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Does My Belief Matter?

Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.—Jeremiah 6:16.

Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. . . . The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. . . . Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established.—Proverbs 4:14, 15, 18, 19, 26.

LESS THAN A hundred years ago, a group of scientific experts met in the United States, and handed down an opinion—an expression of their sincere belief. Man, they said, would never fly, for it was a demonstrable fact in nature that no bird which weighed over thirty pounds could sustain itself in flight. They therefore gave it as their studied, expert, and correct opinion that man would never fly. A few years later the Wright brothers invented the first airplane, and on August 26, 1903, a jet bomber made the round trip across the Atlantic Ocean and back in a total elapsed flying time of eight hours, two minutes. Human belief and opinion, though sincere, studied, and expert, had to yield to facts. Man could fly.

Years ago a friend of mine told me the story of a young man who believed quite sincerely that God had a special work for him to do. He reasoned that if God wanted him to do this work, he would protect him and spare his life until it was

finished. With this sincere belief firmly in mind he entered into a place of very great danger, refusing to take the very obvious precautions suggested by his fellow workmen for his safety. A few minutes later he was dead—a martyr to sincere but erroneous belief.

Years ago I personally knew a young man who believed that there couldn't possibly be any gas left in an abandoned gas well, and who therefore lit a match to look down the dark hole. He died too—a martyr to sincere but erroneous belief.

One of the popular beliefs of our day is that it doesn't make any difference what you believe, so long as you are sincere—that a more or less perfunctory acceptance of Christ as your savior will save you, regardless of your attitude towards such inconsequential things as doctrines and creeds. We have gotten tired of arguing about creeds and doctrine—tired of bickering and disunity among those who call themselves Christians.

There are some beliefs that don't matter. If I believe that we should have corn for supper, and my wife believes we should have beans, we probably compromise, and have corn one night and beans the next, or vice versa. Both are good foods. The choice between them is inconsequential compared to the peace and unity of our home.

There are also times when compromise and abandonment of individual belief are wise and necessary in the interests of unity. As an American, it is my belief that automobiles should be driven on the right-hand side of the street. But if I go to a portion of the world where it is the unanimous belief that automobiles should be driven on the *left* side of the street, I would be very foolish and stubborn indeed not to be willing to sacrifice my belief for the sake of unity. It is not a life and death matter whether I drive on the right or to the left—but *unity* in such a procedure may very well be a matter of life and death.

BELIEF IS IMPORTANT

There are times when belief matters very much, when it is much more important to be right than to be popular, when correctness is more to be desired than unity; yes, when such correctness is absolutely essential to continued existence. You may get only one chance with the gun you *believe* isn't loaded, the wire you think isn't charged with high voltage electricity, the match over the gas well you believe to be empty. The pathways of history are littered with the wreckage of men and nations and civilizations who thought that it was unimportant whether they believed in the laws of God or not, so long as they were powerful and popular and accepted by their neighbors. The laws of God's kingdom and of God's universe are inexorable, inescapable, unchangeable. Sincere belief alone cannot save. Expert opinion cannot save. It is well to be tolerant of the opinions and beliefs of others, and to recognize their sincerity. It is well to wish for and work for Christian unity. But it is better to remember that the only safe unity is a unity based on truth, that one man who believes and acts upon truth is mightier than hundreds of millions who believe and act upon error.

Jesus and the apostles taught certain doctrines. They were truthful, saving doctrines, based on the unchangeable laws of God; for Jesus said, "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me" (John 7:16). Again, he said that if any man heard his words and believed them not, he should be judged by these words in the last day. "For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak" (John 12:49). He promised, "If any man will do his [the Father's] will, he shall *know* of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17). To test a doctrine, try it out in action, in doing, in experience, and let the results prove what kind of doctrine it is.

Jesus attached no small amount of importance to his doc-

trine. If sincerity of belief was all that mattered, he would have had no occasion to disagree with the Pharisees and Sadducees on matters of doctrine. They rejected his doctrine, and he, having in mind the deceitfulness and error and hypocrisy of their doctrine, warned, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." The disciples understood his meaning—that they should beware of the *doctrines* of the two leading sects of their day. Their doctrines were popular; they were sanctioned; they were powerful; they were no doubt sincerely believed, but they were wrong. Sincerity of belief could not make them right nor could their sincere disbelief in the strange new doctrines taught by Jesus make his doctrines wrong.

