

## **What We Don't Know**

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### **I Thessalonians 5:1-5**

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When I was a kid I used to get saved a lot.

A new evangelist would come to town, put on a week of revival services, and by week's end, either I had walked the aisle to get saved or to recommit my life to Jesus. Which motivated my father once to ask me, "How many times do you plan to get saved?" It was a rude question but a good one.

The really good evangelists, the professionals, planned their revival weeks toward the big Friday finale. I remember, in particular, when Bob Harrington, the Chaplain of Bourbon Street, preached at First Baptist Church in Lufkin. In spite of the fact that he was the funniest preacher I'd ever heard, and that his catchphrase was "It's Fun Being Saved," he preached the most terrifying Friday night revival sermons of them all. Friday night was always Second Coming of Jesus night. That preacher could make you smell the Sulphur and feel the heat of hell itself. There's no way for this kid not to walk that long aisle with him in the pulpit on a Friday night.

I found it strange that while all of these evangelists professed that neither Jesus nor the angels of heaven knew when "the day and the hour" of his coming would be, the preachers all seemed to have been informed by a reliable source that the Lord's Day was imminent. This was in my childhood, of course, before I became a Presbyterian and discovered that the Lord's Day is Sunday, and that traveling evangelists are less reliable than used car salesmen.

But I remember, even as a credulous kid, wondering "how do they know?" It still seems to me peculiar that so many Christians seem obsessed by things they can't know. In fact, some churches put their greatest emphasis on the things that are least knowable, branding as heretics those who do not agree with their opinions about things they can't know, and damning to hell those who don't find the unknowable credible.

When we read a passage like this one from First Thessalonians, it makes me realize that Christians were once must less sure about things than Christians are now.

Let's say that First Thessalonians was written by St. Paul as legend has it. And let's say that the traditional dating of the book is about right, maybe around 50 AD, which places it only about two decades after the death of Jesus. The people to whom Paul preached learned all the Christianity they knew from preachers who likely never met Jesus in the flesh and never personally heard him teach, had only the bare bones of his life story to go on, probably a few sayings and maybe a parable or two. But, of course, they didn't have a New Testament, or even the gospels. The faith was a lot looser then.

Today, gosh, we Christians sure seem to know a lot. We even know that some Sundays of the year are green, and some are purple, and some of white. I rather imagine that if one of us stumbled into a Christian service (especially a baptismal service), during the first or second

century, we might not recognize it as Christian at all. Seriously. Seriously. You may want to read Cyril of Jerusalem's "Mystagogical Catechesis" for a taste of that strange religion that was ours long ago.

But one of the most common elements to the preaching and the worship and the beliefs of the very early church was this: they recognized that they didn't know all that much about metaphysics, but they were certain Jesus was coming soon to hold everyone accountable.

He had said so. Jesus said, "Some of you here listening to my voice today will still be alive when the Son of Man returns in glory." Certainly when St Paul was preaching up and down Asia Minor, this belief was widely accepted among Christians.

Jesus was many things to many different Christians in those earliest days of the Church - a rabbi, a healer, the Messiah, Savior, Lord - but above all he was that apocalyptic preacher who believed that the Kingdom of God on earth was just around the corner. The first crushing crisis of faith in the church's history came when the last apostle died and Jesus had not yet returned.

I'm saying this to help us see that what we think of as the most important issues in our faith, the most timeless tenets of our beliefs, what we are sure we know as Christians, these facts of faith are largely creatures of particular historical moments.

The first great question of the Christian church was whether or not most of us could be Christians. The conservatives believed that we (Gentiles) had to become adherents of Judaism first before becoming followers of Jesus. We're in this room today because the liberals won that argument.

And the first great threat to Christian belief came when all of those who knew Jesus in the flesh had died, and he had not yet returned. When the church came face-to-face with that crisis, we had to rethink what we thought we knew about Jesus and about being Christian.

Some Christians in the time of St Paul had apparently stopped working, they were so sure the Second Coming was upon them. Paul attempted to explain that while the Lord's return was imminent, nevertheless you shouldn't give up your day job.

But when those last apostles died, a major crisis of faith fell on the church like a ton of bricks. They had either misunderstood Jesus, or he was wrong, or he was speaking figuratively. Suddenly they realized they didn't know something they thought they had known for sure. Suddenly they had to rethink their faith from the perspective of what they didn't know.

Being Christian couldn't just mean getting a one-way plane ticket from Thessalonica to the heavens. Apparently, we were meant to live here. Apparently, existence isn't just a waiting room for the big blast off.

I don't know whether certainty is the father of arrogance, or it's the other way around. Or maybe both certainty and arrogance are just symptoms of something more basic that's gone wrong. But neither certainty nor arrogance really fit the faith of Jesus Christ, because neither leave room for that reverence that is essential to a healthy relationship with God. God is God; we aren't.

We may not have a blueprint of God's eternal plan. But we don't need one. And we probably couldn't read it if we had it.

A few years ago, Debbie and I were invited to spend a week at Windsor Castle as participants in a program which Prince Philip started. If you saw the last season of *The Crown*, you heard the story behind his founding of St. George's House, an informal group he assembles from time to time to reflect on the future of the world from a faith perspective. So Debbie and I were at St. George's House with a few others to reflect on the future of institutions.

St. George's House is tucked up behind St. George's Chapel inside the castle grounds. And one night one of the Canons\* of the Royal Chapel gave us a tour of it.

Buried in a tomb along the north wall of the chapel lies King George VI, the father of Queen Elizabeth, the king who led Britain through World War II. Carved on his tomb are the words of a poem that the king once said guided him through the darkest days of World War II, when it was impossible for him to see the road ahead, to know what the future held, or what might become of his people. Here are the words on his tomb:

“And I said to the man who stood at The Gate of the Year:

‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’

And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’

So I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod safely into the night.”

However stilted and Victorian the language of the poem may be, the faith is sure. We don't have to know the future. We trust one who knows the way.

Amen.

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\*Another participant in the program, upon hearing that a Minor Canon was conducting our tour, asked what is the difference between a Canon and a Minor Canon (both being Anglican clergy usually attached to a cathedral). I answered him, “A Minor Canon is just like a Canon, only a smaller bore”