

From the Pastor's Desk

Finding Faith in an Age of Belief

In the year 385 CE (Christian Era), after Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, a synod of bishops condemned Priscillian of Avila for heresy, and by order of the emperor he and six of his followers were beheaded. Today, Priscillian's offenses hardly seem to warrant the death penalty. He urged his followers to avoid meat and wine, advocated for careful study of scripture, and allowed for what we would now recognize as "charismatic" praise. He taught that writings excluded from the Bible, although not inspired, could serve as useful guides to life. Priscillian holds an important distinction. He was the first Christian to be executed by his fellow Christians for his religious views. But he was by no means the last. One historian estimates that in the two and a half centuries after Constantine, Christian imperial authorities put twenty-five thousand to death because the Empire considered their belief to be inadequate.

(Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, pp. 6-7)

Jesus and his disciples inaugurated the Age of Faith, which was characterized by the explosive growth of Christianity and manifested in a wide variety of faith expressions and practices. It also came under the brutal persecution of the Roman Empire. During this time, to be a Christian was to orientate one's life toward Christ and his example of mercy and compassion. Faith meant trust, hope and assurance in the dawning of a new era of freedom, healing, and love that Jesus had demonstrated.

The Constantinian Era slowly replaced the Age of Faith with the Age of Belief where people such as Priscillian, whose faith was robust but whose belief was deemed unorthodox, were executed. With the exception of the apostle Paul, Constantine exerted an influence upon Christianity second only to Jesus. He became the sole emperor of Rome after the victorious battle of Milvian Bridge in Italy. He attributed his victory to Christianity, because prior to the battle he claimed to have seen a cross in the sky and upon it engraved "In this sign conquer".

Constantine's edict proclaiming Christianity the religion of the Empire was not enough to create unity. Because of theological squabbles about the nature of Christ, he called the Council of Nicaea and summoned all the bishops of the world to attend and develop a creed that would end these disputes. The 220 bishops arrived at his luxurious palace in Nicaea on the western coast of what is now Turkey. Constantine presided over this Council even though he continued to venerate Tyche, the god of chance and Helios, the sun god. He had no theological training and was not even baptized until shortly before his death. During the proceedings, Roman soldiers surrounded the palace with swords drawn to protect the Emperor and his bishops.

The same Empire that had crucified Christ was now in control of Christianity. Contrasting the Council of Nicaea to the Last Supper, Harvey Cox, in his book *The Future of Faith* states: "It is unfortunate that Leonardo da Vinci never painted a portrait of the Council of Nicaea. It would contrast nicely with his Last Supper, in which a hunted Jesus and his disciples take cover in a rented second-floor room and serve each other a modest meal, while the imperial swords are already being drawn, not to protect this trouble-making rabbi, but to arrest and crucify him."

With the Council of Nicaea, the Constantinian Era had begun. When the Roman Empire finally

died in 476 CE, out of its grave rose the Roman Catholic Church whose governance was modeled after the Roman Empire. It was the era in which imperial Christianity came to dominate the world and was both a blessing and a curse. Luther found the latter with the Papal Bull Exsurge Domine excommunicating him for not recanting his beliefs, which were considered heretical. He would probably have been burnt alive at the stake if not for Frederick the Wise, Governor of Saxony, who protected him. Luther's faith was profound, but his belief was deemed insufficient. Others, such as Galileo and Darwin, would face similar accusations.

Many of the bishops during the era of Constantine had "Empire Envy". They were lusting after the supremacy of the Empire and most were more than willing to grasp this power once Christianity was proclaimed the official religion. To extend their control, Inquisitions arose and faith was replaced by belief in ridged doctrines whose primary purpose was to force conformity and to identify and punish heretics. Many Christians who were tortured and executed had deep faith, but failed to have the beliefs considered necessary by the imperial Church.

This Age of Belief lasted about fifteen hundred years. The beginning of its demise started in the 18th century with the Enlightenment where reason was advocated as the primary source of legitimate authority. The Enlightenment, which was sometimes called the Age of Reason (as opposed to the Age of Belief) led to the American Revolution, the birth of the United States and democracy.

We are now standing on the threshold of a new chapter in Christianity. It's not in decline but growing faster than ever before, mainly outside of Europe and America in movements that emphasize religious experience and spiritual growth. Most of these emerging churches pay little interest to orthodoxy and flourish without hierarchies. These Christians are finding their way from the Age of Belief back to the early church's Age of Faith. Like the first few centuries of Christianity, today's Age of Faith is characterized by a plurality of faith expressions and religious practices. Even some Lutheran churches in Africa have adapted to this new chapter by integrating elements of Pentecostalism in their worship services.

Our challenge, and the challenge of all mainstream congregations in the United States, is to accept the fact that our society has been in the midst of this religious transformation for many years but we have been reluctant to admit it. For several years, we have been involved in study and strategic planning in an attempt to navigate this emerging religious landscape.

In the April 2011 issue of "The Lutheran" magazine, Tom Ehrich wrote an article entitled "Tough Medicine for Tough Problems in Tough Times", where he stated: Congregational leaders would best spend their time in strategic thinking and embrace risk and change. He says we need to understand how churches work now, not how they once worked in the "golden era". He indicated that all other systems from schools, banks and newspapers to gasoline stations are changing and congregations should not consider themselves exempt.

This is a challenging and exciting time in our history. We stand on the threshold of a new era where these words of Jesus ring true: *"Every teacher who has become a disciple in the kingdom is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."* Matthew 13:52 It is a blessing to be part of a congregation that has such a rich tradition and is looking forward with eyes of faith to the new treasures God is calling us to bring forth.