

You Have Been Charged with Being a Christian
Pastor Dave

June 27, 2024

Introduction to the Day

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning: great is your faithfulness!

We conclude our exploration of creeds, confessions and statements of faith with a trial. Imagine that **you** are on trial. You have been charged with being a Christian. Is there enough evidence to find you guilty as charged?

(simple image of Lady Justice)

And is the guilt truly in being Christian? Or in being a poor Christian?

You are charged with being a Christian. In some places in this world that could be true. It could be illegal, a criminal offense, to practice your faith in public.

It could be true that in some places, at certain times, it may be very uncomfortable to be called a Christian... to act as a Christian might be expected to act... to take a stand as a Christian might be expected to take a stand.

To insist on justice... To advocate for a woman's reproductive rights or for gender affirming treatments... To advocate for fair housing... access to education... access to health care.... access to clean air, clean soil, clean water -without risk of cancer or any other debilitating disease ... doomed to suffer because of one's race or income...

To insist that further damage to the environment... further loss of biodiversity... further pollution to air and water and soil **stop – now – not by 2050 – or even 2030 – today – and tomorrow and over the next three years.**

(Image of the scales)

To **insist** - as the epistle reads today - that the economy change so that no one has too much and no one has too little. And to demonstrate such commitments to these goals that you and your household **voluntarily** undertake them. Changing **your** life style – **our** lifestyle - because it's the right thing to do. It's a model for **how we can live**.

These changes are not coerced, because coercion divides people, polarizes people. It is genuine **love** – love that **unites** people.

What if you lived so that mercy was not such a surprise but was just the way life is, because the steadfast love **from** the Lord and the steadfast love **for** the Lord never cease!

What if people said that Paul and Terry and Myrna and Dorothy and David and Joe were Christians and no one was surprised - because it is so obvious? Evidence is everywhere. No one would doubt it or dispute it.

What would that evidence be?

Today there will be a trial. Centuries ago, there were plays – sometimes dramas, sometimes comedies – acted out in the streets. People could not read. People might not step inside a church, so there were plays to catch people's attention and to convey a message and to motivate change.

Today there will be a trial. Dave Saude has been charged with being a Christian. A Prosecuting attorney will present evidence that he may be one but not much of one, not a strong one, not a model one. The Prosecutor will be an accuser, pointing to evidence that Saude is not such a great Christian after all.

And you are the Jury – the assembly of his peers - who will decide his fate.

There will be a Defense attorney – someone to object, perhaps. Or propose, perhaps. Or plead, perhaps. Someone who perhaps will have the final say in Saude's defense.

Pay attention. Listen closely. Remember your creed. You must decide whether the evidence bears the truth. And whether the truth condemns... or sets free.

(colorful image of Lady Justice)

All rise! The civil Court of Midnapore is now in session. The honorable Judge ___ Presiding.

(Image of a gavel)

Judge Please be seated. Would the Prosecuting and Defending Attorneys please identify themselves?

Prosecuting Attorney Your Honor, I am Stan Accuser for the People.

Defending Attorney Your Honor, my name is I M. Freeman for the Defense.

Judge Thank you, Gentlemen. Mr. Accuser, do you have any opening remarks?

PA Yes, Your Honor. Before you today, case file ELC 974/13, finds Mr. Dave Saude charged with being a Christian, indeed a very poor Christian. Mr. Saude is a retired Lutheran pastor, born in the United States but serving his entire forty year career with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The Defense will argue that he has had a stellar career in a variety of parish settings, demonstrating uncharacteristic leadership, imagination and creativity. But the people, Your Honor, will demonstrate that Mr. Saude has serious holes in his ministry and in his character. The evidence will show that he is no better man than anyone else in this room. He is not a model Christian; indeed, the character he models is disobedient, even rebellious. He aligns himself with characters of moral disrepute, even violence.

Judge Thank you, Mr. Accuser. Mr. Freeman, do you have any opening remarks?

Defense Attorney No, Your Honor.

Judge Very well. Let us begin. Call your first witness.

PA The Court calls to the stand Mr. David Saude

 Mr. Saude, are you a religious man?

