

Ed Gungor: Bothered by Christianity?

Is it wrong for a pastor to be bothered by the same faith  he preaches about each Sunday? Apparently not if you're Ed Gungor, lead pastor of People's Church in Tulsa, Okla., and a New York Times best-selling author. Beyond surprising people with the title of his latest book, What Bothers Me Most About Christianity: Honest Reflections From an Open-Minded Follower, Gungor tackles honest questions that every believer wrestles with. In addressing the most troubling aspects of his faith—including why there is evil in the world, why there is only one way to God, why Christians give Christianity a bad name—the pastor opens the door for discussion and encourages believers to understand that it's only with total honesty that we can move into a deeper, more mature faith in Christ. Here Gungor shares thoughts about his latest book. (Click here to purchase What Bothers Me Most About Christianity.)

Q: Upon hearing the title, *What Bothers Me Most About Christianity*, many people will be surprised to discover that this book was actually written by a Christian—and a pastor, no less. Why have you chosen to write on this topic?

A: Those who embrace Christ love Christianity, but some parts of faith still don't sit well. Not everyone is willing to admit this. Some claim they never experience tension or doubt—that their faith is always an ecstatic, absolute, unwavering “knowing” that bubbles inside them at all times, forever effervescent and never encroached upon by doubt.

But I don't believe them. Don't misunderstand me. Faith has already won the day in my soul. But still, some areas of faith throw me off. They disturb me; they disturb lots of people. In *What Bothers Me Most About Christianity*, I extend an open invitation to anyone who wants to explore these areas with me.

Q: Why is it so important for Christians to converse honestly about the difficult aspects of our faith?

A: If we aren't honest about the tensions in faith, problems emerge. Critical thinkers observe Christians and dismiss the claims of Christ, and some Christ followers end up living more in the land of fake than the land of faith. That's why I want to talk openly about what bothers me most about Christianity.

Q: In this new age of relativism, many Christians—including you—sometimes feel uncomfortable publicly proclaiming Jesus Christ as the lone savior, the only way to heaven. This truth, hailed by many as narrow and bigoted, is the foundation of the gospel message. Can Christians tell the truth without offending people?

A: In a pluralistic world, we should expect folks to be bothered by the true claim that Jesus is the only way, but this is only exacerbated by the arrogance many put forward when they believe they are right and others are wrong. Maybe it is the truth tellers' methodology that has given truth such a bad rap. Maybe truth would be more applauded if those who know it would be nicer about it. Historically, Christians have been notorious for pushing Christ down people's throats in antagonistic, hostile and even violent ways that are contrary to the love of Christ. It is possible to remain loving while claiming exclusive truth. An immense help to this end would be acknowledging that discovering Christian truth is chiefly a matter of grace—we only know what we know about God because of His kindness to reveal Himself to us. There is no room for coercion or *better-than-thou*-ing here.

Q: One of the issues you talk about in What Bothers Me Most About Christianity is "The Science-Faith Smackdown." For many years the central issue in this debate has been Darwin's theory of evolution. This theory, accepted as fact by the overwhelming majority of scientists, is promoted by atheists like Richard Dawkins as a key argument against the existence

of God. Christians tend to reject the theory altogether, pointing to the Genesis account and scientific evidence that points to an Intelligent Designer. From a theological standpoint, does it really matter if Darwin's theory is true?

A:I don't think that arguing for God as the Creator of the universe necessitates an attack on the theory of evolution. Are Darwin's theories true? They definitely have problems, but whether or not macroevolution is true, the result doesn't impact the notion that God is the Creator of the world. Scientific theories about origins simply talk about how things came to be, not whether God was behind it. Even if scientists discover how life emerged, no harm is done to the Christian claim that God was behind its origin. For Christians to argue about scientific theory—any theory—because they think it attacks belief in God as Creator seems silly, and that bothers me.

What if the point of the creation narrative in Genesis is more poetic than literal? Historically, the church has believed the narrative to be poetic. The church's take was simply that God created the world. That's it. Before the 19th century, the church never tried to specify how or when God did it. The historical, theistic argument is simply that we believe God is the why behind what is here, wherever and however it got here.

Q: Many skeptics point to the reprehensible behavior of Christians (i.e., the Crusades, the torture of "heretics," the Salem Witch Trials) as one of the most problematic aspects of Christianity—and you agree. What do you see as the catalyst for this problem, and what is the solution?

A:The earliest Christians had a fearless devotion to the faith (they were willing to die for it), but they also were humble and compassionate to others, even those who rejected them and caused them harm. Their undying care for one another, along with their commitment to the disenfranchised, poor and needy in their communities, profoundly influenced the ancient world.

Things began to change when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire. This marriage between the church and the state became a terrible thing. Up until then, the Christian church had never tasted secular power. Certainly, God wants His kingdom established in this world, but He has never been interested in getting it done through broken human systems. God knows that, like the ring entrusted to Frodo in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, secular power corrupts the soul. It was true in the 4th century, and it's true today.

The solution to this problem is to forsake the mindset of "kingdom Christianity," referred to as Christendom, and return to simply being Christians. Christendom is about power; Christianity is about influence. Power attempts to change others, but influence begins humbly with one's self. True Christianity does not claim that changing others is a human responsibility. The Christian's job is to faithfully be a witness to God's presence and love. God does the changing.

Q: Many critics accuse people of faith as being mad or deluded. Is the Christian faith irrational and unreasonable?

A:The answer is yes and no. Just because something is shrouded in mystery doesn't mean it's stupid to believe it. In fact, it's natural and rational to believe something based on a preponderance of evidence. This natural faith is the result of a simple curiosity that examines the evidence and makes hypotheses about possibilities. To suggest, as writers like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens do, that openness to the reality of God is evidence that one is deranged, deluded, and deceived is unfair by anyone's rules. Belief in God's existence is not irrational; however, even though there are clues that point to the existence of God, those God clues will never prove God's existence. A person investigating belief in God will bump into one clue after another, until somewhere along the way a choice emerges. This is faith of another ilk. This kind radically leaps over the lack of empirical proof and

believes what one cannot possibly prove. This is unreasonable faith, and we should call it that because it violates the rules of reason. Its roots are metaphysical; it is the stuff of the supernatural. Unreasonable faith isn't just the result of human effort; it is the co-working of an open heart and divine grace.

Ed Gungor is the lead pastor of People's Church in Tulsa, Okla., and a New York Times best-selling author. He travels around the world speaking in churches, universities and seminars. He and his wife, Gail, have been married for more than 30 years, and they have four children. For more information, visit .