

“Christian Sacred Cows”

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Acts 17:1-15

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.

And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

In heavily Hindu nations like India and Nepal, milk holds a central place in religious rituals. So in honor of their exalted status as milk producers, cows often roam free even in large cities. Indeed, authorities in several cities have tried to remove the cows, but usually they come back. In some places it's considered good luck to give a cow a snack, a bit of bread or fruit. On the other hand, a citizen can be sent to jail for killing or injuring a cow.

Mahatma Gandhi, India's legendary nonviolent leader, once wrote, “If someone were to ask me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protection.” When Gandhi was assassinated in 1948, he would have wanted to hold the tail of a sacred cow as he died. Holy cow!

This Hindu practice has given rise to the expression “sacred cow” in our culture. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines a “sacred cow” as “someone or something that has been accepted or respected for a long time and that people are afraid or unwilling to criticize or question.”

When Paul preached the gospel to the Jews in Thessalonica he told his hearers that, according to the Scriptures, “it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead.” Therefore, he said, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Messiah.” But they wouldn't believe Paul, because one of their “sacred cows” was the idea that the Messiah could never be crucified like Jesus; instead, he would lead Israel to triumphant military victory over their oppressors. So they raised a false and misleading accusation against the apostles. As a result, the few believers in Thessalonica got into trouble and sent Paul and Silas away for their own safety. But when they got to Berea they found some Jews who were “more noble” than the ones who had opposed them in Thessalonica. Instead of clinging to their “sacred cows,” they dug into the Word of God, “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

Today I want to discuss some “Christian sacred cows,” things we often say without questioning them, or asking if they're really true in the light of Scripture. You may be surprised

at some of the items on this list (and I wouldn't be totally surprised if you don't invite me back to speak after this message!). I'm not talking about foundational truths of Christian doctrine. I'm talking about things we sometimes say without asking if they really stand up to Biblical scrutiny. Maybe we need to have a good look at these "sacred cows" in the light of the full Word of God. They may sound good, but they may need to be at least qualified if not altogether set aside. There's only time enough today to look at five of these pestiferous bovines. Here's the first one.

1. "God is in control."

A favorite saying of Christians is that "God is in control." When we say this, we usually mean that in spite of some kind of bad news, of whatever sort, God is working through it to achieve his purpose. It's easy to extend this thought to the idea that everything that happens occurs because it's God's will that it should happen — even bad things that we don't like because they're harmful. We think that if God is God, then nothing can happen that isn't his will.

Actually, that's not a Christian teaching; it's a Muslim teaching. In Islam, Allah has total control of everything; his will overrides every other influence or purpose. In fact, "Islam" means "submission" — total submission to the will of Allah.

As Christian believers we understand that God has created all things by his Word, and his Word underlies and sustains the universe. That's clear from the Bible's opening chapters in the Book of Genesis. Hebrews reminds us that through Jesus God is "upholding the universe by his word of power" (Hebrews 1:3). But does that mean God controls everything? We need to look at the whole story.

Let's go to Genesis 1:26: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" In other words, the Creator has turned control of this earth over to people who are made in his image. People are the Creator's representatives or agents in the management of the world. If something goes wrong that's not God's fault; it's usually because *people* have made sinful decisions contrary to his purpose. God has made all things, but he's turned the management of those things over to us. As Psalm 115:16 says, "The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man."

So claiming that "God is in control" is a "sacred cow" we need to question over against the full teaching of Scripture. When it comes to problems we deal with in life, for example, God isn't responsible for them. Jesus declared that, as the Son of God, he came to give us abundant life, not problems and difficulties. When something goes wrong that's not God's doing; it's the thief who "comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10) who is responsible; and *we have the authority to oppose him* because God has put us in charge and given us dominion. As James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). We don't need to ask God to change something he has given *us* the ability to change. As Gloria Copeland puts it, "If you need a change, *make* a change." Don't just wait for God to change it. So when we say "God is in control," we've forgotten that he has entrusted to us the control of many aspects of our life and experience.

Let's turn to our second "sacred cow," which is a big one.

2. "This world is not my home — heaven is my home, I'm only passing through."

Discussing this "sacred cow" is bound to raise some eyebrows because we hear it all the time, especially in a some of our songs including a lot of country "gospel" music. But we have to apply the principle of the Bereans, to "examine the Scriptures to see if these things are so." Does Scripture really teach that "heaven is our home" and this earth is only a place we pass through on our way there? Let's take a closer look.

