



DOES IT MATTER WHAT WE BELIEVE?

IT depends, of course, on what we are talking about. Some questions—as for example the authorship of writings generally attributed to William Shakespeare—may be hotly debated, but are issues where our belief is unlikely to have any practical effect upon our lives. What we believe about them is not really a matter of great consequence.

But often what we believe can be important to our wellbeing, our happiness and our security. To believe in the love and affection of our friends and family can make a great deal of difference to our lives. Here belief matters. To acquire knowledge and skills in some occupation, whatever the trade or profession, is important, and here the necessary knowledge and belief are accepted as means to an end. We are not indifferent in matters that affect our livelihood. In this field knowledge and belief matter. Again, even to the most sceptical scientist belief matters. Even if he does not believe in his work, he certainly believes in the validity of his own mental processes.

THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

It is, however, generally in a Christian context that we meet this question. And it is here that belief is frequently viewed as a theoretical issue instead of something—as we have suggested by the analogy of training for a vocation—that may directly and significantly affect our lives.

How often we must have heard the view expressed that what really matters is a good Christian life; creed and doctrine need not concern us. Is this true, or is it a dangerous fallacy? To find the right answer we must certainly have clearly in our minds a proper understanding of Christianity. It is true that there are many versions of Christianity and numerous Christian communities, and this may seem to present us with a difficult task. But in fact it need be nothing of the kind. It is not necessary to acquaint ourselves with the teachings of many churches—that would be an exhausting undertaking and one more confusing than profitable. The better course is to recognize the historical fact that since the first century there have been important deviations in the teachings of Christendom from the gospel as it was first proclaimed to the world. Alien ideas have been introduced, and on the other hand important teaching has been neglected or forgotten.

HOW TO RESOLVE OUR DOUBTS

If we wish to know the truth about authentic Christian teaching there is one simple step to take. We must go to the source. In our New Testament we possess the only

authoritative documents about the beginnings of Christianity and it is here that we can discover what authentic Christianity really is, what are its teachings and the record of how it transformed the lives of believers and “turned the world upside down”.

A brief but very plain declaration of what Christian belief involves is to be found in the address of the Apostle Paul to the Athenians. The record is in Acts chapter 17, and a brief consideration of this historic speech can be very profitable to us who live in an age when so many know as little of the nature and roots of the Christian religion as did the Athenians of old. Let then the Apostle Paul, a “minister of the gospel” expressly charged with the task of making that gospel known to the non-Jewish World, tell us what Christianity is—and why it matters what we believe.

THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THE GENTILES

There are two good reasons for looking again at this address to the men of Athens. The first is that as it was directed to an audience of non-Jews and non-Christians, it took little or nothing for granted. It told them plainly what Christianity involved, and it was spoken to those who knew virtually nothing about it. The second reason is that it is a broad view of the subject. Although brief, it is a balanced statement of belief. Matthew Arnold once wrote that we should see a thing steadily and see it whole. It is only too possible to see Christianity unsteadily, and see it anything but whole. If our minds are prejudiced or are emotionally excited, then we shall not see it steadily. If we isolate one or two aspects of belief and concentrate exclusively upon them our view will be distorted. We may see some part of the truth but we shall not see it whole. It is like looking too closely at a part of a picture under a powerful magnifying glass. What we see will have little resemblance to the picture seen from a distance. Herein is the special value of the Apostle’s address to the Athenians. For here we see the meaning of Christianity—in outline and without much detail—we see it steadily and we see it whole. The rest can follow.

You may say that it was not a very successful address, judging by the meagre results, and you will be right. But that is hardly the point for us. The men of Athens had more excuse than we. Apart from what they heard from the Apostle they knew little or nothing of Christianity or of its origins, nothing of the continuing process of divine revelation or of the connecting pattern of history. They had not, as we have, a text book of earlier Jewish history or in the gospels an incomparable record of its founder.

We need the message of the Apostle as did the Athenians; we have less excuse for ignoring it. Let us then, nineteen hundred years after the event, look again at his words. The complete record is found in Acts 17:22-31.

THE UNKNOWN GOD

Paul’s introduction is skilful and characteristic. He tells his hearers that as a stranger in their city he noticed the number of objects which were the subject of their religious devotion. But they were confessedly uncertain in their choice of gods for they had erected an altar “To an unknown God”. What therefore they worshipped in ignorance, “this (he says) set I forth unto you”.

The statement that follows is basic. It affirms that the God who created the world and

everything in it does not live in shrines made by men. He is Himself the universal giver of life and breath and all else.

Upon this primary conviction faith must be built. This is still true and even after the passage of nineteen centuries and the enlargement of human knowledge, much more reasonable than the suggestion that the unity and order to be observed in the universe are accidental, undirected and the product of blind forces. The affirmation that God made the world and all things therein, is coherent and understandable.

To suppose that there is no intelligence or creative mind behind the universe creates great difficulties. As the late C. S. Lewis pointed out, if what goes on in our brains is merely the result of physical and chemical reactions and never had a designer, then what goes on there is not to be trusted. And if we cannot trust our thinking then we cannot trust the arguments leading to atheism or anything else. Unless we believe in God we cannot believe in thought and cannot use thought to disbelieve in God. It is more reasonable to believe what the Apostle told the Athenians, “that he himself giveth to all life, and breath and all things”.

