

BURNING THE BULL
[written in oral form]

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

A down side to such inclusion is that openness can breed vague and lukewarm principles and theology. Most scholars believe post-modernism is fading; even though, many Christians still adhere to the Modern era thinking and theology.

No one knows what's next; however, the obvious contrasts of the two perspectives and this period of transition is causing much tension, even anger.

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

This is happening worldwide, in secular culture and in religions, including Christianity.

For example, in the recent Austrian election, the progressive candidate narrowly defeated the far right--his polar extreme.

We Mennonites are also experiencing, what appears to be, irreconcilable differences over the current "hot button" issue. Both sides claim correctness, as humility surrenders to smugness.

This is strange, because the side that demands total acceptance is NOT so accepting of the counter opinion.

Smugness tends to discourage productive conversation.

Most of us consider it noble to stand up for and defend one's belief,...

...assuming one's position/ theology is valid /.... if it is true.

And, there lies the rub: how can two conflicting and juxtaposed positions both be true?

Mass media feeds off such division. Conflict and extremism makes the headlines; it's entertainment.

Of course, we can always rely on social media to get the facts right.

It's funny how most of my Facebook friends agree with me.

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Debates and confusion have 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.

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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 is a bit like post-modern thinking. Henotheism focuses on one God, without denying the existence of other gods.

Generally, at that point in history, the Hebrews believed that Yahweh was **the** one God for the Hebrews, and others had their own gods, too.

That attitude is tolerant and accepting, yet that inclusion invites religious marketing and shopping around, and that was what was happening.

Maybe shopping around/religious consumerism is no big deal,.... unless.....the other religions are untrue and destructive. ???

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The priests 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.

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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 with an added twist. Baal was more than 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*.

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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 contest.

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 their god was real. That was the goal.

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The Baal group won the coin toss and went first,... of course, after they sang the national anthem. 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 sang, "Come on Baal 'Light my fire'."

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. All they had was rotting bull.

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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 placed 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.

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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 that 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.

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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.

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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 and sensitively debunking a myth is enough.
Attacking and destroying those that believed the myth is simply "Bad Evangelism."

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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 love, mercy and grace through Christ. They lived and proclaimed the Gospel message of God's love,... and that's powerful.

Living and witnessing that reality can set hearts on fire.

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Yet,...good intentions can turn ugly.....if the focus is not about God's grace, but instead is about conversion and conformity.

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

There are other reasons bad theology comes into acceptance.

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Ex. with the rise of denominations in the 1800's, churches began competing with each other. Denominations marketed themselves as better and more accurate than the other. That process was called Landmarkism.

Baptist came up with the ploy called the "Scarlet thread of redemption." It asserted that Baptists were linked directly to Christ's disciples. Thus, suggesting they were better.

The proposed thread went through the Anabaptists, yet in reality, Baptists did not evolve from the Anabaptists. The myth also skipped a few centuries and suggested that there were unknown monastic orders who were really Baptists at heart.

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Other Christian myths have been fabricated, too, in order to attract adherents.

Such as the theology of prosperity, which is still prevalent.

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.

There are many other examples of bad theology--some are embellishments with lots of promises, and some are simplified theology for easy acceptance. The "Roman Road to salvation" is an example of cut and pasting four NT verses, that when followed will render salvation,.....and it fits nicely on a pamphlet / a track.

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To be sure, the notion of Christ leading soldiers into battle against heathen enemies was /is extremely bad theology. It was most bizarre when such wars were between, so called, Christian nations.

"Onward Christian Soldiers"

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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.

Bad theology fails when tested.

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

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

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

They can tell when something smells bad.

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For example, many Christians find comfort in the notion that God controls everything or.... that everything happens for a reason.

Nonbelievers are turned away by both assertions.

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Sadly, when tested, both assumptions fail, and the myth's demise can be painfully destructive.

Yes,.....we have all heard stories about how someone grew and learned from a difficult or ugly experience.

Regardless, Please don't cite God as the author of the pain and calamity.

But, do Credit and praise God for being instrumental in the healing and growth. God does Not set traps and hazards.

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Everything does NOT happen for a reason.

Two years ago, our neighbour's 13 year old daughter, who was a year younger than Katherine, died of cancer.

There was NO reason for her death.

And, I think God was crying with her parents, too.

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

Elijah tested his faith in God being the one true God, and that faith proved to be true.

It was a dramatic, fiery test, and it is a great story.

Yet, no more powerful than our stories about how God sets our hearts on fire or how God leads us to healing and redemption.

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Jesus lived and told others about his relationship with God.

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.

We need to share our stories about what God is doing in our lives.

Starting in the fall, we will offer time in our worship service to hear testimonies about what God is doing / about what each of us are experiencing .

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 is working in our experiences / what is true,.....and it doesn't need to be polished, embellished or enhanced.

If we don't test and reveal the truth, then we could be left with only ..... 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 "honest" story / our "true" journey with God, out in the open air. Whatever our story is, we need to share it and test our understanding of 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 honest,..... and revealing. Doubt is inviting. It's honest, and doubt can lead to testing, too.

In addition to living and telling about our relationship with God, let us also be good listeners.

Let us be less concerned with dogma or grand assertions. Instead, may we listen to stories from the heart, and not be concerned where someone stands on theological spectrum.

God is bigger than our perception, bigger than our theology,... and we may learn something in the process, too.

If you're like me, you may be amazed that God has chosen to invest in 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.

Get rid of the myths.

And,..... share your story / your truth.

Truth thrives out in the open.

The world desperately needs truth, and I dare say, the church needs it just as much..... and so do each of us.

We proclaim that God is real, that God is loving and gracious.

Imagine the fireworks when we publically test and share our living faith in God!