Accused There are many ways of defining the word "religious." Some would say that to be religious is to follow a firm set of rules, a structured morality, a rigid way of being.

 Others would say a religious person adheres to a formulated set of teachings.

 I would say that my faith gives a certain shape to my life, a pattern, a set of goals or objectives, a direction in life. Perhaps to be religious is more about relationships than specific rules.

PA Are you a religious man? A simple Yes or No will suffice.

Accused Yes

PA Are you more religious than most people?

Accused Religion is not a competition. I am not interested in being compared with others. I am more interested in being true to God and to myself. I seek an authentic faith.

PA Authentic. Perhaps we will come back to that later. Mr. Saude, are you more religious than I?

Accused Again, you are asking for a comparison. I do not know what is in your soul. I do not know the circumstances of your life, the choices you make, the values you live by.

Some people claim to be spiritual but not religious. They adhere to some faith content but disagree with how that content is packaged or practiced.

(Colorful image of Lady Justice)

I believe everyone, religious or not, has a story they live by. I do not know your story. By your profession I might assume you live by a framework of justice. Or perhaps you seek to live by good order. On the other hand, since you prefer to prosecute, perhaps you live by a code of vengeance.

It's not for me to say.

PA Are you a saint, Mr. Saude?

Accused Certainly not as most people would expect a saint to be.

PA Mr. Saude, are you a better Christian now than you were as a child? Or perhaps a teenager or a young man in your thirties? Or better than you were ten years ago?

Accused I do not believe that living faithfully is a linear progression of virtue or understanding. Each age we live brings different challenges and opportunities.

I would like to believe I have grown in my faith. But how does one measure growth? Evidence of Innocence? Simplicity? Generosity? Kindness? Trust? Those aspects of faith differ with a five-year-old, a fifteen-year-old or a thirty-five year old. Am I better now than I used to be? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

PA Mr. Saude, do you have a favorite commandment?

Accused All the commandments are equally important, equally necessary. I am obligated to each of them, all of them.

I suppose my favorite might be to love God with my whole being. And the second is like it: to love my neighbor as myself. In those two commandments, scripture says we find all the commandments.

PA Is there a commandment you have never broken?

Accused I understand that to break any commandment is to break all of them. Faithfulness is not about a passing grade of 20% or 80%. As I said earlier, my religion, my faith is less about keeping or breaking rules and more about living in sound, fulfilling, healing relationships.

PA We may come back to that.

You were born into the church, were you not? Your family was Christian. You kept certain traditions and observances. You went to worship and Sunday School ?

Defense Attorney Your Honor, the Prosecutor is leading the witness!

Judge I'll allow this for the moment. But please get to the point.

PA Sometimes people say, "I was a cradle Catholic..." Or a cradle Lutheran. They mean to say that from the very beginning they were immersed in their faith and were shaped by that faith.

Did you have the opportunity to choose to be a Christian, or not?

Accused I suppose I did not choose to be a Christian. There was no defining moment before which I was not and after which I was.

I would say I choose every day what kind of Christian I will be.

I was born an American. I did not choose to become an American.

I did choose to become a Canadian, but only after the United States relaxed the requirement to renounce my American citizenship while becoming a Canadian.

In the community where I lived at the time, I had been called three times to sit on jury duty. But because I was not a citizen, I could not serve.

I wanted to assume my responsibilities as a citizen. I wanted to be more than a Resident. I wanted to take my part in the responsibilities as well as the benefits of being a citizen. I wanted to serve on a jury. I wanted to vote. I wanted to participate in the democratic possibilities of my country.

Are those Canadian values? American values? Or something more like Human values!

PA So, you do choose your responsibilities as a Christian?

Accused Yes, I have responsibilities as a Christian. I choose how to live faithfully.

PA So, may we return to the commandments?

Accused Yes

PA Do you obey them?

Accused Yes

PA All of them?

Accused Yes. I try to obey them.

PA Any favorite? Is there a commandment you find most difficult to obey?

Accused I suppose the most difficult commandment is the first one... To let God be God. To live only for God.

PA Have you ever murdered anyone?

