

Why Evangelicals find it hard to talk to Muslims

A Question that Makes You Feel Stuck

I've been listening, and it seems there's a question that bothers a lot of you. I think it's good that it bothers you, though I also want to figure out *why* it bothers you so much. So to start with I want to see if I've got the question right: to formulate the question in terms that show why *this* is the question that's on so many of your hearts.

The question is something like this: "what right do I have to tell someone else what to believe?" Or maybe, more explicitly: "what right do I have to tell someone they have to believe what I believe?" The question could be put with a bit more theological and conceptual precision by saying, "Is it arrogant to evangelize? Is it offensive to call people to faith in the Gospel of Christ?" But then it wouldn't quite be the question that's really bothering you, if I've been hearing you all correctly—I mean, you Eastern students, students I have in my classes, who keep asking this question because it really bothers you. You're not really asking the question in theological terms; if you did, it would be a lot easier to answer. If I've heard you correctly, you're not really thinking in theological terms when you ask this question, but in practical and experiential terms, and in practical and experiential terms, you feel stuck. How can you tell someone they have to believe what you believe? What kind of arrogance is that? After all, aren't their beliefs just as valid as yours? I mean, we all know you can't *prove* your beliefs—not your beliefs about God, anyways—so who's to say your beliefs are any more valid than theirs?

Does that sound like the kind of question that bothers you when you come to think about what to say to Muslims, for instance? At least, that's the question I think *I've* been hearing from you in my classes. It makes you feel *stuck*, doesn't it? Like whatever you say is going to be wrong. If you try to make them believe like you, then that feels arrogant and self-righteous. But if you don't, then are you really being a good Christian? So whatever you do is wrong. You're stuck. That's the sense I get when I listen to students at Eastern, Christian students, talking about what to say to Muslims. Whatever you say feels wrong: either be arrogant and tell them what to believe, or be a bad Christian and don't tell them what to believe.

Now, from my perspective as a professor, I do think a little more theological precision would help. If you put the question more theologically, you won't probably won't feel quite so stuck: there would still be problems about how to talk with Muslims, but it wouldn't look like everything you could think of doing is wrong. But what I'm interested in, to start with, is the question that's actually on people's minds, the question that really bothers Eastern students I've listened to—why it makes you feel so stuck and why it has become such an important question for people of your generation.

The fact that so many students are bothered by this question is a really significant social fact, a phenomenon that tells us something about the state of evangelical Christianity today. I'd like to suggest an explanation for why this particular question is so prominent in our time and place, here in American evangelicalism at the turn of the 21st century. I'd like to find a diagnosis, as it were, of what's bothering us. And then, I think, it will be clearer why a little theological

precision and even philosophical sophistication might be helpful. For I'm thinking that what ails us, ultimately, is something that's gone awry in our theology, something that's gone wrong in our understanding of the Christian faith, and therefore something that's not quite right about our faith itself. I think it's very easy, oddly enough, for Christians to have a faith that isn't quite Christian enough, because it isn't very Christ-centered. That's the problem that good theology corrects.

To see what I'm getting at, think about the difference between the question, "Who am I to tell someone else what to believe?" and the question, "Who am I to tell someone who Jesus Christ really is?" Which way of asking the question makes you feel more *stuck*? When you ask the question about *Christ*, don't you begin to feel a bit less stuck? And of course, it's the question about Christ that is more specifically *Christian*. So the good news is: the more deeply Christian your thinking is, the more Christ-centered, the less stuck you will feel when you ask these kinds of questions, questions like "how do I talk to Muslims?"

Do Muslims Believe?

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Let's go back to the question that makes people feel really stuck. It's a question where you leave Christ out of it and just ask, "Who am I to tell someone else what to believe?" I think there's more to learn about why we're stuck on that question. I was struck by this during a conversation last semester in my Faith and Philosophy class. We were supposed to be talking about faith and reason, about questions like whether you can prove what you believe, or whether you have to prove it in order to believe it, and so on. These were once the fundamental questions of modern philosophy of religion. They are what philosophers call epistemological questions, questions about epistemology or the study of knowledge and belief and reason, and what they all have to do with one another. And as I say, these used to be the basic questions of philosophy of religion, the questions that were on everybody's mind: is faith rational? Do you have to prove it? Can it be rational if you can't prove it? How do you know? and so on.

But they weren't the questions that held the class's interest. Rather quickly the big question became the one about telling other people what to believe. It went something like this: if you can't prove your belief in God, then what right do you have to tell other people they have to believe in God? Like, for example, Muslims? Just because *we* believe in God doesn't mean *they* have to. Who are we to say Muslims have to believe in God?

At this point we all realized something really weird had just happened. Here we were talking as if the problem with Muslims was that they didn't believe in God. This of course is bizarre, because everyone in the room knew that Muslims believe in God. That's what's so puzzling. We all knew that Muslims are not atheists, for heaven's sake, nor polytheists nor pagans—we all knew this. And yet we were talking as if Muslims didn't believe. What was going on here? What had just happened in our classroom? Something really puzzling was going on in this conversation, and I wanted to figure out what.

How is it that a bunch of people who knew perfectly well that Muslims believe in God talked as if the problem they had talking with Muslims was that Muslims didn't believe? Well, as I tried to figure this out, it seemed to me there were two possible explanations. One was that people were saying that Muslims didn't *really* believe in God, somehow. I think that's what many students felt like they *were* saying, and didn't want to say: it's what made them feel stuck. As if the only way to be a good Christian was to tell Muslims that they didn't *really* believe. And how self-righteous is that?

That's in fact why I said at the beginning that I think you folks are right to be bothered by this question. It *is* self-righteous, arrogant and offensive to tell Muslims they don't really believe in God, and Eastern students are *right* in wanting to avoid that. *Of course* you shouldn't tell Muslims that! But—here's the other side of it—the students in my class were feeling that somehow they weren't good Christians unless they did. After all, Muslims aren't Christians, are they? And you become a Christian by making a decision to believe, right? So Muslims must somehow not believe, not really. So to be a good Christian you have to tell them that, right? And that means you're stuck: to be a good Christian means you have to be self-righteous: you have to tell other people that you're the one who really believes in God—they don't. That's why the students in my class felt stuck. Does that sound right to you? I mean: does that sound like the way *you* feel stuck, too?

What is Christian Faith About?

But I said that's only one explanation. The other gets us unstuck. But it's also scarier, because it suggests that what's wrong is not Muslims' belief but ours. It's not that Muslims don't believe in God, for heaven's sake, but that *we* have forgotten that believing in God is not all there is to our own faith. The problem is with *us* and with our assumption that we're the ones who believe, when all we believe in is God. That's a belief we share with Muslims. So it can't be what Christian faith is all about. Christian faith is more specific than that. It's about more than just believing in God.

Let me expand upon this point a bit, because that may help us understand why so many evangelicals feel *deeply* stuck when they think about talking to Muslims. Suppose that Christian faith really is all about believing in God. Or better yet, it's about experiencing him working in your life. To believe God, really, is to let him work in your life, to give him control, so that you experience God in your life. Isn't that what believing God is really all about? That's what becoming a Christian is all about, right?

The answer, I think, is: No it's not! But let's think about this some more. Isn't this what many of you have been taught to believe? That being a Christian is all about believing, about experiencing God in your life, about giving God control. I could go on and on. Couldn't you? Don't you all know how to talk this talk, and even walk this walk, where it's all about letting God take control of your life, experiencing his presence, etc., etc.? Aren't you trained how to talk this way and even live this way, as if this is what the Christian faith and Christian life are all about? At least that's how it appears to me every time I listen to a praise service at chapel here at Eastern. Everybody talks the same way: everybody talks about experiencing God working in your life as if that's what faith is all about—it seems like everybody in the gym knows how to talk that way. Where'd they get it from, I wonder? They didn't get it from the Bible (it's not there). But it's how Christians talk nowadays. So I figure, it must be how we are trained, taught, told how to talk, in our churches. It's certainly how we're told to talk in most of the sermons I've ever heard in church.

But it's not Christian faith. That's the scary point. But that point is what we have to understand to find the good news we're missing. Listen again to what's missing in this talk—and (hint) listen for the *name* that's missing. We're taught to talk as if true faith is all about experiencing God in our lives, letting him take control of our lives, knowing his plan for our lives—what am I missing? What name? Think of the kind of stories we tell at praise services, all about God working in your life. How often do you hear the name, Jesus Christ, in these stories? I have to tell you, I've listened for that name in praise services at Eastern and not heard

it. Think of the kind of stories we tell. Are they stories about a man on a cross, a man who is the eternal Son of God, God himself in the flesh, who shed his blood out of love for us, about his death and burial, about his rising from death so that death itself is defeated for us and our salvation? No, we don't learn to tell that story, the story called the Gospel of Christ. Instead we tell stories about God working in our lives, as if that's what our belief is really all about.

Does that mean Christian faith is NOT about God working in our lives? I think the short answer is, Yes. Our faith is in Jesus Christ. Yes, of course he does work in our lives, but that's secondary. It's not what comes first. It is not what our faith is all about. In that sense, our faith is not about God working in our lives. I put it that bluntly—that shockingly, maybe—because I think we have an important decision to make. We have been taught that what Christian faith is really about is the experience of God working in our lives, and that's wrong. I think we need to change our minds about the Christian faith. We need a faith that is more Christian, more Christ-centered, than what we have been taught in church.

Let me put it even more bluntly: the faith we express in our praise services at Eastern University is not Christian enough. We need to change our mind about that. We need what I sometimes call a theological conversion. We do have the faith of Christ here, but we need to come to a new understanding about it—that's why I call it a *theological* conversion, not a conversion to faith. We have the Christian faith here, but we don't understand it very well, because we've been taught things about our own Christian faith and lives that are not true—and we need to change our minds about that. The fact that this really is a deep change of heart and mind, which will have deep consequences for our lives, is what I mean by calling it a conversion.

A theological conversion means, not a new faith, but a new understanding of the faith we already have. The conversion I have in mind is this: our coming to understand that it's all about Jesus Christ. Yes, we do have experiences of God, but that's not what our faith is about. What it's all about—what Christian faith is all about—is not an experience but a person. It's about Jesus Christ. It may seem obvious to say Christian faith is about Christ, but in practice that's not how we actually think about it. Ask most evangelical Christians today what they think their faith is all about, and they will tell you about God working in their lives—right? don't you think?—and a good many of them will not even mention the name of Jesus Christ. I wish it wasn't so, but then I remember what I've heard in our praise services and in my classes. So I think we really do need to have a deep change of mind about this.

What If It's About Christ?

To encourage you toward making this change of mind, let's talk some more about Muslims. Let's go back to that question that makes Christians feel stuck. Suppose we put Jesus Christ rather than experiencing God at the center of our thinking about the faith. Think of the difference. You want to go to a Muslim and say: "well, of course you don't really experience God in your life, like I do. So that's why you should believe in God like I do"? You want to tell that to a Muslim? Most of you don't, in fact, because it would make you feel self-righteous and arrogant. And you know what? You're right! It is self-righteous and arrogant, as well as untrue. Let me be explicit about this, because it's a hard word and it demands a choice of us: I think that a faith based on the experience of God in your life is inevitably self-righteous, fundamentally and at its very core. Whereas a faith based on Jesus Christ is not. And that's good news.

So imagine talking to a Muslim if you have made this change of mind: you believe Christian faith is not about experiencing God in your life but about Jesus Christ. Will Muslims be offended if you say, "You don't believe in Jesus Christ, do you?" Well, no, they won't be

offended--not if you're clear about a couple of important details. For of course a Muslim does believe Jesus existed, and they even believe he was a great prophet, and they honor his name. Still, they do not believe in Christ the same way they believe in God. They think that's crazy. And of course, that's precisely the way Christians do believe in Christ: that he is God in the flesh, the eternal Son of God who became human just like us, who suffered and died and rose again for our salvation, and who is therefore both Lord and Savior. That's what Muslims don't believe. And they won't be offended at all if you say they don't believe it! They insist on not believing that about Jesus.

See the difference? Muslims have every right to be offended if you say they don't believe in God or don't experience God in their lives. But they won't be offended at all, if you say they don't believe in Christ as Son of God, Lord and Redeemer. They already know this! It's right there in the Qu'ran, as a matter of fact. "Far be it from His transcendent majesty to have a son" says the Qu'ran (4:171) and "He has chosen no son, nor has He any partner in sovereignty" (25:2), and it clearly has Christianity in mind: God has no Sons, and therefore not Jesus nor anyone else can be the eternal Son of God. Muslims know they don't believe in Christ in that way.

So: you don't have to tell Muslims they don't believe. But you can tell them they don't believe in Christ, because that's just obvious, and they will perfectly well agree with you on that point. That is to say, you can start the conversation by agreeing about what you disagree about, rather than saying something offensive and self-righteous like "well, you think you believe in God, but you don't, not really" or "of course you don't really experience God in your life."

So, you see, the conclusion I draw here is that if our faith were more Christian, more Christ-centered, we wouldn't feel so stuck talking to Muslims. We wouldn't have to say offensive things about Muslim belief and experience, but could start by agreeing with them about where we really do believe differently, which is to say about Jesus Christ. And then we could begin talking with them about Christ. Now I'm not saying that talk will be easy. But at least we can focus on the real issue, which is Jesus Christ, instead of being stuck from the very beginning in self-righteousness—stuck saying arrogant and really stupid things like "I experience God in my life and you don't."

The Merciful God

It's self-righteous *and* it's stupid, because it's simply not true, and we have a moral obligation to recognize the stupidity, the foolishness of this falsehood. We don't have a right, in other words, to go around thinking that only Christians experience God in their lives. That too may sound like I'm saying something shocking, but I don't think I am. I'm just suggesting that we should conceive our own experience in a non-magical way, in an honest, humble, human way. What I mean is this: I don't see what our experience could be made of except our own thoughts and feelings, including our beliefs, our hopes, our trust and confidence, and so on. And if that's what experience is, then Muslims have as much experience of God as Christians do. They believe in God, too, they have feelings about God too, they trust in him, have confidence in him, hope in him, etc. The emotional tone of Muslim experience of God is often different from Christian experience: there's often more emphasis on submission (which is the very meaning of the word Islam) than on trust and love, but trust and love aren't simply absent. And I think it's sheer self-righteousness for Christians to say otherwise—once again, a moral fault.

Let me illustrate by focusing on a point where Christians have been particularly self-righteous—a point where we have a lot to repent of, in other words. You will still often hear it said that Muslims don't believe in a merciful God. That is outrageous self-righteousness. Just

imagine it: telling someone, "I believe in a merciful God and you don't!" What kind of creep would say this? And of course it's simply false. For heaven's sake, even the pagans believe their gods can have mercy on them, be favorable to them and so on. And all the monotheist religions believe God is merciful. Devout Muslims in particular pray 5 times a day in the name of "God, the merciful and compassionate." That's from the opening lines of the most frequently uttered prayer in Islam, the Muslim equivalent of the Lord's Prayer. It's also how nearly every chapter in the Qu'ran begins: "In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate." And you're going to tell people who pray this five times a day that they don't believe in a merciful God? They have every right to be offended. And by the way, folks, this is Islam 101. You don't have to know much at all about Islam to know this much. And there are Christians going around—one bunch came to my church a few years ago—teaching that Muslims don't believe in a merciful God. That's offensive and self-righteous.

Of course, Christians do believe some things about the mercy of God that no other religions believe. Only Christians believe that God shed his own blood to redeem his lost children. But that's of course because only Christians believe in Christ. In the view of other religions, only Christians are crazy enough to believe in this man Jesus the same way they believe in God, as if this man's blood were God's blood. For only Christians believe the things about God that make this belief look something other than merely crazy: only Christians believe that God is Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that the second person of the Trinity, the Son, became incarnate, which means truly human, so that his blood is God's own blood, so that the blood Christ shed on the cross is God's own blood shed for us and our redemption. Only Christians have that view of the mercy of God—that crazy and that beautiful. And if you know the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation well enough to explain why it's not quite so crazy to believe this man Jesus is God, then you'll be able also to show Muslims and people of other religions—who do in fact believe in the mercy of God—that Christian belief in God's mercy goes deeper than any other.

No other religion is crazy enough to believe the mercy of God goes that deep—that God shed his own blood for us. And precisely because it's a lie to say that other religions don't believe in God's mercy, they are indeed in a position to see how beautiful, how profoundly attractive is this Christian view of the depth of God's mercy—if only you can show them why it's not simply crazy, not sheer idolatry, to point to the blood of this man, Jesus Christ, and say it's the blood of God. But that means, of course, that you have to learn some theology, learn to understand the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation well enough to explain them to others, rather than being stuck with the kind of self-righteousness where you have to talk about the experience of God in your life.

For if Christian faith is all about Christ, then the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation tell you more about the God you believe in than your own experience of God working in your life. Indeed, if you don't learn the doctrines, your experience won't tell you that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And that of course is why Father, Son and Holy Spirit are hardly mentioned in our praise services. In most evangelical churches today we aren't taught the fundamental Christian doctrines about who God really is—I mean the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation—but instead we're taught to believe in our experience of God. So even our experience becomes less and less Christian, less and less Christ-centered, less and less aware of who God really is.

You see, I think our experiences can be wrong. Often are. Like I said before, there's no magic to our experience—it's just human experience, human feelings and thoughts and beliefs.

And if our beliefs are wrong, our experience will be wrong—even our experience of God. This may sound shocking, but I think it's just obvious, and nothing particular to get upset about—if you believe Christian faith is about Christ, not about the experience of God in your life. That is to say, one marker of whether you've gone through the theological conversion I'm talking about is whether you find the things I'm saying shocking or obvious. So let me say it again: our experience of God can be wrong. It often is.

And I'm talking about Christians, here. When our beliefs about God are wrong—especially when they're not as Christian as they should be—then our experience of God will be wrong. And it often is. We deceive ourselves, we lie to ourselves in the name of God, we are self-righteous, we have all sorts of things to repent of that we don't repent of. And we try to put God in our pockets, which means we make up imaginary Gods who speak in our hearts and tell us his will for our lives—as if we weren't responsible for making our own decisions—tell us whom we should date, whom we should marry. That's self-deception and an imaginary God. If you want to know the real God, learn to tell the story known as the Gospel of Christ. And learn the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the Christian teaching you need to understand in order to make sense of the God who is revealed in that story.

None of this means our experiences aren't real, by the way. That's one of the tricky aspects of the concept of experience. I'm saying our experiences can be wrong, we can have experiences of an imaginary God—not just Muslims but Christians can have such experiences—and do, all the time. I mean, any guy who says to a girl, "I think God wants us to get together" is having a real experience of an imaginary God. And that happens all the time around here, or so I hear. So there you go: we can have real experiences of unreal things. That's what I mean by saying our experiences are often wrong: they're not unreal experiences, but they're about unreal things.

It's just like believing things that aren't real, which we do all the time, whenever our beliefs are wrong. It's not that our beliefs aren't real; they're real beliefs about unreal things. Likewise, we can have real feelings about unreal things. And so it is with our experiences, I think: we can have real experiences about unreal things. Otherwise we're stuck with that magical belief that whatever we experience has to be real. And then we have to say that Muslims don't have a real experience of God, like we do, which is offensive and self-righteous, and I do think, very stupid, in the moral sense of the Biblical concept of foolishness: only a fool, which means a wicked person, thinks his experiences are more real than someone else's. The question between Muslims and Christians is not who has real experiences, but whose beliefs about God are true. For the experiences follow from the beliefs. If you believe that God is merciful to us by shedding his own blood for us on the cross of Christ, then your experience will be different from someone who believes God is merciful but could never go *that* far. So Muslim experience is different from Christian experience, but the reason why is that Muslim beliefs are different from Christian beliefs, and the thing to talk about with Muslims is the difference in beliefs.

Do Muslims believe in the same God?

Here let me say a few words on a really difficult question, and give you some advice about how to handle it. The question is whether Muslims really do believe in the same God as Christians. I'm not sure it's possible to give a good answer to this question, but there are some things we can say about it. It's very clear from the Qu'ran that Muslims, at least, think they believe the same God as Christians and Jews. They intend to worship the God of Abraham. But Christians and Jews are not always so sure. In that regard it's like the relation of Christians and

Jews. It's very clear from the New Testament that Christians believe they are worshipping the same God as the Jews of the Old Testament, but Jews are not always so sure, especially when they look at the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—that doesn't look to them like the God of the Hebrew Scriptures.

It's a hard question to answer: should we say these two groups believe different things about the same God, or that they believe in different Gods? For logical reasons, it's a hard *kind* of question to answer. Let me illustrate. Imagine you heard someone talking about Thomas Jefferson, and he said Jefferson was the first president of the United States. Does he just have a mistaken belief about Jefferson, or should we say his belief is not about Jefferson at all: he's not thinking about Jefferson but about Washington? Hard question to answer. We'd have to listen some more, and find out what else he says about Jefferson.

