people on Jesus? Then use some wisdom!

One of the things my seminary professors told me was that when the New Testament writers spoke about Jesus’ uniqueness, they were speaking the language of devotion and not doctrine. It is like we might say to our spouse, “You are the only one that I could ever love!” That is a statement of personal devotion; so were the statements about Jesus from people who loved him. “He has to be the only one! Who could ever be more wonderful?” they said.

If we expect others to hear what we have to say about God, then it is only fair that we are willing to hear them also. If we want people to hear our claims about Jesus, we don’t need to turn them off by our claims of uniqueness or superiority. If they keep listening to us long enough, they will arrive at their own conclusion.

Back when I was in seminary, some door-to-door religious “salesmen” paid me a visit. I decided to invite them into my house. Their presentation was excellent, and they were very courteous. When they finished their presentation, I asked permission to make my own presentation to them. They listened intently as I told of our belief that everybody can be absolutely certain of where they are going to spend eternity because only one thing is necessary for that to be true for us, and that one thing is trust in God’s grace. When I finished my brief sermon, they openly and honestly

acknowledged that their faith community did not believe what ours did. For them, faith was only a part of their formula for salvation. There were many other requirements. It was very clear where our beliefs differed, and we parted on friendly terms.

The next Sunday, they were in my church to hear me preach. And they came back the next Sunday to hear our senior pastor preach. When they disappeared from our community a few months later, someone told me that these gentlemen had been reassigned to another territory, far away from our church. We never once told them we thought they were wrong. We simply told them what we believed.

What is it that God has done for us in Jesus? In ways I don't totally understand, Jesus closed the great divide that separated us from God. Or maybe in Christ, God was sending us the message that the separation didn't exist, not as far as God was concerned. Clarence Jordan, the author of *Cotton Patch Gospel*, paraphrased 2 Corinthians 5:19 this way: "God was in Christ hugging the world to himself." According to the Bible, the curtain in the Temple (which symbolized the separation of God on one side from people on the other) was torn in two, from top to bottom, the hour Jesus died. So however you want to understand the message of Christ, it had something to do with our relationship with God being restored.

I had a wonderful professor at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary named Dr. John Benjamin Bedenbaugh. One lecture of his I will never forget. He stated that the Apostle Paul was trying to find the right metaphors to explain what Christ had accomplished on our behalf. Paul was familiar with the Hebrew Temple, the Court of Law, warfare, slavery, and the family. So Paul borrowed the terminology of those five human institutions. In Christ, God covered our sins, just like the priests covered sins in the Temple (atonement, propitiation). In Christ we have been declared innocent and in right-standing with the laws of God, just like in the courts of law (righteousness, justification). Once we and God were estranged, at war with each other and enemies, but now we have signed a peace deal (reconciliation). We were enslaved by sin and death, but our Redeemer (literally our next-of-kin) has purchased our freedom (redemption). We were orphaned and alone, and now God has adopted us as God's sons and daughters (adoption). God did all this for us in Christ.

But all metaphors have limitations. When we insist that one of these metaphors be taken literally as the only way to understand the cross, we do the Christian faith a great disservice. These metaphors aim us at the truth, but the truth is much greater than these symbols.

As I hinted earlier, there is an interesting debate as to whether Jesus' actions "achieved" these things or if they were already so in the heart of God and, therefore, Jesus came to reveal and demonstrate these truths. In the book *Jesus Christ for the 21st Century*, author John P. Cock points out that theologian Schubert Ogden came to the conclusion that Jesus did not achieve salvation for us but rather made obvious

(“re-presented”) the condition that already existed in the heart of God. As the author quotes Ogden, “The New Testament does not affirm that in Christ our salvation ‘becomes possible.’ It affirms, rather, that in him what has always been possible now ‘becomes manifest,’ in the sense of being decisively presented in human witness” (*Christ Without Myth*, 143).

“Achieved” versus “re-presented,” I am comfortable with either interpretation. I don’t think it makes light of Christ’s suffering to say that Jesus revealed what was the existing reality in God’s heart rather than to say that Jesus created the conditions whereby we might be saved. To be absolutely sure, God’s heart didn’t need to be changed. Jesus didn’t have to die to create the condition in God’s heart whereby we would be accepted. What needed changing was our hearts and minds. We needed to know the depth of God’s love for us. Perhaps it took Jesus’ sacrificial love to demonstrate this.

When I ride in my car, it becomes my sanctuary where I pray (and when others ride with me, they often cry out to God!). Soon after our daughter was born, I was riding down a back road thinking about the love that had been created in my heart by her birth. I had never experienced anything quite like it. I found myself praying, “God, this is someone that I would gladly give my life for, without thinking or hesitating for even one second! God, do you know how this feels?”

My answer came immediately. Yes, God knew exactly how I felt. God feels that way about you and me.

When people ask me if I believe people who do not believe in Christ can be saved (just wait until you see my next chapter!), I answer that this question is way over my pay grade. Billy Graham refused to limit God; I think I’ll follow his wise example! “Those are decisions only the Lord will make,” Graham once said. “It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won’t. I don’t want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have” (Jon Meacham in *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2018).

It is God’s mercy we are talking about, remember?

One can proclaim Jesus is the foolproof way to heaven without excluding the possibility of God providing other avenues. You know, we keep producing better and better fools. But if salvation depends on what God has done—and not what we have done—then that plan cannot fail, regardless of how great a fool I might become.

What about the first Easter and the empty tomb? I will address that in my last chapter, so I hope you will stick around until the end.