The apostles continued to teach the doctrines which Jesus had taught and those doctrines became known as their doctrine. For a time the church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). But soon men began to change the doctrines of Christ to suit themselves, and the apostles found themselves fighting a losing battle to maintain the purity of doctrine which Jesus had given them in the beginning. Nearly all of the epistles written by Paul contain some reproof for false doctrine, or an exhortation to hold to sound doctrine. Seeing in the Hebrew saints a tendency to belittle doctrine, and to be careless about belief, Paul wrote to them, "Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace" (Hebrews 13:9). To the Romans he wrote, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences *contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned*; and avoid them" (Romans 16:17). To Timothy, his spiritual son in the faith, Paul wrote, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine" (I Timothy 4:16). He warned that the time would come when men would not endure sound doctrine. Paul was evidently not one of those who thought that belief did not matter.

John, too, thought that a man's belief matters. Almost the

whole of his first epistle is an argument and a pleading against the doctrinal heresies of Gnosticism which had arisen in the church only a few short years after Jesus' ascension. Peter and Jude found it necessary to cry out against these same heretical doctrines. In the book of Revelation the Spirit of Christ expresses concern and revulsion for the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, which were being taught in the church at Pergamos. If we need any more proof of the importance of doctrine to Jesus and the apostles, it may be found in these verses from II John [9-11]: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the *doctrine* of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the *doctrine* of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

WHAT IS SOUND DOCTRINE?

What is the doctrine of Christ? There are several theories as to where that doctrine may be found, and who determines what is right and what is wrong. One theory is that authority to determine sound doctrine lies with the church, that whatever the church teaches must be accepted as truth. The Reformation challenged this theory, and proposed the theory that the Bible is the final authority on the doctrine of Christ, that in it is to be found a complete, perfect, all-sufficient statement of doctrine which is necessary for the salvation of mankind. The age of reason was ushered in; men's minds were freed from the chains of tradition, and men were encouraged to read and to think for themselves.

The result of this new freedom was utter confusion. Once men were allowed to go to the open Bible, to read it for themselves, to interpret its doctrines for themselves, the way was wide open for every man to make an interpretation of doctrine quite different from the interpretation of his neighbor. Strange doctrines multiplied, and are still multiplying. Free-

dom from the authority of the church did not bring sound doctrine, but confusion, until today we have some two hundred and fifty denominations, each teaching its own particular brand of doctrine, and all claiming to find authority for that doctrine in the Bible.

Of late years, the feeling has been growing among Christian people that such division in the ranks of Christianity is wrong and that the followers of Christ should all be united. There have been numerous attempts, some successful and some completely unsuccessful, to unite the scattered fragments of various denominations and to bring about mergers between major denominations. Not always, but often, these mergers have been accomplished at the expense of doctrine. Christian people say that we should be united; therefore, if doctrine is the thing which divides, we will quit believing in, talking about, teaching, or stressing doctrine. As we have said, this is a shaky foundation for unity. The only safe foundation for unity is truth, is sound doctrine.

How then shall we find, know, and agree upon sound doctrine? The church has not been able to supply it to the satisfaction of all her members. Appeals to the Bible as an authority on doctrine have only resulted in a multiplication of sects. There is a crying need for a new revelation from God, that God should speak again to interpret doctrine, that the voice of Christ should be heard, not only speaking through divinely called and authoritatively commissioned ministry but speaking clearly and unequivocally and unmistakably to individual men who need to know. Men have ceased to listen for, to expect, or to believe that such communication of God and Christ with man is possible. But if it was possible for God to speak to the men who wrote our Bible, and if God is an unchangeable God and no respecter of persons, we have the right to hear his voice today. If we do not hear it, it is because each is so busy proclaiming his own doctrine that he has no ears to hear, and no will to listen.