It may shock you to hear that "going to heaven when we die" is not the ultimate goal of the Christian life. The New Testament says little about what happens when we die. Indeed, Paul told

the Philippians, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Philippians 1:23). But he doesn’t elaborate on exactly what that means, or give us a picture of what it looks like. Several passages in the New Testament tell us that Jesus is seated “at the right hand of God” (Romans 8:34), so we assume that means heaven because heaven is the dwelling place of God.

But what is “heaven”? Obviously it’s not someplace that’s literally “up” above the surface of the earth, because the earth is a ball floating in space. So heaven could be “down” as well as “up.” It’s better to say that *heaven is “God’s space,”* as contrasted with our space. It’s not “up there” but it’s all around us in a dimension beyond the four dimensions we normally experience. Paul says, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). If we’re in Jesus, who has been raised from death, then we’ve already been raised and are already “seated with him in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6) — we already participate in God’s space.

The aim of being “saved,” or delivered from the false values of the prevailing culture through membership in Jesus, is not so we can “go to heaven when we die.” The aim of our membership in Jesus is to live the resurrection life now, as we anticipate the fulfillment of God’s ultimate plan for us.

But what is that plan, as Jesus and the New Testament writers teach it? God’s plan is to merge “his space” with “our space” *in the new creation*. Often we quote Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:17, to say that when a person comes into Christ he becomes a “new creature.” But the Greek puts it a little differently: *ei tis en Christo, kaine ktisis* — “If anyone in the Messiah, a new creation.” There isn’t any “he is” in this sentence. What Paul is saying is that when a person become a member of Jesus, *a new creation exists for him*, a new way of life in which everything has changed. As members of the risen Jesus, we experience a foretaste of our ultimate destiny in the new creation, which is described in the Bible’s final chapters.

The picture many people have of heaven, with the “golden streets” and all that, is actually drawn from the Bible’s picture of the new creation in Revelation 21, the “new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:2). But if it’s coming from heaven then it’s not heaven but the renewed earth, which is to be like the earth God originally made, where God dwells with his people as our space merges with his space. So if we say, “Heaven is my home, I’m only passing through,” *we have it exactly backwards*. Earth is my home, and heaven is where I pass through on the way to my real home in the renewed earth. Heaven is a “holding pattern” until, with Jesus, we “come in for a landing” in our ultimate destination in God’s new creation, here on this earth. We don’t stay in heaven forever. “Heaven is my home” is another “sacred cow” we need to put out to pasture.

If you’re still with me, let’s discuss our third “sacred cow.”

3. “You never know what God will do.”

It sounds pious, or religious, to say we don’t know what God will do because we think that expresses our humility in the face of God’s sovereignty, his ability to do whatever he wants to do. In Isaiah 55 God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). And, of course, because “God’s space” is a dimension we can’t access through our normal senses, we recognize that there are many things about the Creator we’ll never fully understand. But that doesn’t mean we “never know what God will do” — because in many cases he’s told us *exactly what he will do*.

There shouldn’t be any doubt that he will heal us — in fact, he *has* healed us — if by faith we take the healing he offers us in Jesus. There should be no doubt that God will bring justice to unjust situations, because as Psalm 103 declares, “The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed” (Psalm 103:6). There ought to be no question in our mind that God will hear our prayers, forgive our sin, and renew our living space according to his purpose — since he

tells us, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). The Lord has told us that if we obey his commandments he will make us “the head and not the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:13). So we have no uncertainty about whether God will reward a life of generosity with blessings in return; Paul says, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. . . . And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:7, 9). We could go on and on.

And there’s the other side to that equation: foolish actions will bring unpleasant results because that’s the way God has set up the universe. Paul, in Romans 1, calls this “the wrath of God”; but God doesn’t actually have to do anything for the consequences of disobedient and foolish actions to have their effect. As Paul explains, all God has to do is to “give people up” who refuse to acknowledge him, and the effects of their poor choices will play out in their lives because that’s the way his universe works.

So it’s not correct to suggest that God is unpredictable and we don’t know what he’s going to do. We do know, because he’s told us in his Word. God’s purposes aren’t hidden from us. Paul quotes Isaiah 40:13, “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” Then he adds, “But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). As members of Jesus we have insight into God’s purposes and intentions. So when people say “You never know what God will do,” that’s another “sacred cow” we can drive off, like the city authorities in India.

