



Q. Does It Really Matter What I Believe?

Josh McDowell Ministry

A. A question we often hear is, "Does it really matter what I believe as long as I believe in something?" Or, "As long as your belief helps you, isn't that all that matters?" Today, we are told, "That's nice that you believe that, but I wasn't raised to believe that way."

The idea behind statements such as these is that there is no absolute truth to believe, thus, the act of believing is all there is. You might call it relativism: the theory that "there is no objective standard by which truth may be determined, so that truth varies with individuals and circumstances" (David Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 348). We all believe in something, as Edgar Sheffield Brightman states, "A thinker cannot divest himself of real convictions, and it is futile to pose as having none" (E. S. Brightman, *American Philosophies of Religion*, ed. H. N. Wieman, B. E. Meland, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1936).

So, does it really matter what I believe?

The idea of finding any truth or meaning to life has escaped modern man. This statement reflects the inability to conceive of something outside of one's self: "There are no rules by means of which we would discover a purpose or a meaning of the universe" (Hans Reichenbach, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*, p.301). Even though we live in a day in which we all have definite beliefs about things, today's culture seems to value the act of belief rather than any real object of belief. "Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact," states pragmatist William James.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Belief will not create fact. Truth is independent of belief. No matter how hard I may try, believing something will not make it true. For example, I may believe with all my heart that I want it to snow tomorrow, but this will not guarantee snow. Or, I may believe that my run-down old car is really a new Mercedes convertible, but my belief won't change the facts.

Belief is only as good as the object in which we put our trust. Someone may come to me and say, "Hey, let's go for a ride in my new plane!" I may believe that it is safe. But if his plane hardly runs at all and he doesn't even have a pilot's license, then my faith, no matter how strong, is not well founded.

My faith won't make my friend a great pilot once we are in the sky! However, if another friend of mine comes along and makes the same offer, but he is a certified pilot with a new plane, then my trust has a much more solid base. It is the fact which makes it true, not whether or not I believe it.

The Bible also emphasizes the fact that it is vital what one believes. Jesus said, "... for unless you believe that I am who I say I am, you will die in your sins" (John 8:24 NLT). We are also told, "All who believe in God's Son have eternal life. Those who don't obey the Son will never experience eternal life, but the wrath of God remains upon them" (John 3:36, NLT).

Thus, the stress of the Scriptures is not so much on the act of belief as on the object of belief. What is emphasized is not so much the one trusting, but rather the one trusted. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, NLT).

People today believe whatever they wish to believe, but this will lead to their ultimate destruction. Let's look at an example from biblical history. One of the darkest periods in the history of Israel occurred in the time of the kings. During this time, there was a contest between the Lord God and Baal, a highly regarded cult deity. An altar of wood was built, with pieces of an oxen laid upon it as a sacrifice. The god who answered by fire and consumed the sacrifice would be acknowledged as the true god in Israel. Baal went first.

If anyone could start a fire from the sky, it was Baal – the great nature god who controlled the weather (i.e., rain, thunderstorms, lightning). The priests of Baal paraded around the altar all morning and until late afternoon, beseeching Baal to respond. These false priests jumped all over the altar, cut themselves with swords, danced into a frenzy, raved and pleaded all day. No one can say they were not sincere, or did not believe. Yet, nothing happened.

After they were finished and the altar was rebuilt, the Lord God answered with fire from heaven and consumed the altar and sacrifice. The false prophets of Baal were then slain.

If sincerity and belief saved, then these prophets should have been spared. But sincerity and belief are not enough. These prophets had their trust in the wrong object. They had never chosen to investigate the truth. God requires man to put his faith in Jesus Christ; nothing less will satisfy either them or Him.

Taken from *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith*, Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, Tyndale House Publishers, 1980, and *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Josh McDowell, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.

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