

CONFESSIONS OF A PEASANT

I received this letter about two months ago. After reading it, I shared its contents with numerous colleagues, friends, and fellow members of my flock. The comments generated spanned a range from challenging to controversial to provocative to heretical. I give the letter to you in its unredacted entirety so you can ponder its contents.

I don't know why it was sent to me, and I have never discovered the identity of the author.

Pastor Arnie

Dear Pastor Schmidt,

I am a peasant in the verdant fields of theology.

I have followed Christ all of my life including the time in my mother's womb.

I do not hold a degree in any higher study of the nature of God. Unable to read or speak Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic, I depend on the work of all those who have translated scripture into English.

Which translation is the inerrant word of God? Did translations such as the King James have errors? Is the Revised Standard Version now the inerrant word of God? Or will future discoveries of archaeology and manuscript fragments bring us a new inerrant word of God? Will nuances in language bring scholarly changes to some words and meanings that change the big picture painted for us? The Bible is a complicated book with a simple message – a message that I do not think can ever be retranslated, revised, or improved upon. It is that simplicity that appeals to my limited theological knowledge.

I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, the Father's only Son who came to earth to save humanity from spiritual death. I believe in the Holy Spirit, who though I don't always understand how He works, I know He does work to enlighten and keep me on

the path of Christ. Whether they are a triune God or three separate Gods, I don't know. To me, it does not make any difference. They are all supreme beings. The concept does not change how I live my life. I will continue following Christ and live under the influence of all three with every aspect of life.

For me, I find much of the Old Testament to seem almost irrelevant. Oh sure, you can find parallels to today in some of the writings. Genealogies, the history of Israel, and countless rules that have no meaning in this modern world may be of great interest to the scholar, but less so to a peasant. I believe that Jesus was who He said He was. While I struggle with a lot of the Old Testament, I believe the Bible as a whole gives us the big picture of how God wants us to live. The Ten Commandments and Jesus's further simplification are clear:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On those two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

I look around at all the division among those who call themselves Christians. There are so many denominations out there that I have lost count. Each one insists their interpretations are the correct ones, and they work hard to keep them pure.

The two biggest divisions seem to involve the Lord's Supper and Baptism. They divide when they should unite.

I fully believe Jesus said those words at the Last Supper, and that He meant something with them. Did He mean we should build a table and declare it to be God's, only to exclude others that God will be welcoming into heaven despite our exclusive doctrine? I have a recurring dream where I am sitting in church with Billy Graham on my left and Mother Teresa on my right. When it comes time to go up for Holy Communion, I start to walk up and look back to see that they are not allowed to come to God's table.

For those fellow Christians who do not accept infant Baptism, I wonder how the Holy Spirit feels about it. I wonder if it is really about a lack of understanding as to what the Holy Spirit can do through a child. I know, the learned theologians

will always have explanations for these divisions, but they often seem to me to be man wanting to be in control instead of leaving it to God.

I look at beautiful, architecturally elaborate, and expensive churches sitting on every other street corner. I see them sitting empty for 90% of the week. I have to wonder what kind of an impact on the spreading of the Gospel would occur if the money spent on buildings, pipe organs, and all the other trappings of adornment were used for local missionaries and shepherds.

I go into church on Sunday morning and usually end up sitting in the same pew with the other worshippers following the same pattern. Woe to the visitor who sits in someone else's seat – of course, I am exaggerating, though there is very little rush to welcome that newcomer. I hear the robotic recitations and see the pious religious rituals. I listen to the reading of the scripture and no explanation follows from the shepherd for the waiting sheep. Does a visitor learn anything about God from a service that is liturgically designed for those who already know what's going on?

I do not mean to sound so unsophisticated in my meandering questions. As a rustic, I suffer from a lack of refinement or elegance in trying to understand the mores of my religious superiors.

I do know that if someday the bombs start falling or the rockets come screaming, I won't be rushing down to the church to try and save the gold communion ware, gold collection plates, and gold Bibles. I will gather round my family, my neighbor, and a well-worn Bible. I will trust in God that no matter what happens, I will be at his feet in due time. If it is not my time to go, I will remain vigilant and ever thankful for life. I will continue to live as God would want me to live with every minute of my life. When I fail at times, I know that I am forgiven if I am sincere in seeking God's forgiveness, and He will know if I am sincere.

And all of this is not really that complicated.

But what do I know? I am just a peasant.

I have thought about this letter often over the course of the last two months. As a pastor, I will say that I see some of the things the author wrote in a

little different light. But ... I have to wonder ... If the veil of manmade denominational rules were to be lifted ... I wonder how many of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world might not make the same confessions as the peasant writer of this letter.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt