

# Who's in your boat?



by Mathew Block

**B**ack when I was in university—in my first semester, in fact—I took Religious Studies 100. It wasn't a very intense class, just an introduction to world religions. We looked at Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in particular, taking a cursory look at the doctrines that make up these different faiths. It was hardly earth-shattering stuff. Trying to get through all the world's major faiths plus a number of smaller ones in a few months? You hardly have time to do more than take a quick glance at each of them.

Imagine my surprise then when a Christian classmate confided to me after the course that the class had “really shaken” his faith. I was flabbergasted. How could it shake his faith? We had hardly learned anything about these other religions!

A little conversation revealed the truth: despite growing up in a Christian family and going regularly to church, he had somehow learned hardly anything about his own faith along the way. He had faith, but no real roots to ground him in that faith.

## Navigating the faith

That's a danger we all face in the Church: we can go through the motions, show up every Sunday, even serve on church committees, but unless we learn to dive beneath the surface, we can end up with an unanchored faith. When the weather is good, we bob along on top and all seems well. But then a big storm—or maybe even just a minor squall—strikes, and we find ourselves, as St. Paul warns, “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14 NIV).

Part of the problem is that we're often trying to row the boat alone. Or maybe we remember the old Sunday school song and sing, “With Jesus in my boat, I can smile at the storm.” That's true. But it's not *just* Jesus who's in the boat with us. He's the Captain, but we have fellow shipmates, too. The trouble is, we often ignore them as we go about daily life. We each think we're sailing the storm on our own. We each think we have to navigate the ship ourselves. But the Church is a big boat, and there are many people aboard it. Others have been sailing longer than we have, and it's important that we look to them for help.

It's to prevent shipwrecked faith, St. Paul tells us, that God provided different servants to work in the Church in the first place: “It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service,” he writes. Why? “So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,

attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13 NIV). Teachers and pastors in the Church are like experienced sailors; they know how to keep the ship on course, and they're there to train us to become mature, experienced sailors, too.

In our turn, we'll help other young Christians grow up in the faith. In fact, St. Paul encourages us in another part of Scripture to teach each other. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," he writes, "as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16 NIV). The things we learn, we're supposed to share with others. Faith isn't meant to be a private thing; it's something we all do together.

### Looking back

That means connecting with the people in the pews beside you, of course, but it doesn't stop there. The Church isn't just your own congregation; it stretches, as C.S. Lewis once wrote, "through all time and space" and is "rooted in eternity." We confess in the Apostle's Creed that we believe in "one holy Christian and apostolic Church." The ancient text says "catholic" instead of "Christian," because "catholic" is the Latin word for "universal." In other words, we believe in the whole Christian Church, the universal Church, spread out across the globe, reaching back to the beginning of all things and stretching out to forever—the great, vast body of Christ in all times and places.

If that's the Church we say we believe in, if that's the Church we say we're part of, then that changes how we ought to approach faith. The ship we're sailing is truly massive, and there are some master sailors on board to learn from. Many of them are no longer with us; they've passed on to glory. But we can still learn from them in the words they've left behind.

We've quoted one of these master sailors just a few moments ago: the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian author C.S. Lewis. He played an incredibly important role in the development of my own faith. As a child, I first came to know Lewis as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When I was young, my pastor explained to me that these stories have Christian elements in them—that the great lion Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was, in fact, a symbol for Christ, and that Aslan's death and resurrection pointed to Jesus' sacrifice at the cross

and His triumphant resurrection three days later.

As a teen I came to read some of Lewis' other works. This Oxford professor wrote numerous books, some fiction (like his *Space Trilogy* and *The Great Divorce*), and some non-fiction, including his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* and the classic *Mere Christianity*. I particularly enjoyed *The Screwtape Letters*. In this book, Lewis takes on the persona of an "uncle" demon writing to his "nephew," giving advice on how to tempt humans. It's witty, and clever, and made me think about temptation in a way I never had before.

From Lewis, I moved on to other great teachers of the faith. There are of course Martin Luther, Philipp Melancthon, and the rest of the leaders of the Lutheran reformation. But there are other important writers too—Christians who came before and after the Reformation—who also have things to teach us. There's John Donne, the 17<sup>th</sup> century English priest and poet. There's the famous mystery writer, Dorothy Sayers, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There's St. Augustine from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. There's St. Clement, a bishop from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, who likely knew some of the Apostles themselves.

The writings of these and other Christians throughout the ages help us understand our faith better. They're there to help us understand the Scriptures, to "teach and admonish us," just as St. Paul encouraged the early Christians to do (Colossians 3:16 NIV). Are these writers always right? By no means! But they've faced the same trials we face. They've survived the same storms we are still struggling through. We have so much to learn from their advice, if we will only listen.

Don't sail the ship alone! Get to know your fellow shipmates. Join or start a Bible study at your local congregation. Take an online seminary class. While you're at it, ask your pastor to recommend a book by a great Christian writer who has gone on before. You'll be surprised to see how much they have to teach you.

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