THE PERSONAL GOD

The next step in this brief creed is the relationship between God and man and the purpose of human life.

“He made of one every nation of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek God if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he is not far from each one of us; for in him we live, and move and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.”¹

In this declaration the Apostle’s teaching about God is carried much further. There have always been thinkers prepared to acknowledge the existence of God as a necessary hypothesis or a First Cause, but who stop at that. Here it is made clear that the Christian is no mere deist. He believes that God is a personal God in that He made persons, is interested in them and made them responsible to Him. They are to know Him and reflect His glory. Human life is dependent on God whose will it is that they should seek and find Him.

This truth is concisely expressed in the words: “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him” (Heb. 11:6).

The second part of the sentence is vital. It marks the difference between the deist and the Christian, for to be a Christian one not only believes that God exists, but that He is responsive to His creatures who seek after Him. In other words, He is a personal God who knows His offspring and desires that they should know Him.

¹ Quotations are from the Revised Version.

THE OLD IGNORANCE AND THE NEW LIGHT

It is true that for many centuries most of the world's inhabitants had no knowledge of God beyond what they could derive from a study of nature. The Apostle recognizes this. Spiritually the world was in darkness and the Jews, through whom God's will could and should have been revealed, had failed in their mission. In this state of ignorance, men had not been held responsible to God, but now all is changed. Something had happened that affected all men everywhere:

“The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent; inasmuch as he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead”.

Here in this great passage we have in outline the structure of the Christian belief. First God, then man, then Christ who redeems and judges and saves. Notice the grand sweep of vision encompassing the past, the present moment of challenge and opportunity, and the future appointed time when God will judge and rule.

The time of ignorance, or the excuse for ignorance, had passed. What then had happened? A light had come into the world and with that light came man's opportunity for knowing God and coming to Him. Paul referred, of course, to the coming of Jesus, the Son of God, the light of the world, the man whom God had ordained. He had come into the world speaking God's truth, revealing His will, making known His purpose, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. Through Jesus men could attain a new relationship to God. “As many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:12).

ALL MEN EVERYWHERE TO REPENT

Repentance was the first and necessary ground of acceptance. The earliest recorded teaching of Jesus makes this very clear. “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15).

To repent is to change one's mind and ways—and confronted with Jesus and his life and teaching, the kind of change and the new direction are made clear. This is as true today as it was in the first century. In many ways it is clearer for us than it was for those Athenians who first heard the command to repent, for at that time they had not seen the light which had come into the world. Unlike ourselves, they had not had an opportunity of measuring themselves or their world by the standard of Jesus Christ. Today we are in a very different position, for we have behind us the long centuries of human history: the record for the most part of human folly and selfishness. It is the way of the world, and we are able to compare it with the way of Christ. They are seen to be in contrast. It is the contrast of light with dark, of love with hate, of humility with pride, of gentleness with violence. It is, in brief, the contrast between righteousness and evil. And in this latter part of the twentieth century we can see only too well to what a pass man has brought himself. When they stop to think men are

appalled at the abyss that yawns in front of them. But again the man who is honest with himself knows that the evils of the world are but projections of the forces of evil which he finds in his own nature. If we would reform the world we must first of all reform ourselves, and it is supremely in the person of Jesus Christ that we meet this critical challenge. Will we walk with him or with the world? It is critical for us because he is a watershed which must determine the course of our lives. To follow his course is to change our direction, to become his disciples, to become in fact new men and women in Christ. Herein are the issues of life—God commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent.

THE APPOINTED DAY

The urgency of the message and the reason for it are made clear. Repentance is needed because a day has been fixed in which this world will be judged—and judged by Christ, “the man whom he hath ordained”; and the certainty of this has been demonstrated to all men in that he hath raised him from the dead.

Here in few words we have the great doctrines of the judgment, of the Kingdom of God on earth, and the resurrection of Christ. That Christ will come to judge and rule is not taught very widely or clearly from the pulpits of Christendom today. Yet here is obviously something fundamental. Although part of the Apostles’ Creed, the second coming and its consequences are neglected principles of the Christian faith.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD UPON EARTH

The teaching that Christ will return as judge and ruler over this earth is not a conditional doctrine. That is to say it is not, as is widely believed, dependent upon man or upon the work of the Christian church. Indeed the outlook would be depressing indeed if men had first to achieve a moral reform before the Kingdom of God could be realized, for of such a spiritual revolution we see no sign and much that points in the other direction. But there is no doubt about the early Christian teaching on this matter. It is that the Kingdom of God is to be established at a particular moment in history. There is to be a radical discontinuity of human rule, a divine intervention in human affairs, and judgment is at the threshold of this consummation of the promises and prophecies found in the word of God. Here the Christian knows that he has no continuing city, for there is to be a new creation, not of a new physical sphere, for this earth is still to be the human home, but an earth cleansed and made fit for a people giving glory to God.