If everything he says about Jefferson is right except for this one belief, then I suppose we'd be inclined to say he's just got one mistaken belief about Jefferson. (That would be like saying: Muslims believe in the true God, but are wrong about him in one or two beliefs, like believing he has no Son).

But suppose we listened and he went on about how Jefferson lived on Mount Vernon and was the leader of the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War, and so on. Everything he says about Thomas Jefferson is actually what's true about George Washington. Then we might say: oh, his beliefs aren't about Jefferson at all. He's thinking about Washington. That's the only person he really knows about. (That would be like saying: Muslims believe in a different God).

But then suppose things were more complicated than that. He has a lot of beliefs about Jefferson that are true: he lived in Monticello, not Mount Vernon. He wrote the Declaration of Independence, and so on. But he also has a lot of beliefs that aren't true: he still thinks Jefferson is the first President of the United States and the leading General in the Revolutionary War. He is, in short, really, really confused. What shall we say about that? Well, it's hard to be clear about what someone really believes when they're really, really confused. Any professor who has to read a lot of student papers knows how this goes. It's true: I mean, if students are really confused enough, you can't tell what they're thinking.

So maybe it's like that with Muslims: they're confused about who God is, and the final answer, from our merely human perspective, is that we can't tell whether they believe in the same God Christians do. We may have to leave it at that. But we should recognize and respect the fact that they think they're worshipping the same God we are. (As Jews recognize that about us). And the way to make progress in any discussion with a Muslim is not to focus on that particular question, which is virtually impossible to answer and is likely to cause unnecessary offense, and instead focus on particular beliefs about God, one by one. Does God have a Son? Does it make sense to say Jesus is God? Why do Christians believe God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit? and so on.

It would be like talking to the person who is really confused about Thomas Jefferson, and instead of arguing with them about whether the man they believe in is really George Washington, you go one belief at a time: it was George Washington who was the first president of the U.S., Thomas Jefferson was the third. And Washington lived at Mount Vernon, while Jefferson lived in Monticello. And so on. That's the way to make progress in the discussion. I don't see what good it can do to argue that Muslims don't really believe in the same God as Christians, other than to get Christians stuck once again in self-righteousness. Let's not go there. Let the true God judge whether Muslims are worshipping him or something else.

We have nothing to give apart from Christ

Let me conclude by summing up my advice about how not to get stuck in self-righteousness when you talk to Muslims or anyone else, for that matter. Remember that question at the beginning, and how it made people feel stuck, and my point was, that if you recognize that Christian faith is all about Christ, you won't be stuck that way. So how I would sum up my advice about talking to Muslims or anyone else is this: recognize that, as a Christian, you have nothing distinctive to give the world apart from Jesus Christ. Nothing *distinctive*, mind you: you have all sorts of things to give to the world simply as a human being: love, joy, belief in God, a concern for justice. These are not distinctively Christian things, they're human things, gifts which God has given to the whole human race, even those who have never heard of the Christian faith or reject it. You don't have to be Christian to love, to rejoice, to believe in God and his mercy, to care about justice for the poor—and it's self-righteousness to think otherwise.

The good news is that you don't have to be self-righteous to be Christian. All you have to do is believe in Christ. So you're not stuck—so long as you understand this about the one in whom you believe, and recognize that as a Christian you have nothing distinctive to give a Muslim or anyone else in the world, apart from Jesus Christ, the one in whom you believe. But *in* Christ, you have all manner of things to give the world. So when I say: you have nothing to give the world apart from Christ, I mean: nothing apart from Christ, all things in Christ. That's how Christian faith works. So there is a distinctively Christian experience of the mercy of God, as I said, stemming from Christian belief that God pours forth his mercy upon the world by shedding his own blood on the cross of Christ. Likewise, there is a distinctively Christian acceptance of the justice of God, the justice or righteousness of God in Christ Jesus, as the apostle Paul puts it.

So, in conclusion: as a Christian, you have nothing distinctive to give to the world apart from Jesus Christ. Recognizing this will mean you don't have to get stuck in self-righteousness. But recognizing this requires, for most of us today, a theological conversion, a deep change of mind about what Christian faith is all about. It's all about Christ. If we really understood this, we would be perfectly free from self-righteousness. But it takes work to understand this. You have to learn some theology, things like the doctrine of the Trinity, without which it makes no sense to say that God shed his own blood on the cross of Christ. You have to learn. But what are you here at Eastern for, anyway? What did God call you here for? Go study.