

Be Babes in Evil, but in Thinking Be Mature

Children prefer their cereal sugar-coated. Many adults are like that when it comes to religion. I dare say that many religious believers simply don't want to confront facts and ideas that challenge conventional ways of thinking. How frustrating--and disheartening.

For example, if the concept of historical fact has any meaning, then we must say, as a matter of historical fact, that Moses did not write the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), the ancient Israelites never mass-invaded the land of Canaan, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is at least partly due to ambiguity in translation, Paul only wrote but seven or eight of the "books" ascribed to him in the New Testament, and Jesus never spoke most of the words attributed to him in the Gospels. In particular, he probably never said any of the things attributed to him in the Gospel of John. Any well-educated seminary student knows these things, but may never dare to say them in church.

I sometimes despair that we human beings are so resistant to the facts, to the truth of our situation, when deeply cherished beliefs, values, and convictions seem to be at stake. This is so not only in our religious life. It also holds true with respect to other loyalties—the loyalty we feel toward our country, our race, our political party, and so on. When the truth about such things conflicts starkly with our cherished views and feelings, we often deny reality rather than re-think the situation. We'd rather not work toward intellectual integrity, we'd rather live under illusion, than have to re-conceive the nature of the world in which we live and the things we hold most dear.

Paul most likely did author these words: "Be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature" [I Cor. 14:20; RSV]. A big part of maturity lies in learning to think about things in ways that bear critical scrutiny. That means being willing to face reality and live life free from pretense, illusion, and the false security that cherished but untenable notions often provide. This is true for the life of religious faith no less than for any other area of human existence. Think about it! Change can be very difficult, even disorienting. But would you really want to live a lie? Try thinking in terms of finding a God big enough to uphold you in the unvarnished truth.

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