

## TRUTH VERSUS BELIEF

Christianity is subscribed to throughout the world in some form or other and with various degrees of commitment by over two billion souls. Although the forms are as different as night and day, those who subscribe with any real commitment have had their lives changed by their belief and generally the change is for the better. Not only is behavior changed but emotions are affected. Christianity on almost any basis can produce a sense of well-being, a good feeling that "I'm religiously alright".

But, despite the sense of well-being produced by the Christianity of the world, two opposing and conflicting facts must be faced and reconciled. The first of these is that there is only one faith (Ephesians 4:5) and therefore, only one true Christian ethic. Christ prayed for unity of His disciples, that they may all be one, even as He and the Father are one (John 17:21). The basis on which He prayed for unity was not born of a spirit of compromise or of willingness to accept and fellowship others simply because they are sincere or wonderfully committed to their beliefs, but rather it was a plea for unity solidly placed on God's word, the word of truth (John 17:14, 17, 19) by which we are sanctified (verses 17 and 19). This was not just a plea for the twelve or even a broader group of disciples that walked with our Lord. It was a plea in behalf of you and me (verse 20). Christ wanted the world to see in us a reason to believe that He was sent to save the world.

The point is that adherence to truth is what sanctifies and unifies us. Truth, by its nature is objective, always unbending and uncompromising. It can always be counted on to remain unchanging and trustworthy amid society's fickle and unpredictable standards of right and wrong. God Himself is eternal (Romans 16:26) and unchangeable (James 1:17). To expect the truth of the word of an eternal, unchangeable God to be shifting and changing, to be "adaptable to our time" is unthinkable. Truth is not subjective. One of the greatest, most appealing blessings of Christianity is the peace and tranquility of knowing that we are at peace with God, one with Him who maintains standards for morality and right living on a dependable, predictable basis.

The second unavoidable fact is that human nature is not objective. When the bedrock firmness of truth meets with our subjective and fickle human nature, a conflict is unavoidable. We search for the peace of God with preconceived, individual notions of who God is and how He is to be approached. Man's answer to, "What must I do to be saved?" is as varied as can be conceived by men to suit his own ideas.

One of the popular beliefs in our time is that one need only ask the Savior to come into his life to receive salvation. Suppose this approach to God is about all you had ever been taught and you had heard it enough to believe that it certainly must be so. Millions have "accepted Jesus" on this basis and are comfortable and happy with their Christianity. If this is all you knew, how do you expect you would feel on the day you

asked Jesus to come into your life? Your belief deep within you would certainly cry out, "Be happy, be joyous! This day you have received the Savior and His Spirit will guide and protect you thereafter." You would need no further evidence. The question of whether the Bible, God's truth, really teaches salvation on this basis might never enter your mind. Feeling would be quite enough.

All of this raises a crucial question. Does how we feel about our decisions assure that our belief is correct? Does the fact that millions have believed the same and acted accordingly assure our position? It must be clear that the answer is "no" to both. Believing something does not make it so nor does the fact that millions believe it make it true. This is where man's belief must inevitably conflict with truth.

At this point, someone is likely to say, "Yes, but he is so sincere. Surely such sincerity makes him okay." Sincerity of belief is always commendable; in fact, whatever our convictions we must be sincere about them. The apostle Paul explained in Romans 14 that if we believe something to be wrong, even though it is not, our believing that it is wrong makes it wrong for us (verse 23). Isn't Paul saying that we dare not violate sincerity of belief even when the belief is wrong? It seems that a sincere and tender conscience is more valuable than doing something we have a right to do while believing it to be wrong. It is obvious, however, that Paul is not saying that our mistaken belief has made a bad thing good, only that it is wrong for us to go against our conscience.

Nowhere does scripture suggest that believing something right or wrong, good or bad makes a difference in the facts of the case. Believing something right when it is wrong does not make it right for us. No amount of sincerity makes it right. A falsehood sincerely believed is still just as false. Remember the story of the man of God from Judah and the old prophet (1 Kings 13)? The old prophet lied and because of his believing the lie, the man of God lost his life. King David understood this concept without doubt. He knew that conscience, what we know and believe, is imperfect and unable to keep us from committing errors against the truth. It concerned him so that he prayed for acquittal of hidden faults (Psalm 19:12).

The great challenge for humanity is to seek and learn and abide in truth, and to do that with all sincerity. In other words, given that truth is unchanging, unbending, and by its nature precludes the possibility of compromise, we must conclude that all the changing required to unite truth and belief must be on the side of belief. This being so there are several necessary conclusions that cannot be escaped.

First, man has no greater reason for existing than to carefully and honestly seek for God's truth and, as it is known, to conform his belief and his life to it (Acts 17:24-31). Second, any individual no matter how sincere and no matter the religious name he may wear, who has not found and conformed to God's truth cannot be united with God and Christ, cannot be at peace with God and, therefore, cannot be in a saved condition (John 14:6; 1 John 2:3-6). Third, when we consider all the sincere folks we know - friends, relatives, loved ones, schoolmates, peers at work, neighbors, the person who cuts our hair, delivers our mail, services our car, and so on -, many of whom may know

less of God's truth than we do, our own sincerity of belief demands that we share what we have with them (Matthew 28:19, 20; Mark 4:14-23). Fourth, we can instill in our children no greater appreciation, teach them no greater skill than the appreciation of scripture and the ability to study it for themselves without being spoon-fed and to understand what has been studied (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Timothy 2:15). Fifth, given the brevity of life and the vastness and importance of truth's challenge, we dare not waste this or any day, but rather make a conscious effort every day to close the gap between truth and belief (Romans 12:2). Finally, it ought to be crystal clear that none of us is immune to having a set of beliefs which does not square with truth (2 Corinthians 13:5-8). If our friends are not immune, then you are not and I am not. Each one of us, being human, is in jeopardy with our similar subjectivity of understanding and convictions. What I believe to be right does not make it so. May the Lord help us lift ourselves out of our subjective mire and refresh our souls with His words of truth which are sweeter than honey (Psalm 119:89) for they have been settled in heaven forever (Psalm 119:103).