THE PROOF OF IT ALL

The ground of such a belief is made very clear. It is the resurrection of Christ—this is the assurance that has been given to all men. It lies at the heart of Christian conviction:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”, writes the Apostle Peter, “who according to his great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

Here we have the apostolic message in terms that are crystal clear. God has

demonstrated His will in Christ and has chosen him expressly, not by some metaphysical argument, but by an act of intervention in human affairs—God has given assurance unto all men in that He raised him from the dead.

A VITAL DOCTRINE

The resurrection of Christ is then the fact upon which the Christian gospel is built. In his day the Apostle Paul could call as witnesses to the fact of Christ rising again many who were still living, and in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, he assembles some of the evidence for this vital conviction. Vital indeed, for unless it be true then there can be no assurance of the future, no guarantee of life to come. If Christ be not raised, wrote Paul, “your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Cor. 15:17-18). But as Christ has been raised and is alive for evermore, then the antithesis is true: those who have died “in Christ”—that is, in the faith—have not perished for ever, but will at his coming be raised to life. “But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that are asleep.”

The fact of the resurrection of Christ guarantees, then, two things:

- a. A new world order with Christ as ruler and judge.
- b. Personal salvation for those “in Christ” at his coming.

Apart from this heart-warming and inspiring conviction there could have been no Christian church, no joyous and irresistible body of believers to make such an impact upon the world in the first century. No longer under the power of sin—for had they not a living Lord?—no longer under the power of death—for was not his resurrection a guarantee of their own raising at his coming?—they were new men and women.

NEWNESS OF LIFE

The command of Christ was that his disciples should preach his gospel to the whole world:

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved: but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.”

After the resurrection of their Lord, the act of baptism by which believers signified their belief and allegiance upon their entrance into the Christian community became a vivid symbol of change. A change from the old to the new, not only in outlook and conduct, but in status. Henceforth they were related to a living Lord and their rising from the water of baptism (always by total immersion) was a figure of the rising of their Lord from the dead and their own association with his resurrection. Today unhappily this crucial symbol of a triumphant rising to a newness of life is widely neglected and the teaching of the coming resurrection of believers has been relegated to obscurity. In turn this has been the consequence of glossing over the truth of man’s mortal nature and—apart from the resurrection at Christ’s return—his ultimate oblivion in the grave.

A SUMMING UP

After reviewing the brief but comprehensive address of the Apostle Paul to the Athenians we are now able to offer a more satisfactory answer to the question of whether belief matters. Surely it is clear that if what the Christian believes—as is made clear in the Athenian address—is true, then belief is of the highest importance and for the believer everything is changed. The world is no longer without meaning nor is his own life without significance, for he enjoys the promise of his master:

“For this is the will of my Father, that every one that beholdeth the Son and believeth on him, should have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40).

That we live in a world that is for the most part pagan and unbelieving does not affect the case for the need for such positive belief. The first Christians lived in an age that was hostile and unbelieving and it was only the strength of their convictions that enabled them to achieve a way of life in striking contrast to that which was lived around them. If we read Acts 2 we shall see that at the very heart of their belief lay the certainty that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God who had risen from the dead and was alive for evermore. The evidence was beyond contradiction. The promises to the Jewish fathers of a redeemer, had been fulfilled in him. It was wonderful, but it was also alarming. Many had joined in his rejection and were implicated in his death. Since he was the righteous one of God their guilt was heinous and retribution could be terrifying. But for those who came in repentance there was forgiveness and much more. The believer had become a child of God, and by the act of baptism he buried the old life and entered upon a new one, dead to sin but alive unto righteousness. Their Lord lived and would on his return raise them from the dead. They believed this without reservation and their logic was beyond refutation. If, they argued, Jesus had, by the power of God, overcome death and had risen to an endless life, then they could be sure that he was able to fulfil his promise to raise them at his coming.

MORE THAN CONQUERORS

Would that we could recapture both the conviction and the reforming zeal of the first Christians! Of course they were under a spell. The resurrection of their Lord had altered everything. They belonged to one who cared for them, who had been raised to power and who was alive for evermore. The powers of man might be arraigned against them, but that was of little account, for in a century of time men grew old and died, and though they too might grow old and die before he came, yet still at his coming they would enjoy a glorious resurrection. It was exciting, it was exhilarating and, guaranteed by the Resurrection of Christ, it was true.

The point for twentieth century believers to remember is this: If it was true for them, then it is also true for us. If the Resurrection of Christ really happened, then the pattern of human history has been altered for all time, and the reasons for a triumphant faith in our days are precisely those that transformed those early followers into men of unconquerable faith and courage.

In this day and age is it not true that man needs desperately a faith that has both vision and purpose? And does not the world—so much a prey to the evil forces of

selfishness, greed and violence—need to see the transforming power of the Christian life?

But this can only be witnessed when it is effective in individual life. And individual life can only be transformed by the power of belief. This then is where we must start aright. Herein lies the challenge to every man and woman who hears the gospel's sound. And because for us this is the most important thing in the world, and because it involves our hopes, our happiness and the very issues of life—it really matters what we believe.

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