

ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION January 2010

In our church, those appointed to be elders are tasked with functioning as spiritual leaders. One of the ways I covenant to do that with members of my care group (and with anyone else who might be interested) over the next 3 years is to share with you a monthly one-page (like this one) set of perspectives on the history of Christian thought. Now why would anyone want to do that, you might ask. *That, I believe, is a major question for us.* Why in the world would anyone want to *think* about theology, God, Jesus, church, religion, spirituality? Hasn't the thinking already been done for us? Perhaps not.

There are popular and common reasons for not thinking about any of those things. For one, thinking is hard work. It is so much easier to hold loose opinions that require no real accountability. Much of what passes for "theology," much of what makes us wrinkle up our noses at the word, lies in the banalities, the trivialities we associate with it. If you watch the religious channel on TV, for example, you may notice that, not only is much that is said incoherent and inconsistent; incoherence, inconsistency, even ignorance seem to be glorified! It is as if the dumber the faith, the greater the faith. Pretending to think while, in fact, skating on opinions or feelings, is so much easier. As is abdicating responsibility to and within the community of faith, expecting someone else to do the hard work.

A second reason, perhaps a more important one, is that we prefer to think about what really matters to us. History, having already gone by, seems less important than current affairs. So, I am proposing that we consider the history of Christian thought not as something that is over with, for it isn't, not by a long shot. I like to think of the Christian intellectual tradition as a Great Conversation. Just because it started a long time ago doesn't mean those who initiated it had the final word (though some believe they did). Rather, the conversation continues today; and it's our turn to add our own thoughts to the mix. It is crucial, if we are to be responsible and accountable for our own participation as Christian people, that we introduce *what really matters to us* into the discourse.

I choose to initiate this project by raising something that I think really matters: the **question of authority**. By what authority do you hold yourself to be Christian? Is it the authority of family tradition? "I am a Disciple (or whatever) because my sainted mother was a Disciple (or whatever)." Is it the authority of congregational membership? "Because I go to church I'm a Christian." This could work the other way round: "They don't go to church; therefore they must not be Christian." These ways of addressing the question of authority place it outside us, in someone or something else: family, institution, the Home Office, or the Vatican, for example. "I do or did what *they* said, so that makes me a Christian." But the issue is: by what authority do *you* hold *yourself* to be Christian? And, are you able to give anyone who asks a thoughtful accounting of your answer? This second question is important because it is *in community* that we engage this conversation, identifying ourselves to one another, giving account of ourselves to one another – as Christian people. A third question: do the authoritative ways we claim to be Christian convince anyone else that we are who we say we are? I would wager that, if the best we can do is offer loosely held opinions with no real thought to support them, if momentarily experienced feelings are all we can refer back to; well, you can get both of those and more without theology or God or Jesus or church or religion or spirituality at all! What difference does calling yourself Christian make in that event?

The whole enterprise of Christian thought from the beginning until now might be understood as 2000 years of individual and corporate responses to Jesus' question: "Who do *you* (both singular and plural) say that I am?" He asked another question in a similar vein: "Do you say this of yourself, or did someone tell you?" All of Christian theology and practice is a response to those and similar questions.

So, who do *you* say that Jesus is? Do you say it on your own authority, on someone else's? How would you characterize the authority on which you base your responses? Does it matter? Why or why not?