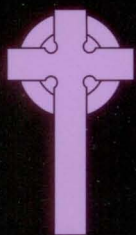


The Apparent Heresy of Jesus



Gerard A. Pisani, Jr.

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by Gerard A. Pisani, Jr.

Church traditions formed in previous centuries may have little relevance today and may even obscure God's original message. In this perceptive work, Gerard A. Pisani Jr. explores the ways in which such traditions are formed and how they can be harmful to a living, growing community throughout *The Apparent Heresy of Jesus*.

Rev. Pisani, whose own ministry is within the Episcopal Church, points out that traditionalism often hinders the ability of individuals to have their own special communion with God, which is important for maturity and wholeness in one's own life. The elevation of tradition to church doctrine endangers the vitality of the church community. Christian communities who blindly follow established religion without examining the tradition's origins are at risk of stagnating under the weight of their own restrictive doctrine.

Rev. Pisani adds his insightful work within to his already long list of achievements to the greater good.

About the Author

As a young man, Gerard A. Pisani Jr. traveled extensively with the Word of Life Fellowship, which had regular nationwide radio and television broadcasts. In 1966 Pisani was ordained into the Episcopal priesthood, and he served in a number of churches before settling in Bayonne, New Jersey, where he is the pastor for Trinity Parish and president of the Windmill Alliance, a not-for-profit corporation encompassing six distinct ministries.

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Introduction

What is a heresy anyway? The dictionary says that it is an “opinion or doctrine at variance with the orthodox or accepted doctrine, especially of a church or religious system.” According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was, any number of times, at variance with the orthodox or accepted traditions of the leaders of his religious system. I suppose most of us, at least once in our lives, have questioned accepted doctrine. Perhaps we have even been at variance with our religious system.

The fear of being a heretic, however, may be the unrecognized source of a problem most people have in experiencing the fullness of life. John’s Gospel speaks of the thief who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, but continues by telling us that Jesus has come in order that we might have life—life in all its fullness!

In this book, I hope to share with you how I believe we all can experience an abundant life. I now recognize that the lack of such an experience may be due to our fear of heresy and an inappropriate use of tradition. That is why I wish to explore these issues with you, especially as they may be observed in the life of our Lord and the Church.

I have been a part of the Church all my life, although not always a part of the Episcopal Church, and I have always been bothered by something. Although I, for the most part, gained much strength and vitality from my relationship to Christ and the Church, deep within my heart I detected an uncomfortable feeling about a pervasive weakness and emptiness in most Christians. There was often something missing, but I was never able to point my finger to the source of the problem. In fact, it was not a topic that was easy to discuss with many people. Often I would be accused of lacking humility or of judging others when the topic arose.

The Church, which is really the people, was sometimes so alive and yet, more often than not, so dead. Promises were offered for abundant and eternal life, yet many Christian communities were barely making it or even in the process of dying. This scenario has been true, from my observance, in all the Christian traditions of which I have been a part.

I was raised in the Assemblies of God, where there always appeared to be excitement and progress. In fact, even to this day people in the Assemblies speak of themselves as the fastest growing denomination. With the lively music, awareness of spiritual gifts, celebration of healing, and the constant evangelical and revival atmosphere, one could easily agree that it was true. As a member of one of the faithful families in the Assemblies, however, I was also aware of the many Assembly churches in America where this was not so. My grandfather was a minister all his ordained life in places that were simply existing or dying. My uncle, who was also a minister in the Assemblies, only served in one congregation that was somewhat "alive." This realization saddened me by the age of twelve; it was one of the things that compelled me to move on. Unfortunately, I moved on with a sense of snobbery. With an air of self-righteousness I moved "up" to another evangelical tradition. In my teens and early adult life I wanted to be a part of a somewhat less "emotional" crowd and join with those who were more "intellectual." I assumed life was more actively present among those who celebrated and enjoyed knowledge and understanding. The services were more "dignified," and everyone was open to studying and learning. My new elders had the answers to life, and I was anxious to learn them and apply them. While there were popular and well-known Pentecostal evangelists, I was now traveling with the "real crowd," Billy Graham and Jack Wyrzten, the international head of "Word of Life" fellowship! Jack was on hundreds of radio and television stations across the United States, with camps and conference centers in the Adirondacks, South America, and Mexico. I not only appeared on radio and television programs each week, I was privileged to travel all over as a part of these services and rallies in huge stadiums and auditoriums. In our travels, I was able to converse with and learn from many evangelists who were distinguished scholars and preachers.

While there were many outwardly large and successful places in this segment of the evangelical tradition, there were many more that were hardly making it. It likewise came to my attention that this branch of Christianity was not as great as I had originally expected. While primary in the United States, the Protestant tradition is not so well established in other countries. In spite of their enthusiastic support for many "foreign" missionaries, their popularity and fort  was primarily in America. During my days in college, I was busy exploring many different sects within the

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Christian faith. Most of these were rather small, but I realized that smallness was not the problem. I still felt there was something lacking which I could not yet identify, but I came to realize it was not necessarily connected to size.

In my continuing quest, I moved on to the worldwide Anglican Communion. I assumed that this group of Christians possessed all one could ever wish for in church. Scholarship reigned high. Music and liturgy were superb! In many places around the world this elegance enhanced the mind, fed the soul, and warmed and stirred one's emotions with dignity and extravagance. While it was not the largest denomination in the United States, most of our presidents and many of our people in Congress were Episcopalians. This church brought people together from the four corners of our globe in some of the grandest historical structures imaginable. In fact, the largest cathedral in the world was the Episcopal cathedral in New York City—St. John the Divine. Even though I lived in one of the most vital and successful dioceses in this country, the Diocese of Newark, I was faced with a lack of life and vitality in many of the churches—especially in Hudson County. Here, in the midst of a rich and historic tradition, there were congregations who were discouraged, frustrated, and defeated. It was sad for me to recognize that there were still too many ailing and hurting congregations. Why were so many church and Christian people who spoke of the “good news” experiencing so much “bad news”?

As I look back on my many years and all the variety in my background, there is hardly a regret. I have actually come to love and appreciate most of what I have experienced. I realize how blessed and privileged I am to have acquired such a wide and varied heritage in the process. In fact, because of the openness of my present Episcopal tradition, I can appreciate the vitality added to my own life by these numerous experiences in my journey. I am truly grateful for the witness and influence of so many people in such diverse circumstances. But deep within my heart, I still recognized an uncomfortable feeling about something, yet I was unable to point my finger to the source of the problem.

Then, as I was preparing my sermon for Sunday, June 23, 1991, it suddenly dawned on me what may have been bothering me for those many years. As I studied the Scriptures in the lectionary appointed for that Sunday (Proper 7 of Year B in the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church, 1979), I saw something I had never noticed before. It quite possibly was the point that had been missing in my varied encounters with all parts of the Body of Christ. It was something that, for now, I will refer to as that Apparent Heresy of Jesus.

In the chapters of this book I will try to portray that which I now believe causes most religious and church problems. I hope to make this

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presentation in a practical and reasonable way. While I will attempt to present any facts in a trustworthy manner, this is not intended to be a scholarly work. I want everyone, the faithful and the lapsed, to seriously consider what I have to say. My hope is to bring an experience of perpetual and vital life to the whole Community of God.