Let’s look, now, at our fourth example of a “sacred cow” sometimes found on the lips of Christians.

4. “I’m just an old sinner, saved by grace.”

It’s common for Christians to call themselves sinners. Again, this makes us sound humble and religious because we think it would be prideful to claim we’re not sinners. But does this idea stand up to the Berean test, a thorough scrutiny and deep understanding of the Scriptures?

It’s really easy to dispose of this “sacred cow,” once we remind ourselves that as believers we’re members of Jesus. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . ,” says Paul, “and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). The “body,” of course, is the body of Christ, and we’re members of that body. The New Testament tells us that Jesus “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). As Paul states, “For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). So follow the logic here. If you’re in Jesus, and Jesus isn’t a sinner, then you can’t be a sinner either.

That doesn’t mean that, from time to time, we don’t commit sinful acts. Paul often has to remind his readers — whether in Corinth, or Ephesus, or wherever — to avoid sinful conduct of one sort or another. He warns the Corinthians, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Christians can slip up once in a while; if that weren’t the case John wouldn’t have told his readers, “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1).

But just because we don’t always measure up to the standard of godly behavior doesn’t mean we’re supposed to brand ourselves as “just an old sinner.” We were sinners before we knew the Lord, but when we were “saved by grace” *we stopped being sinners and became “the righteousness of God”* in Messiah Jesus. What I do on a few occasions doesn’t mark my identity for my entire life. Sometimes I drive a car, but that doesn’t mean I’m *always* a motorist. Every week I go the store, but that doesn’t make me nothing but a Walmart customer. Three times a day I enjoy a meal, but I’m not just an eater all the time. So for me to say, “I’m just an old sinner, saved by grace,” is to feed another “sacred cow” I shouldn’t be feeding.

We have time for just one more example of what I'm talking about.

5. "We all have our cross to bear."

When people are experiencing difficulties in life, we sometimes hear these problems described as a cross we have to bear. It could be a serious illness, or a difficult family member (such as an alcoholic spouse), or some other stressful condition. People think of Jesus' suffering on the cross and try to compare their own situation to what Jesus was facing. But let's take a closer look at this comparison and ask if this isn't another one of these "sacred cows" we need to avoid.

What was the cross of Jesus? In the ancient Roman world, crucifixion was the penalty for rebellion. A person the Roman authorities deemed guilty of defying their regime could be hung on a cross, in public view, and might linger for hours or days in painful humiliation before succumbing to a merciful death. (In fact when we speak of *excruciating* pain we're comparing the pain to crucifixion.) Jesus was crucified as a rebel against Rome, actually for questioning the "sacred cows" of some leaders of first-century Judaism who got the Romans to do their dirty work for them. But it was through the cross of Jesus, and his resurrection, that God won the victory over sin and death and opened up the possibility of new life for those who unite with him. As Paul asks the Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:3-5).

I suggest that to call sickness, or family problems, or some other stressful condition a "cross" we have to bear is to *cheapen the cross*. Jesus spoke of "taking up our cross and following him" (Mark 8:34), but in the New Testament *the cross means persecution*. Unless we're being persecuted for our faith we're not "bearing a cross." Paul (Philippians 3:10) and Peter (1 Peter 4:13) speak of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. But didn't Jesus suffer enough for all of us? As members of Jesus we enter into *his* suffering on the cross, and also his victory over sin and death in his resurrection. The stressful and difficult situations we face aren't equivalent to the cross of Jesus.

Sometimes our favorite songs contain "sacred cows" we need to question. "Take the name of Jesus with you, child of sorrow and of woe." No, we're not children of sorrow and woe; we're children of our Father and we take the name of Jesus as our shield against the foe. Or we sing, "I will cling to the cross, the old rugged cross" — no, we don't cling to the cross; *we cling to the risen Jesus* who has overcome the cross and opened our pathway into God's new creation.

In this study we've looked at five "sacred cows": (1) "God is in control"; (2) "This world is not my home"; (3) "You never know what God will do"; (4) "I'm just an old sinner"; and (5) "We all have our cross to bear." When I hear expressions like these I'm tempted to exclaim, "Holy Cow! ©2014 Richard C. Leonard is that really true? Does that square with Scripture?" We need to be like the people Paul and Silas met in Berea who "received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

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