Accused Jesus taught that to murder is more than merely taking a human life.

PA Have you ever taken a human life?

Accused No.

PA You became an adult during the Viet Nam War, did you not?

Accused Yes.

PA And being an adult and a citizen of the United States, you were subject to the draft?

Accused Yes.

PA You had a deferment while attending university. Is that correct?

Accused Yes

PA A deferment was a way of avoiding the draft. Is that correct?

Accused No. A deferment meant that my obligation to serve was deferred or delayed until another time.

PA Young men were called into service on the basis of a lottery. A number was assigned an individual on the basis of that person's birthdate. You had a lottery number that virtually assured that you would be called into military service upon graduation from university. Is that correct.?

Accused. Yes.

PA You had a choice at that time to enlist or to be drafted.

Accused I would definitely be called into service, yes.

PA Or you could elect to be a CO, a Conscientious Objector. You could refuse to serve on the basis of religious principles. Is that correct?

Accused No, not exactly. I could refuse to serve as a combatant. I would be obligated to serve my country for a period of time as a noncombatant, having military duties to perform that did not require taking a human life.

I understood I could not refuse my duty if I knew that deep in my soul I had the capacity to take a human life.

PA So you knew in your soul that you could kill a man.

Accused I knew in my soul I have the capacity to do so. I could not pretend otherwise.

PA You could kill a woman.

Accused I have the capacity.

PA You could kill a child.

Defense I object! The accused has answered the question.

PA Have you ever been in a fight?

Accused I do all I can to avoid fighting.

PA It is easier to walk away?

Accused It is not easier. But it may be necessary to walk away.

PA Have you ever been violent?

Accused I have the capacity.

PA Have you ever been abusive?

Accused I have the capacity.

PA You have never hurt anyone... shamed anyone... manipulated anyone... demeaned anyone. You've never lost your temper...

Defense I object! The Prosecutor is badgering the witness.

Judge Overruled. I want to her this answer.

Accused Yes. I confess I have been cruel in what I have said and done and thought.

PA That does not sound like something a religious person would do.

Defense Redirect, your Honor?

Judge Proceed.

Defense Is it not true that wars have been fought in the name of religion?

Accused Yes.

Defense Wars may be fought to defend another weaker party or nation?

Accused Yes

Defense Even in waging war there are limits to the targets of violence, the use of violence, the weapons chosen and employed?

Accused Yes.

Defense Please tell the Court about your ministry with men who acted abusively in intimate relationships.

Accused One church where I served had a very long-standing relationship with a local women's shelter. They offered shelter, support and empowerment for women. There was also a ministry for children.

Defense Was there any ministry for men?

Accused No. Not at that time. So we together sought to create one. This was in the mid 80's. There was very little research or resources available at that time.

In those days when men were accused of acting abusively at home they might be required to attend a weekend anger management program.

But research was beginning to show that there is more involved than anger management. The roots for the abusive attitudes and behaviors were much deeper than what could be done in a weekend. We offered a program that involved time and attention and accountability.

Defense You identified with these men?

Accused I admitted I have the capacity to behave abusively. I often said that I am only one word away from causing someone pain. I also asserted that I have choices, as they do.

I also modeled healthier relationships. I worked closely with a female co-leader. We modeled effective communication, and problem solving. We modeled an effective, respectful, but not always perfect relationship.

Defense How long did you conduct this ministry?

Accused Approximately ten years.

Defense What happened with this men's ministry when you moved on?

Accused It continued for another ten years.

Defense How could that be when the leadership changed?

Accused The program included developing a procedural manual with directions for intake, assessment, session leadership, as well as the theory and values behind the process. There was also work done to develop a stage one and stage two process, so the work could be extended.

Defense That sounds like something a religious man might do.

PA Your Honor!

Judge Sustained

PA Let us return to the draft and your graduation.... Is it true that you considered enlisting in the Air Force?

Accused Yes. I was gathering enlistment papers, taking admission exams and gathering applications for medical school.

PA Medical School! Not Seminary?

Accused At that time I was confused about what my calling really was. Since the fourth grade I had believed I would one day be a healer. And to a fourth grader a healer meant being a medical doctor. And my studies and work experience followed that path.

Then one night my spiritual turmoil peaked. I had an experience in a church sanctuary where I argued with God and made a deal that I would go to seminary for one year to discern and work this conflict out.

PA You could have been drafted?

Accused Yes. In my senior year I received the letter from Washington requiring me to appear for a physical exam and aptitude testing. I did so appear.

PA But you avoided the draft yet again.

Defense Redirect, your Honor?

Judge Proceed

Defense When did you graduate from university?

Accused Early May, 1971.

Defense When was seminary to start?

Accused September, 1971.

Defense You had classmates that were drafted within days of graduation in May?

Accused Yes

Defense Washington knew where you were and what your timeline was?

Accused Yes

Defense You were available for the draft?

Accused Yes

Defense But you were not drafted.

Accused Yes No

Defense Was this an act of God?

PA Objection! Calls for speculation!

Judge Sustained

PA Do you argue with God often?

Accused As frequently as necessary.

PA But to get angry with God...

Accused You heard my testimony last week.

PA Would you say that God disappoints you? Let's you down?
Maybe even punishes you?

Accused I do not always understand the ways of God. There are
lots of biblical examples of characters arguing with God.
Even in today's reading. Yet the first lesson affirms that God does not
willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

PA Doesn't this disappointment, anger, resistance strain your
relationship?

Accused The key, sir, is to remain in relationship. I do not seek to
resist God, as much as to remain, to grow, to bear fruit. To discover where
our relationship is going next.

PA No more questions.

Defense You are retired.

Accused Yes.

Defense How many years?

Accused Nine.

Defense How have you chosen to use your time?

Accused I devote my time and energy to exploring the relationship
between faith and creation care and environmental justice.

Defense Is it easy work?

Accused No. There's lots of resistance.

Defense Do you make lots of money?

Accused No. It's voluntary. And my wife Helen and I agree it is important to invest money in books and memberships and courses.

Defense. So today's reading about generosity and eagerness applies vividly to you.

Accused Yes.

PA Objection, your Honor! Counsel is leading the witness.

Defense Help me understand something. In the gospel reading Jesus is asked to come and heal the daughter of a religious leader.

Accused Yes.

Defense This may have even been a man involved with those who would see Jesus silenced, even martyred.

Accused Perhaps

Defense He was known well enough to be named.

Accused Yes.

Defense As a teacher of scripture and tradition this man knew that to ask Jesus to touch her as she was dying or in her death, was a violation of rules of purity.

Accused Yes

Defense In this same lesson, a woman comes to be healed by Jesus.

Accused Yes.

Defense Would custom allow Jesus to touch her as a woman in public?

Accused No

Defense Would custom allow Jesus to touch her in her illness?

Accused No

Defense Why would Jesus expose the woman publicly?

Accused So others would see that she deserved to be healed. So she would see that she was knowingly healed by Jesus. This was no accident.

PA Your Honor, is there a question in this?

Defense Pastor Saude, you are a man of faith.

Accused Yes

Defense You have been given a lot of moral responsibility.

Accused Yes

Defense Have you always followed the rules of your teaching, tradition, or custom?

Accused No

Defense In fact, you have been known to break with religious tradition, to include in your ministry divorced people and people with addictions, people who have broken the law, people marginalized by sexuality, race, economics, religious differences. In fact you have even worked with clergy who violated their office and caused irrevocable harm!

PA Your Honor! Question?

Defense Are those things something a religious person would do?

PA Objection!

Defense One last question then...
 Would you encourage other Christians to live like you do?

Accused Absolutely not! I would encourage other Christians to be all that they can be – to live their faith enthusiastically, imaginatively, playfully, compassionately in the deepest love they can muster!

Defense No more questions.

Judge Members of the Jury, you have heard the questions and the testimony. I leave you now to deliberate.

 The question remains before you. The accused has been charged with being a Christian. You must decide for yourselves... Is there enough evidence to convict him?

I leave you with these final instructions....

(four slides finish with the scales)

John 15.5:

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Isaiah 42.1:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

John 10.10b

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 15.16:

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.